Beyond risk and boredom: reflections on Claudio Ciborra and sociology

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From my perspective as a sociologist there are far too few artists in sociology today, those who combine an innovative vision with an exhilarating voice. With the loss of Claudio Ciborra that number has diminished.

Readers of this journal may be somewhat surprised that I appreciate Ciborra largely as a sociological innovator. Even more surprised may be sociologists who, avoiding the literature on information systems (IS), have until now missed out on the sociological pleasures of Ciborra's writings.

Yet in my view Ciborra's writings were truly sociological, in the best sense of the term, as exemplified in C Wright Mill's call for sociologists to address connections between personal troubles and public issues. While Ciborra's contributions may not yet be widely appreciated in the discipline, he has set the stage for creatively engaged and challenging 21 century sociology.

In his writings on information systems and risk management, Ciborra always called on theorists and practitioners to pay close attention to the sociological and cultural dimensions of analysis. In his view 'the IS literature on risk has not been particularly innovative or rich in scope' (2004, p. 17). Against the limits of economic and technological explanations, Ciborra spoke of 'the need to invoke sociological perspectives on risk and modernity' (2004, p. 12). His own work always engaged with the insights of sociologists of modernity such as Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash, Anthony Giddens and Bruno Latour. He was also informed by sociologists of regulation such as Mitchell Dean.

At the same time, Ciborra offers the beginnings of a sociology that goes beyond these established schools of sociological thought. Ciborra's discussions of risk and risk management always include a social (and psychological) dimension which focuses on questions as 'risk for whom?' and the attitudes towards risk of different social (and economic) agents.

As someone teaching the sociology of formal organizations and organizational theory I have had the benefit of learning from Ciborra and sharing with my students his insights in those areas while also appreciating his contributions to sociology more broadly. In what follows, I hope to sketch briefly some of Ciborra's contributions to sociological thought. I encourage my fellow sociologists to take up the threads of these initiatives and to meet the challenges Ciborra's works open up for us.

It is certainly a testimony to the vitality of Ciborra's work that, from the foundation of his own specific research he has made such valuable contribution across disciplines. I hope that this piece encourages sociologists to read Ciborra's works as well as encouraging information systems analysts to follow Ciborra in developing their sociological imaginations. This is not meant as a thorough presentation of Ciborra's many insights but rather as a reflection on some of the paths forged by a writer whose works point to many avenues that might be pursued fruitfully.

Most sociological approaches to risk in the age of digital technologies do not stray very far at all from the sociology of modernity expressed by

theorists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. This sociology of modernity goes beyond technological rationalist perspectives in highlighting the nonlinear nature of risk management and in stressing the fact that risk management control techniques can themselves become the source of new risks.

In posing something that pushes past the sociology of modernity approaches in order to deal with what are simultaneously promising and puzzling issues, Ciborra argues that sociological, and indeed economic, analyses of risk must be complemented by a phenomenological or existential one.

> Life, risk and technology are getting more intimate than ever. This is due to some subtler reasons than the hazards posed by GM crops or the thinning of the ozone layer. Paradoxically, the extension of the domain of quantifiable knowledge, and representation, exposes us to the danger of the further growth of ignorance generated by the mysterious new interdependencies and side-effects created by the very infrastructure deployed for the colonization of knowledge. The essence of such a 'reflexive' process needs to be captured by a new notion of risk, combined with a different perspective on the question of technology (2004, p. 4).

Ciborra's sociology calls for 'a fresh exploration into the intertwining of life, risk and technology' as a way to grasp possible developments as grid technologies contribute to the increasing 'quantification of our life projects' (2004, p. 4). As Ciborra (2004, p. 5) notes the causes and consequences of risk as well as risk management approaches are intertwined in social processes and networks of relationships as well as being embedded in institutional organizational structures.

Even more, against dominant approaches that privilege equilibrium (or a return to equilibrium), Ciborra calls into question the notion that socio-technical systems must engage in equilibrium seeking. While much of the sociology of modernity and risk society is preoccupied with the control (equilibrium restoring measures), Ciborra's vision holds that risks are often the source of innovation and new orders arising from disequilibrium. As he reminds us 'reduction to a preexisting order may constitute a repressive policy that kills innovation' (2004, p. 6).

Beyond economic and technological perspectives that view technology as merely a tool, Ciborra raises views of technology as a potentially autonomous actor, operating according to its own logic, with the capacity to shape how humans perceive reality. This is pursued in his discussions of technology drift in which implementation processes move beyond original system design intentions.

Ciborra's analysis of the deployment of large ICT infrastructures within and between public institutions shows the new and surprising risks emerging in the technologically-enabled path to a supposedly calculable world.

