Domenico da Empoli (1941–2016)

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Domenico da Empoli, born in Reggio Calabria on September 24, 1941, Emeritus Professor of Public Economics (*Scienza delle finanze*) at Sapienza – Università di Roma, passed away in Rome on December 3, 2016. He is the one primarily responsible for introducing Public Choice—the subfield of public economics that suggests that individuals behave no differently in public contexts than they do in the market—to Italian academia.

Da Empoli came into contact with Public Choice during a visiting stint in the US, first at the University of Illinois (1965), and then at the University of Chicago (1966). Though scientifically recognized, today Public Choice still remains a minority voice in Italy. In this sense da Empoli’s 1993 article remains current.¹ The main reason for the minority status is that most still hold the view of benevolent government. This is surprising as Italian history (and classic Italian political thought) clearly shows how government benevolence is a scarce resource. Another reason for this surprise is found in economics: one of the three foundational pillars on which Public Choice rests is the Italian tradition of *Scienza delle finanze*, which always placed the economic analysis of public institutions through *homo economicus* at center stage.² (The other two Public Choice pillars are Austrian

¹ da Empoli, D. (1993), “Public Choice in Italy,” *Public Choice* 77(1): 75–83 (September).

² Buchanan, J. M. (1960), “‘La scienza delle finanze’: The Italian Tradition in Fiscal Theory,” in James M. Buchanan, *Fiscal Theory and Political Economy: Selected Essays*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 24–74.

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subjectivism and Wicksell's approach to collective decisionmaking.) Thus da Empoli's background in the Italian tradition of *Scienza delle finanze* was congenial to embrace Public Choice.

By 1983 he was so convinced about the fruitfulness of the Public Choice approach that he decided to found *Economia delle scelte pubbliche/Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice* (PFPC), the first European public economics journal also explicitly covering Public Choice. Over the years, the journal, which occupied a significant amount of his research time, published many articles by prominent scholars, including Nobel Prize winners (M. Allais, R. H. Coase, J. M. Buchanan, G. Stigler). Though PFPC slowed down its output as da Empoli's age advanced, he served as the Editor in Chief (and owner and principal financial sponsor) of PFPC until his death. An important objective of the present authors is to motivate the future publication of PFPC.

Concurrently, however, da Empoli always held a pragmatic, or perhaps more precisely, an embeddedness position as regards the direct application of the reasoning principles of Public Choice to Italy. Consider federalism, which became one of his main interests as he aged. One of the most well-known Public Choice perspectives is arguably the one that perceives the fiscal decentralization of the public sector as a way to limit the expansion of government spending. The (theoretical) logic is simple: decentralization induces competition in the public sector, reducing spending as local jurisdictions attempt to attract and maintain their tax base. Da Empoli always believed that for Italy this logic did not hold. His reasoning was equally simple: Italy's dual economy—with a richer North and a laggard South—was not *ex ante* congenial to decentralization. And if to this we also add, as he often liked to repeat, the fact that the Italian state in effect does not de facto control all of its *de jure* territory, then federalism would also mean giving the South away.

Da Empoli was a beloved friend and respected member of SIEP, the Italian Society of Public Economics. Internationally, moreover, he was part of the European Public Choice Society, the Public Choice Society, and the Mont Pélerin Society. He was always very kind and open to dialogue with his students, even though always extremely formal. With his colleagues da Empoli was an exemplary moderator and the cleverest debater when actually involved in academic politics (not too often). He very much enjoyed the process of reading, exchanging ideas at length (we recall many afternoon debates in his office), and, after much time dedicated to thinking, writing. He authored a large variety of publications, in Italian and English, on fiscal federalism, tax competition, on the theory of public goods, and on the functioning of liberal democracy. He also held prestigious positions in international organizations, such as the United Nations and the OECD, where he had the opportunity to apply the Public Choice prism to practical matters. This is especially the case when one considers his long-lasting experience with the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. An experience he began in 1979, followed by his 1995 election to the Seabed Authority Finance Committee, and re-election in 2001 for another five years. He was Chairman of the Committee for

another four years and later Chair of the Council of the International Seabed Authority.³

Da Empoli will be remembered as a learned and courteous person of vast intellectual interests encompassing such different fields as history, law, philosophy, political science, and, of course, his professional discipline of economics. He had deep interests in the history of Italian economic thought and in the economics of institutions, always trying to link economic analysis to empirical reality, no doubt a fruit of his personal exposure to the Chicago School. Above all, Domenico was a genuine cosmopolitan gentleman who was very proud of his Italian cultural roots and who was always concerned—as are we—about Italy’s political future.⁴

³ da Empoli, D. (2000), “Public-Choice Analysis of a New International Organization: The International Sea-Bed Authority,” *Constitutional Political Economy* 11(1): 59–67 (March).

⁴ The present authors will also pen a companion piece remembering da Empoli, jointly with Marianicola Villani, for the *International Tax Law Review* published by Sapienza Università Editrice.