



### **IN MEMORY OF SIMONA BALBI, A DIALOGUE THAT CONTINUES BEYOND A LIFE**

Simona was one of my first students, and I had a beautiful and fruitful collaboration with her that lasted nearly four decades. Her contributions have become one of the core elements of the ‘Neapolitan school of data analysis’ that is recognized worldwide today.

I had the pleasure to meet Simona in the late 1970s. At that time she was a brilliant student in one of my first courses in Statistics and Data Analysis at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, the University of Naples. In 1982, I came to know her better as the supervisor of her dissertation thesis, ‘Problems of stability in factorials methods’, from which her remarkable aptitude for research, based on insight, rigour and critical spirit, had already clearly emerged.

Her passion and capacity for statistical research increased and consolidated in the years after her graduation, during the fruitful period of her fellowship at the Institute of Statistics and Demography, where she had the opportunity to meet masters, such as V. Amato, J. Nelder and J.P. Benzecri, as well as to participate in the international schools on Data Analysis and Informatics that I recommended to her (1981, Naples; 1982, Dubrovnik). There she met, among others, representatives of the French school of ‘analyse des données’, E. Diday, L. Lebart, A. Morineau and G. Saporta, with whom she had the opportunity to interact during her university career. Simona’s work at the Research Department of the MedioCredito Centrale (1985-1990) contributed to her professional growth and led to her academic career

in 1990 as a researcher at the Federico II University of Naples.

Simona completed her statistical training with studies at the University of Montpellier (1991), Cologne (1999) and Paris-Dauphine (2012). She soon attained the position of associate professor (1998), being among the first five in a competition of over 130 applicants, and a few years later (2001) she was awarded the title of full professor at the Federico II University of Naples.

Her students greatly appreciated her elective courses and respected her clarity and dedication. Among the courses she taught were: Statistics and statistical inference, Statistical methods for data mining, Text analysis, Market analysis, Statistical quality control and Statistical methods for evaluation. In addition, she chaired the Bachelor's and the Master's courses in Statistics and Informatics at the Federico II University for about 10 years, contributing enormously to the training of a generation of young statisticians.

Simona's major research contributions focused on methodology for the analysis of multidimensional data, and specifically on the problems of stability and the enrichment of factor configurations by means of external information, as well as on repeated surveys and the analysis of data panel. Moreover, she contributed to the development of issues in text analytics and text mining in a significant way, as well as her work on sensory data analysis and network analysis. From a substantive point of view, Simona contributed to innovative issues for market analysis, statistical quality control and social statistics.

She also participated in the following editorial activities: co-editorship (with J.C. van Dijkum and J. Blasius) in the SAGE series 'Research Methods for Social Scientists', co-editorship (with L. Fabbris) of the Italian Journal of Applied Statistics and membership on the editorial board of *Modulad*.

Also of note was Simona's international activity for the European Commission as Project Evaluator of SUP-COM and EPROS/DOSIS under the 4th and 5th framework programmes.

Simona was particularly active in scientific societies, such as the Italian Statistical Society (SIS), the Association for Applied Statistics (Deputy Chairman from 2014), the International Association for Statistical Computing, the International Federation of Classification Societies (CLADAG), the International Association of Survey Statisticians, the International Statistical Institute, the International Sociological Association (2006-2010) and RC33 Research Committee (Vice-President).

We still cannot believe that Simona has left us. Many department colleagues knew of her long-lasting and silent battle against the disease. We stood at her side with discretion, certain that Simona, with her courage, serenity and sweetness, would prevail yet again. Unfortunately, it was not so.

A. Basile, former dean of the Faculty of Economics, remembered Simona on the occasion of the first council of the Department of Economics and Statistics after she passed away: ‘In the years of her disease, except in the moments when it was just impossible to be present, Simona was always active in our Department, regularly, as if nothing were going on, tackling with force and dignity the weakness she was exposed to. She continued to cultivate her strong vocation as a scholar and teacher’.

Simona leaves a great void among her colleagues from the Federico II University and from other universities, many of whom gathered at the Church of San Francesco at Via Aniello Falcone to celebrate her last farewell with great emotion.

Among them was Roberto Serpieri, co-ordinator of the Doctorate in Social Sciences and Statistics, who said: ‘I am deeply saddened for the loss of a colleague and friend Simona Balbi. Sorrow comes to my mind when I remember this person who was passionately involved in research and showed great dedication in teaching her students. She contributed to our PhD programme since its inception, with tireless dedication despite the weariness and suffering she endured in recent years. It will be difficult to fill that void, but we will renew our commitment by remembering her example in life and as a teacher’.

Many messages of affection and deep esteem have been received from Italian and foreign scholars who had the pleasure of knowing and working with Simona, appreciating her great human qualities and scientific accomplishments. Ludovic Lebart writes: ‘Je suis vraiment très triste, Simona était si douce et sensible. Grande perte pour l’analyse des données, la statistique textuelle, pour CARME et pour Naples. Tout le monde l’aimait’.

Her death has caused great sadness among her beloved students, who are still in disbelief at her passing. Simona Baronale says: ‘I learned the sad news of the death of Professor Balbi, news that struck me deeply. We appreciated her humanity, her strength and nobility of soul, in addition to her superior intelligence, experience, competence and professionalism. I will always cherish the memories of her wonderful lessons, her valuable advice and availability. She never denied anyone, even when she was fighting her final fight. I will treasure her teaching that has had such a significant impact on my life’.

Dear Simona, you have left us with a smile. That is how we wish to remember you. May your love for research and teaching represent the way forward also for your disciples. I commit myself to lead them, your behalf, with a loving hand and in harmony with a dialogue that continues between us beyond life.

*Carlo Lauro*