> Despite the tight managerial control, careful planning, appropriate risk management, and so on, ICT infrastructures tend to have a life of their own: they basically drift as a result of improvised usages; unforeseen technical interdependencies between old (legacy) and new platforms; quirky design choices; surprising user resistance; and other unpredictable behaviours of both systems and humans (2004, p. 3).

Hierarchical and authoritarian control-oriented directives only accelerate this drift. Higher levels of formalization, standardization and integration, which are characteristics of risk management paradoxically provide an environment in which disruptive side-effects can spread at higher speeds. As Ciborra suggests: 'Again, we encounter the phenomena that seem to elude the economic analysis but have been highlighted by the sociologists of risk society and modernity: those reflexivity and runaway dynamics' (2004, p. 14). He goes on to note that, especially within IS risk studies, a certain inattentiveness to these phenomena has been encouraged by an excessive fixation on ideas of control and equilibrium (Ciborra, 2004, p. 14).

Yet, as Ciborra suggests, risk is socially constructed. Cultural and institutional biases, especially missions of control, frame issues of risk and set the agenda for analyses of risk.

Ciborra reminds us that what matters in dealing with risk is situated action, and the enactment of decisions includes crucially perceptions and attitudes as well as even feelings and moods. Ciborra's study of improvization sets the stage for a new thinking in sociology, beyond its privileging of formal institutions, rules and social structures. In his view improvization is a special case of situated action. Quick, sudden and extemporaneous, and highly contingent upon emerging circumstances it acts towards unifying design and action (2002).

> Improvisation is the antidote to panic and boredom because it is 'extemporaneous', i.e. it ruptures the way time entrances us in both situations, either by being completely missing, or totally undifferentiated. Improvisation is then rupture, or as the conductor Pierre Boulez describes it in music 'Einbruch'. Only if such a temporal entrancement is ruptured do beings no longer refuse themselves, possibilities for action emerge, graspable in the situation and give to the actor the possibility of intervening in the midst of beings at the specific moment and in the specific circumstances (2002).

Ciborra takes improvization beyond cognitive definitions that posit it as simply quick problem solving. 'Only by bringing back into the picture the situation of the actor, those fleeting personal circumstances (captured by the term *mood*), and not only the emerging environmental circumstances, that we may get to a fresh understanding of improvization' (2002). As Ciborra reminds us moods are much more than simply private states: 'They disclose the world; they set the stage for our encounter with the world' (2002).

So taken for granted are moods that they are almost entirely absent from sociological thinking, except perhaps where they are dismissed as too vague, negligible or subjective to hold any sociological interest. Yet as Ciborra

suggests: 'Moods are the fundamental modes in which we are disposed in such a way, they are not the direct consequence of our thinking, doing and acting: they are rather the presupposition, the medium within which those activities take place' (2002).

Through the concept of bricolage Ciborra develops his discussion of situated, experience-based, competent improvization. In Ciborra's hands bricolage and tinkering become highly suggestive concepts for sociology. His work highlights ways in which people develop strategy through bricolage and tinkering in order to get past obstacles that might otherwise impede creativity and innovation.

Ciborra's sociology points a way beyond typical structure/agency debates and the similarly familiar discussions of infrastructure/structure. Ciborra rethinks infrastructure as movement and interlinked social actions. Understood as movement infrastructure is re-envisioned such that aspects previously defined as social or technical are situated as socio-technical networks.

This is a daring sociology of drift (derive), chaos and situated strategy rather than social control or social order (and even formal organization). In place of authoritarian concepts of order and the sociological preference for formal organization, Ciborra poses hospitality and collaboration. Improvizing actors take time and care. As Ciborra (2004) poignantly concludes:

Nevertheless, dimensions of risk such as value and man-made change point to the importance of human existence, the: 'Who am I and what do I wish?', or to the general intrinsic mobility, openness and unpredictability of life… When modeling risk within each of the perspectives examined so far, we recommend the need to stay close to, and to safeguard, some essential traits of human existence, in particular the intrinsic openness of life and its fundamental indeterminacy as the key sources of our very personal worry about risk. But it is not simply about life and the indeterminacy of danger, or even death, ahead. Ontological strength is given to the mundane notion of risk through our generic disposition in life and in our care and concern about people, things and the world that surrounds us. Risk is there both because the world is dangerous and unpredictable, as well as because we are restlessly concerned about it (2004, pp. 15–16).

As a sociologist, I believe I can say with some confidence that too much of what passes within the discipline these days is marked by the boredom that Ciborra identifies. It is perhaps highly ironic that someone who devoted so much thought and writing to risk management was never afraid to take risks in the way he tackled even seemingly mundane issues. That Ciborra shared favoured concepts such as bricolage and derive with anarchists, situationists and punk rockers is highly suggestive. Each of those groups has waged their own struggles against complacency and boredom. There is no reason that sociologists and IS analysts cannot heed Ciborra's call and do the same.

About the author

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