



Claudio Ciborra's way of being: authenticity and the world of information systems

Lucas D. Intronra¹

¹Lancaster University, Lancaster, U.K.

Correspondence:

Lucas D. Intronra, Department of
Organisation, Work and Technology,
Lancaster University Management School,
Lancaster University, U.K.
E-mail: l.intronra@lancaster.ac.uk

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Introduction

In this short paper I want to do something unusual (as I think Claudio would want me to). I want to celebrate Claudio's life, his particular way of being, and simultaneously challenge us to use this reflection to think more carefully about the phenomena we study: the world of particular information systems in-the-organisation. I want to use the Heideggarian notions of authenticity and inauthenticity to bring out one of Claudio's insights, which I believe is his important ethical legacy for us.

On authenticity: Claudio's world and way of being

Those who knew Claudio knew he had a very particular way of being who he was. His way of being was a radically singular way of being – unlike any other. To know him was to be immersed in Claudio's world – a world revealed so delicately to us through the many tributes posted to the LSE website. Let me capture the spirit, or rather faintly suggest some contours, of his world through the words of Prodromos and Marco:

You have always been a naughty kid making sure that no single research seminar, conference or other event you ever participated remained a dull gathering of bored and boring academics. You were giving me false deadlines to make sure that I would submit my papers on time and we never managed to agree on a single thing related to fashion, music or art, (if art is those posters that I kept putting on the walls of the 5th floor). But being a kid you would always be fascinated by a new idea; look out for the people you loved; and give advice in your own unique Claudio way that made me a happy man every time I would get a smile or an email from you. I still remember our trip in Oslo with Ole, Jannis, Daniel and Diego, the first research trip I had ever made. I had lost my wallet, credit cards and was late in every single meeting we had when you turned to Jannis and told him: 'we chose not to have any children to avoid this, and now look at us!' Another time, in Oslo again, I was not letting you enjoy your meal and kept asking you about a boring case study. You gave me a very serious look and told me that we all have a limited time on this planet and we had better spend it doing interesting stuff. This was back in 2002 (Prodromos Tsavos).

Visiting Claudio in the course of his illness, I was struck by his indomitable vitality: alert to detail, prompt to grasp the essence of things, he remained remarkably creative right to the end. Claudio had the enviable ability to juggle multiple research interests at the same time, though always giving his various colleagues the impression that his attention was devoted exclusively to them. Irrepressible as he was, Claudio's mind was forever lighting on interests outside our academic field, often of the most unexpected nature: architecture, cooking, sport but, above all, art. One day after he had become quite ill I called him to see whether he would like me to visit: 'Certainly,' came the reply 'but don't come round until you've seen the Seven Heavenly Palaces of Anselm Kiefer exhibition.' After following these instructions, I went to see Claudio and found myself embroiled in an absorbing discussion with a man who, though confined to his sickbed, gave every impression of knowing much more about the exhibition than his interlocutor. Claudio's academic and cultural contribution is something that those who shared his interests and relied on his support cannot but carry on into the future. His immense human warmth, too, will surely remain with those of us who had the privilege of enjoying his friendship and love (Marco De Marco).

In Claudio's world there were no 'mere objects'. For him there were beautiful objects, objects with style, charisma and sensuality, and there were ugly objects – objects that were drab, functional and offensive to his acute sensuality. In Claudio's world there were not simply these and those ideas. In his world there were innovative, challenging and radical ideas and there were, sadly for him, many boring, dead and 'lazy' ideas that weighed down our thinking and made us intellectually obese. In Claudio's world there were striking contrasts and evident distinctions. The world did not appear to him as a landscape of indifference – mere objects, mere encounters, mere ideas, or mere possibilities. The horizon of his world was rather a highly charged landscape to be affected, to be challenged and to be transformed in this or that particular way. In his human and 'Claudio' way of being the world that he encountered mattered in a very intense and personal way, one could say (if you were Heidegger) in a very 'authentic' way. For Heidegger, authenticity is a unique horizon of the unfolding of one's possibilities. It is a human way of being where self takes ownership of its ownmost possibilities. An authentic life is one where one chooses to choose to be this or that particular individual being. It is a state of being that is active, congruent, contemplative, dynamic, and teleological – an agency burgeoning with quiescent potentiality (Guignon, 1984). As such, authenticity is the process of becoming one's ownmost possibilities, an idiosyncratic, singular and unique subject. In Claudio's way of being there was no place for an inauthentic existence – 'they' did not matter. It did not matter that 'they' all believed in the 'alignment' of business strategy and IT strategy (1997) in spite of the mounting evidence of massive IT project failures. Indeed it did not matter what 'they' believed at all. For him (as a careful reader of Heidegger) the 'they' were a way of living that avoided the difficult questions to be faced (and 'face' is meant literally here). As Heidegger (1962 [1927]) explains:

