From Italy to East London

Antonio Cordella[1]

[1] Lecturer in Information Systems, Department of Information Systems, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, U.K.

Correspondence:
Antonio Cordella, Lecturer in Information Systems, Department of Information Systems, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, U.K.
E-mail: A.cordella@lse.ac.uk

'Antonio! I've discovered a new Vietnamese restaurant, you have to try it, it's excellent!' this kind of conversation has been very common over the years I spent side by side with Claudio at the LSE. We moved to London at almost the same time and we both had to find out how to settle in the city. Our daily conversations while having breakfast at the student bar at the LSE or having lunch at the Senior Dining Room, centred on the basic problems we both encountered when we first moved to London: what are the best areas to live? (we both agree: East London); is it worth buying a flat or not?; where are the most interesting places for shopping? and the nicest delicatessens?; what is the best bakery for bread? (according to Claudio it was in Angel, North London!) and the best one for chocolate cake? (in Clerkenwell!, here we both agreed!). Every time we found something interesting, we immediately exchanged our new discoveries. All my friends have been to a very nice Turkish restaurant in East London, known as 'Claudio's Turkish restaurant', because I first went there with Claudio.

These conversations were common even during Claudio's illness. Every time I went to visit him at the hospital in Milan, he was asking if I had discovered some new restaurant, shop or bar in London and, if I had, he wanted to know all about it. My map of London is a shared frame that has been built through these daily conversations we had during the years.

This mind-set, Claudio's never fulfilled curiosity for the surrounding world, has also been the main driver of his research. He was never satisfied by one theory, or approach. He always searched for new and different ways to contribute to the debates in the field. He asked his students to contribute with challenging ideas that swerve from the standing assumptions. This (re)search for new ideas, new ways of understanding technology and its use, I consider to be the richest lesson he has left us.

Researchers might disagree on Claudio's main contributions to the field: we have people that associate Claudio Ciborra with his seminal analysis of transaction costs economics and information systems; for others Claudio's work is the one of hospitality and groupware; for others it is the inspiring research he has led on the theme of information infrastructures; most recently it is his use of phenomenology in the study of information systems.

However, the development of ideas such as 'mediating technologies', 'tinkering', 'hospitality', 'care', 'gestell', 'improvisation', 'drift', 'duality of risk', are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the contributions Claudio has made.

The proliferation of these ideas is in fact not a schizophrenic nomadic migration in the mind of a very clever intellectual. In his talks, papers, and as a leading figure in the Department of Information Systems at the LSE, Claudio has provided a very clear, linear message to his colleagues and his students. He always advised: 'never stop at the first bar if you want to test the best wine'. His journey is not a detour from the mainland of the information system discipline, but rather a constant search for a better and richer way to develop the same discipline providing a better understanding of the complex nature of technology in the contemporary business and social world. Claudio's research was driven by a curiosity for exploring new

ways to study and hence comprehend the complex nature of technology, but also by the need of overcoming the simplified analysis of technology that has been provided by the traditional, techno deterministic approaches towards the study of IS. I think a clear way to summarize his research programme is to say that he has always struggled to find better, rather than different, ways of explaining the imbrications of technology and the social context within which it is embedded.

This search for a better explanation of the nature of technology is what I have been taught by Claudio and has become the main driver for my research too. A taught that will never be forgotten, even if is very difficult to put it in practice in the same, successful way, as he did.

I would have never been working in the area had I not met Claudio. This happened in the early 1990s, in Bologna, while I was finishing my undergraduate program in Political Science. He arrived in Bologna as a new Professor in organisational studies and for the first time brought the information systems discipline to the curricula of the students studying political science with a major in organisational theory. For the first time, we heard the word information systems and for the first time we learned that information technology was a fundamental actor in the complex arena of organisation studies. What we did not know yet, however, was that the young professor was one of the major figures in the discipline. He was also among the few unconventional intellectuals that were trying to enrich the panorama of the field showing that many of the undisputed ideas regarding information technologies, their design and management were fundamentally wrong. His explanations were grounded in ideas taken from the 'quasi unconventional' – for the discipline of information systems management at least – fields of economic theories, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy: in a nutshell the different topics that constitute the curricula of the students taking a major in organisation theory at the faculty of political science at the University of Bologna. When I first met him, I knew I had found my path! I immediately asked him to help me joining a Ph.D. programme in information systems. I ended up in Sweden, at the Department of Informatics at the Gothenburg University, lead by a philosopher: Bo Dahlbom. My path to become an 'unconventional' researcher under the Claudio's aegis was designed……

During all these years, had been very easy to find support and help in the development of my ideas, because since the very beginning, I have discussed these ideas with Claudio, followed his advice and been flattered (and also upset) by his comments. Indeed, sometimes it has been difficult to accept the tough responses he gave to what I was presenting to him. I always knew that this was done to strengthen my research but…fortunately, there were also rare cases when the ideas I was proposing clicked his attention, made his visual expression change, his eyes lighting up with excitement: this has always been an invaluable reward, the clear signal that his curiosity was caught, the idea was worth exploring! I know I have been very lucky to have the privilege to have Claudio has mentor, as we say in Italy, '*Maestro*' who challenged my ideas and who showed me the path to be followed!

As in his academic life, Claudio was very demanding in his friendships. However, again this attitude was contributing to the making of the very deep and profound friendship that has linked us over the years. Above all, I have to say that I have immensely lucky because I not only met Claudio as 'Professor Ciborra', but also because over the years I became a friend of Claudio, may be the most invaluable and unforgettable privilege!

As I'll never forget his teaching I will also never forget the parties he was organising in his stylish flat in East London, a must for all of us!

Ciao Claudio!

About the author

Antonio Cordella is Lecturer at the Information System Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His interests cover the area of social studies of information technologies. In particular, he is interested in issues related to information infrastructures and e-government.