



# A portrait of a scientist

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I did not have the good fortune to meet Claudio Ciborra until relatively late in life. Not that his reputation as a scholar was by any means unknown to me. Many colleagues had spoken of him, I myself had struck upon a number of his highly incisive and stimulating articles, I had even begun to gather some presentations in which he had demonstrated his remarkable originality but I had still not had the opportunity to hear him speak in person. In some scholars the sum of their thought can be quite easily located in a single work; Claudio's ideas eluded the confines of a single contribution. Continuously revisited and extended, his reflections spilled out over a multiplicity of academic publications and far beyond. Not surprisingly, then, it was with a great sense of anticipation that I set off for the 1996 ECIS (European Conference on Information Systems) meeting in Aix-en-Provence where he was expected to be present.

The ECIS meeting has now become an important part of the annual academic calendar. In that initial stage Claudio had made an enormous contribution to the initiative and in the years that followed the conference would become a must for the scholars of the field. Indeed, thanks in large part to the intelligence and passion which Claudio dedicated to it, the ECIS meeting evolved in the space of a few years into a key event for anybody who sought to confront information systems from the point of view of the social sciences – an event that one could simply not miss, because it was there that all new perspectives on the subject were advanced and it was there that the discussion of them at an international level took shape.

Our first encounter took place in the university cafeteria. Never having seen Claudio before, somewhat cheekily I ventured the famous line: 'Professor Ciborra... I presume?'. It was well-known at the time that in Italian academic circles, as well as having many enthusiastic admirers, Claudio had also some foes and that he himself constituted a highly controversial figure, even though even his most fierce opponents could not but acknowledge his academic and cultural superiority. I had been fearful that, precisely because of his past skirmishes with the Italian academic establishment, I would find him a little wary and somewhat reluctant to embark upon discussions that could lead to collaboration or even joint projects with his fellow countrymen. But quite to the contrary, to my great delight, I was greeted by a man who was not just open and friendly but who seemed to be actually waiting for the opportunity to make his thought available to his Italian colleagues in a direct, personal manner.

Since that first encounter our relations became ever more frequent and affectionate. Without planning or even anticipating it, we discovered that we both had the same objective. For some time my aim had been to encourage those of my Italian colleagues engaged in the study of Information Systems – especially the younger generation – to integrate into the mainstream of European academic activity. An approach to Information Systems from the point of view of the social sciences had not made great headway in Italy at that time and it appeared clear that the quickest way to affect such an outcome was to establish a close relationship with the academic institutions where debate on the subject was already well underway. For his part, Claudio was only too keen to incorporate into

his research the contribution of an additional group of scholars offering a further, distinctive cultural perspective. Generous to a fault, he staked his whole reputation and deployed all his influence in an unremitting effort to ensure that the Italian research community was able to interact fully with the international community. He agreed to participate in a research programme with a group of Italian scholars, placing even the younger participants in highly visible roles and providing everyone with great opportunities to grow within the international academic community.

Claudio encouraged his young Italian colleagues to tackle what were the key themes for understanding the relationship between information systems and organisation, extending to them the opportunity to participate at the highest level – notably, at the London School of Economics and Political Science – in the elaboration of theory in relation to those themes. Thanks to the connection we had with him, it was possible for some of us to build permanent working relationships not only with scholars attached to the LSE but with others working within other Northern European universities. One very concrete result of this joint effort was the realisation of the first ECIS conference to be conducted in Italy: the 2003 conference organised at the Università Federico II in Naples. Claudio himself had strongly supported the selection of this venue. In doing so he had wanted not just to demonstrate his confidence in the small group of dedicated and promising scholars based in the area but also to express the great love that he had for that troubled but extraordinarily vital city of ours.

Thanks to the enormous efforts made by all the people involved in the 2003 ECIS conference, it was more successful than anyone had thought possible. More importantly still, it marked the beginning of a consolidation of permanent working relationships between our Italian universities and their British (in particular, the LSE) and Scandinavian counterparts (in fact, Claudio had worked for a long period in Scandinavia and always spoke with great pride about his association with the University of Oslo).

When people of the vast experience and capacity of Claudio Ciborra pass away, it is inevitable that each one of us reflects on what they have left behind. Obviously, as with any scholar, there are the writings. In the particular case, there remains available a vast range of books, articles and papers. Perhaps Claudio's initial publications and his writings in Italian are not so easy to access but, happily, to address this obstacle, some of his admirers have already set about the task of locating, cataloguing and commenting on these works.

Beyond the literary legacy, though, people of Claudio's stature inevitably leave behind a human one: the students and colleagues that looked up to them. Curiously, though by no means accidentally, apart from a small group of very close collaborators, Claudio did not have an inordinately large number of readily identifiable followers. In contrast to a lot of others, Claudio was never

attracted by the idea of constructing a power base. Instead, he preferred to dedicate himself to the cultivation of a group of talented and passionate scholars of whom he demanded total commitment but to whom he gave his whole self.

Shortly after Claudio's death, I was struck by the desire to take up again his works and reread them with renewed attention. I can only say that this was an absorbing experience, particularly in regard to his earlier writings where, an advocate of socio-technical approach, he strove to develop an interpretative key to deal with some of the crucial phases in the evolution of technology within companies. Already in that period and in that context the name Ciborra constituted an authoritative point of reference in the discussion about how socio-technical theory could explain the various aspects of organisational life. One of Claudio's enduring interests was the one he had in large organisations. In fact, this was an environment in which he had worked right from the time that he had just finished his university studies. This orientation was all the more remarkable for the fact that it emerged at a time when the attention of the majority of scholars seemed to favour a concern with companies of a smaller scale. Claudio's interest in large-scale organisations played a key role in helping him to consolidate one of his defining characteristics: that of always being able to introduce into theoretical discussions concepts that were full of practical common sense and to underpin any statement he made with a series of telling examples. Although he consistently refused to confront issues of management at a theoretical level, he was always more than willing to address such questions from a practical point of view, providing responses that, true to form, were not just acute but also of considerable depth.