With Dasein [Heidegger's term for our human potential to be] lostness in the 'they', that factual potentiality-for-being which is closest to it...has already been decided upon. The 'they' has always kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities of being. The 'they' even hides the manner in which it has tacitly relieved Dasein of the burden of explicitly choosing these possibilities. It remains indefinite who has 'really' done the choosing. So Dasein makes no choices, gets carried along by the nobody, and thus ensnares itself in inauthenticity (p. 312).

An encounter with Claudio was not an encounter with 'them' it was rather an encounter with a particular, singular and unique person (as is evident from all the tributes). It is an encounter with an authentic human being who has chosen to be the fullness of his possibilities to be. Claudio's life, his authentic way of being, must continually remind us of how easily one slips into the average 'theyness' of everyday intellectual and organisational life. However, I think it can also teach us something more. His way of living can teach us to think

differently. It can remind us to not take for granted – slip into the 'they', forget to choose – what might seem so obvious. In his thought there is an ethical imperative to take (and be taken), not just other people, but all other beings as the singularities that they are.

The world and the information system in-the-organisations

Claudio's way of being, his world, was what made Claudio particular and special. We could not imagine Claudio without immediately and already imagining his world – his words, his gestures, his writing, his likes and dislikes, his office, his smile, his disagreement, his encouragement, his presentations, his beautifully tailored clothes, and so forth. Claudio was Claudio's world and Claudio's world was Claudio. Claudio's world was not something added afterwards. His world was the necessary possibility, or horizon, for him to be what he was – a wonderfully particular person. Without Claudio's world Claudio as a very particular human being would be unthinkable – this seems obvious. However, it is less obvious to us that information systems in-organisations are also particular worlds. This is what Claudio wanted to teach us with his notions of 'care', 'hospitality', 'drift', 'bricolage', etc. He wanted to teach us that to treat information systems in-the-organisation as abstract theoretical worlds (through our theories and models), rather than as a very particular way of being-in-the-world is to deny them their individual and particular socio-technical way of being. This is not to suggest that Claudio is the same as an information system (a claim he would reject with a smile on his face I am sure). It is rather to say that like the human way of being that is particular in *every* instance, there is also a socio-technical way of being that information systems in-organisations have that is particular in *every* instance. When we theorise we tend to treat them in their similarity or generality in spite of the fact that we have to *live with them in their differences and particularity*. To understand this more specifically we need to turn to some of the ideas that informed Claudio's thinking: Heidegger's notions of world and being-in-the-world.

World as the ongoing referential whole

Early on in *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) argues that the world is not simply the collection of familiar and useful objects (tools, practices, values, etc.) that surrounds us as we go about our daily projects. Such a view of the world already draws on a more originary 'worlding' of the world, disclosed through finite human ways of being. This already worlding of the world is exactly what allows the familiar and useful to 'show up', as 'familiar and useful', in the first place. For him the worlding of the world is the ongoing and dynamic *referential whole* which are already necessary for things to have their meaning as this or that familiar and useful thing.

This ongoing significant referential whole (our world) is disclosed through the ongoing horizon of the finite

everyday human life (*Dasein's* being-in-the-world in Heidegger's terms). How does our human way of living disclose the world to us? The essence of our human way of being is not that we have this or that project but that we are always already projected (ahead of ourselves, concerned with the future). We have projects because we are, as *human* beings, always already projected, our finite human existence is always already at stake – it always already matters to us. Whenever we consider ourselves we find ourselves as concerned with our ongoing way of being – we care about it. When we wake in the morning the day ahead already matters to us, we anticipate it; we already imagine how it and we might be. Not just to survive but to *be* somebody or something in particular (a father, husband, manager, leader, artist, etc). That is why Heidegger suggests that the essence of being human is *care* (as understood in the idea of 'mattering' or 'being concerned with'). Even the attitude of indifference is only possible because we already care. It is only in this ongoing horizon of ongoing human way of being – of already mattering or caring – that things show up as this or that particular possibility-for or thing-for our project. As a tourist the people passing us are curious things; for the policeman they are possible trouble makers; for the politician they are possible voters, and so forth. We always find that some things and people already matter to us in some way or another and others not. If 'mattering' or care was not the essence of our existence then it would not have been possible for beings to be disclosed or show up at all. Without 'mattering' as our human way of being we might imagine that our experience of the world would be similar to what appears on the lens of a camera. It would not appear as possibilities-for this or that but merely as variations in frequency of light. Thus, in this ongoing horizon of human existence things show up as that which they are, not simply because we 'choose' to take them to be this or that thing, rather it is possible to take them as this or that thing because they are already revealed as such within and through the ongoing referential whole of our particular human existence as this or that particular person (manager, writer, etc).