Today, it is easier to understand the arguments Claudio put forward in favour of a *social studies* approach to IT as opposed to what he used to refer to as the 'managerial studies' approach. Indeed, it seems perfectly natural to situate the study of information systems within the field of the social sciences. At the time in which Claudio proposed this approach, however, it was by no means readily accepted by the academic community at large. A social studies approach to IT was developed in the course of a series of seminars held for the most part at the LSE, where, on various occasions, I had the opportunity to witness the extremely high academic standards of the participants as well as the great variety of their national origins. A further striking feature of these seminars – apart from the quality of the programmes – was the great respect with which Claudio was invariably treated.

Claudio's writings remain of great relevance to today's academic concerns. One indisputably pertinent and extremely stimulating component of these is constituted by his development of the concept of *Gestell*, the term he adopted to refer to the framework in which organisational action takes place. As was his way, to advance his theses and to create a new set of terms to sustain them,

Claudio used often to depart from the etymology of words. In fact, even today I still have a very clear memory of how dazzled I was when I first read those remarkable pages in which by way of a kaleidoscopic foray into German etymology he arrived at an extraordinarily illuminating definition of *gestell*. At first sight the exercise struck me as somewhat excessive but I have to admit that since then my mind has returned again and again to reflect on the etymology of that word. This way of looking at things, in particular, of conceiving of technology as a context, or better, as *gestell* – to use the term Claudio preferred – has now become a widely shared way of confronting the relationship between technology and organisation. Indeed, where once the perspective seemed a little exaggerated – even a forcing of a concept – today it constitutes a line of thought that continues to be explored by an entire generation of scholars.

Claudio's writings abound in an extraordinary lexical creativity. Another extremely suggestive invention of his was the concept of *hospitality*. Developed with the usual etymological acumen in terms of a duality/ambiguity in the root of the word (*hospes* vs *hostis*), it was deployed so as to open the path towards approaching technology as something that can be considered simultaneously as foreign and open to being accepted. In this case too the concept – highly original at the time it was invented – is now commonly used. One only needs to make the smallest effort to cite innumerable other examples of the Ciborra vocabulary: bricolage, tinkering, drift, enactment, hacking, mood, serendipity, situated action, improvisation, etc. All these words, sometimes spun slightly to effect an unexpected nuance, often reinvented with astonishing novelty, contributed to weaving an intellectual construct that was not only characterised by broadness and depth but which was also remarkably original. More concretely, Claudio Ciborra's linguistic mastery played a crucial role in ensuring that a concern with IT assumed and maintained a key role in the evolution of organisational studies. In particular, it paved the way towards viewing the relationship between IT and organisations in terms of its social and human implications. As such it constituted and still constitutes today an invaluable contribution not just to academic life but to the community at large.

I have often wondered how Claudio managed to produce such a vast and rich array of writings. In the

course of these reflections there has been one characteristic of Claudio that has struck me as particularly significant. Very often people of Claudio's calibre manage to develop an important theory only to spend the rest of their lives engaged in a battle to support and defend it, thereby overlooking everything else that is occurring around them and not least everything that happens to be novel. This was certainly not the case with Claudio. In fact, Claudio never supported any particular theory. His approach was to depart from specific concrete situations so as to analyse them on each occasion under a different light and from various perspectives, exploring even the most unlikely hypotheses and often arriving at quite unexpected conclusions.

Claudio's ability to draw inspiration from the most disparate fields, from the history of Christianity or philosophy, for example, gave to his writing an originality that is quite rare. Particularly audacious was his insistence on drawing inspiration from Heidegger. The use of such a source in the context of a discipline like computer science which has its roots in the mathematical sciences at first appeared – to me, at any rate – as not just inappropriate but even incomprehensible. As so often happened in relation to Claudio, though, deeper reflection brought wiser counsel. Closer attention both to Claudio's own writing and a growing acquaintance with that of the German philosopher in front of whose house Claudio had even gone to the length of having himself photographed revealed just how much the former drew meaning and significance from the latter.

What, then, is the legacy that Claudio leaves us? And who will be able to bear witness to and carry on his work? What is clearly not in doubt is the fact that Claudio Ciborra will play a crucial role in moulding the upcoming generations of academics. Today, in universities across Europe and beyond there are young men and women for whom Claudio Ciborra has been and will continue to be a crucial intellectual reference point. Their existence and commitment alone are a guarantee that Claudio's thought will live on and continue to bear fruit. So far as older academic troopers like myself are concerned, our responsibility remains a significant one. It is most important for us to continue to lend a helping and guiding hand so as to ensure that Claudio's contribution is treated with all the respect and careful consideration that its profundity indisputably warrants.

## About the author

**Marco De Marco** is full professor of Organization and Information Systems at the Università Cattolica in Milan. Before embarking upon his academic career he worked in the aerospace (Boeing) and computer (IBM, GE and Honeywell) industries as a research engineer and product planning manager. He is author of four books and numerous essays and articles, he has written mainly on

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