For example, for a pen, to be disclosed as 'a pen' – that is as a possibility-for writing and not merely a PVC object full of a chemical compound – it necessarily already refers to a world of writing. This 'world of writing' already presumes a writing surface as a possibility for writing 'on' (such as paper, white board, etc.). Likewise, the writing surface (paper or board) necessarily already refers to a location for writing (desk, book, lap, wall, etc.); and so forth. Thus, things are revealed or disclosed as that which they already are within a referential whole in which other things already refer to them and also draw upon the whole to be what they already are taken to be. When I use the term 'refers to' I mean that the thing in question (the pen in this case) will not be disclosed as that which it is 'a pen' *unless we take it (the pen) as already implying these references*. Differently stated, these references are already

necessary for it to be disclosed as that which it is, as a pen, rather than as something else. This can be seen very clearly when we 'strip' the pen of its necessary references, its world. For example, if we would drop the pen into a society that does not have any form of writing practice. How would those in the society encounter this thing we take as a pen? They would most certainly not encounter it as 'a pen', not as a possibility-for-writing. The referential whole that is necessary for it to be disclosed 'as a pen' would simply not exist – even if it was made by someone else, familiar with the world of writing, to be 'a pen'. Such prior 'making' only already made sense in a 'world of writing', where the pen was already revealed as necessary.

Heidegger (1988) suggests that '(the) world is not something subsequent that we calculate as the result from the sum of all beings. The world comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. beforehand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent *Dasein* before any apprehending of this or that being, beforehand as that which stands forth as always already unveiled to us' (p. 165). Kockelmanns (1972) refers to this 'world' as the primordial praxis: 'a certain whole is also given as that in which each concrete thing can appear as meaningful. This whole of relationships, within which things mutually refer to one another and can manifest themselves as meaningful is called "world"' (p. 12). What about the world of information systems and organisations?

A particular socio-technical world (the information system in-the-organisation)

When we encounter a particular information technology artefact such as an application, message, screen, report and barcode, we do not encounter an object (or a system), rather we already encounter a world. To encounter it as meaningful we must *already* draw on the necessary references for it to be revealed as that which it is (screen, message, report, etc.). This necessary referential whole is dense and dynamic. However, it is often so implicit that we mostly do not notice it. This dense and dynamic referential whole is what we often refer to as 'our organisation' (our world). By this we mean the totality of technology, processes, structures, practices, actions, ways of speaking, values, beliefs, and so forth. It is often almost impossible to enumerate all the things that are necessary to make up 'our world'. Just think what is necessary to describe the fashion world, or the stock market trading world, or the agricultural world. To be in – in here as being involved rather than merely spatially located in – a particular organisation is to already share a particular world – that is to share a world is to *already* have a horizon of *common concern (of caring or mattering)*. This common concern is the ongoing horizon in and through which things (systems, practices, objectives, etc.) show up as meaningful, important and relevant in particular ways – that is show up as something that matters. Clothes show up in the fashion world in a different way than they show up to the production floor.

There are different priorities and different concerns. Obviously, we are all part of the human community, we already share human concerns. However, we are also part of a variety of particular, one might say *local*, communities (or worlds). In these local worlds (our organisation) we share particular local concerns.

As those involved in the organisation draw on this referential whole – their world – they also participate in its ongoing making and remaking. The referential whole (their organisation) becomes more and more meaningful to them that participate in and through it. This means that more and more things (tools, practices, ways of speaking, etc.) show up as meaningful in more and more particular ways. For the participants their existential project or concern – to be this or that specific kind of person (their own identity) – becomes increasingly intertwined with the collective identity of the whole, the organisation. As the participants in the organisation become increasingly immersed ‘in’ (involved in) the organisation-shared practices, tools, language, believes, and values emerge as implicit conditions and outcomes of such ongoing meaningful immersion. More and more of what they, who are involved, are becoming have as its necessary condition the referential whole they now call ‘our organisation’. Likewise, the way things (tools, systems, language) are seen, used and interpreted becomes increasingly idiosyncratic and specific. For example, in Khaled Hosseini’s (2003) book *The Kite Runner* the main character Amir describes how in their world a stick functioned as a credit card:

‘... [I]n Kabul, we snapped a tree branch and used it as a credit card. Hassan and I would take the wooden stick to the bread maker. He’d carve notches on our stick with his knife, one notch for each loaf of naan he’d pull for us from the tandoor’s roaring flames. At the end of the month, my father paid him for the number of notches on the stick. That was it. No questions. No ID’ (p. 112).

In-the-organisation, in the making and remaking of ‘our world’, general functionalities of the information system become defined, interpreted and used in ways that designers never anticipated – in a similar way that the stick becomes a credit card. In Claudio’s language we see a process of ‘drift’. Intentions are shaped and reshaped into ‘local’ meanings. The systems are subjected to an ongoing cultivation, in ‘circumspection and being worked at (or “work-arounds”) in order to be embedded in the workflow and deliver their potentials. They require an extra, subtle effort of acceptance’ (Ciborra, 1997, p. 74).

Improvisation overtakes the intentions suggested in the design. Care, what matters to us here and now, shapes and reshapes the world of system ‘use’. To enter these worlds and describe them as ‘ERP systems’ is like describing Claudio as ‘an academic’. Of course he was an academic but he was so much more besides. In fact if

we were to enumerate all that we knew of him we will still be uneasy and feel that he is so much more than these descriptions. This is also true for the systems-in-the-organisation. They are always more than our theories and models (e.g., of alignment) might suggest. They are more than all the attributes that describe them. Claudio has taught us that they are in every case a very particular world, a singularity.

If we start to see information systems in-the-organisation as particular singular worlds (as Heidegger’s ideas suggest) then Claudio’s language opens up in very subtle and meaningful ways – as I believe he intended. Differently stated: if we treat the world of the information system in-the-organisation authentically (in its particularity) rather than inauthentically (in general conceptual/theoretical terms) we might start to appreciate the profoundness and subtlety of Claudio’s vocabulary and insights. Claudio treated the things he encountered (ideas, people, things) in the way he treated his own life – authentically; not as a general other but always as a singular other. This is his challenge to us. We must not neglect our duty and slip into the general ‘they’ of our theories and models. We must always suspend our certainty and remain open to be surprised.

Disaster, loss and remembering

We have lost Claudio. We have lost his particular way of being human. His singular way of being will never be available to us again. This is a disaster (*dis-* ‘away, without’ + *astro* ‘star, planet’). We are without our star and no way to reckon or recount for it, as Caputo (1993) expresses so well:

‘A disaster is an economic notion... The disaster belongs to an economy of excessive cost, for which there is no compensating return. The disaster is an utter wasting, a sheer loss. There is no larger perspective, no larger whole, no totality in terms of which the loss can be reckoned part of an acceptable expenditure, an acceptable cost that one is willing to pay. Disasters throw all reckoning and cost-accounting, every logos and ratio, into chaos’ (p. 29).

We cannot reckon but we can recall. We can remember, not in general but in particular. We can remember his authenticity and choose to remain open to the possibility of surprise. In Claudio’s life and thought there is an *ethical* imperative so evident in the lightness of his language: care, hospitality, cultivation and drift. It is a call to recall; to encounter the otherness of the other (person, organisation, system) in its particularity – as singularities. Singularities about which we can say nothing without violating it; singularities that we can only face again and again with the anticipation of surprise, of being caught out. Out of this disaster there might grow a new authentic way of being with others as academics, researchers, users, managers, system designers, and so forth. What a wonderful ethical legacy that would be.

About the author

Professor Lucas D. Introna lectures in Technology, Organisation and Ethics at the Centre for the Study of Technology and Organisation, Lancaster University. Previously he lectured in Information Systems at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research interest is the social study of information technology and its consequences for society. In particular he is concerned with the ethics and politics of technology. He is co-editor of *Ethics and Information Technology* and associate editor of *Management Information Systems Quarterly*. He is also a founding member of the International Society for Ethics and Information Technology (INSEIT) and an

active member of IFIP WG 8.2, The Society for Philosophy in Contemporary World (SPCW), and a number of other academic and professional societies. His most recent work includes a book *Management, Information and Power* published by Macmillan, and various academic papers in journals and conference proceedings on a variety of topics such as: phenomenology of technology, information and power, privacy, surveillance, information technology and post-modern ethics, auto-poiesis and social systems, and virtual organisations. He holds degrees in Management, Information Systems and Philosophy.

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