



From Milan to Mann Gulch: reflections on the intellectual contributions of Professor Claudio Ciborra

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Like many, I have great admiration for the intellectual contributions Professor Claudio Ciborra made to our field and, as a Ph.D. candidate, to the zeitgeist he fostered within the Department of Information Systems at the London School of Economics. However, my feelings go beyond admiration as I owe him a great debt that will never be repaid. Before I reveal my personal debt, I would like to discuss how I remember Claudio and the tragedy that served as a bridge to a friendship between two very different people.

In addition to being a powerful intellectual force, Claudio was also one of the most cosmopolitan men I have known. He truly was a citizen of the world who thrived in a bath created by different cultures and the rich traditions contained within them. However, his ties to his native Italy were unmistakable. The cultural streams of the world shaped and refined him in important ways, but it was the strong currents found within Italy that made him who he was. When he spoke he was often animated, passionate and deeply engaged in the topic. When one spoke with Claudio you got the sense that he *lived* his life – he was not a passive observer stumbling through. I will always remember him impeccably dressed, striding back and forth with authority in front of a classroom full of masters students deeply engaged in a lecture on the subtleties of the work of Professor Lucy Suchman. He was magnificent.

Claudio also loved food in the way only a person who has experienced the world's best cuisine can. In fact, the only occasion in which I sensed Claudio was upset with me concerned his reverence for food. I was eating my lunch in the Ph.D. study area, which was located near his office. My lunch consisted of a bowl of soup I purchased from an eatery adjacent to the LSE. From his office he could smell my lunch, which he quickly judged to be disgusting and was certain its origin must be that of an American fast food chain. Shortly thereafter he laid down the law that I was no longer allowed to bring my American Burger lunches into the Ph.D. area as it made him sick. He also stated that I would be well served to avoid such food because it was not fit for human consumption. Needless to say, I received quite the razzing from my fellow Ph.D. students about that one.

I come from a very different background than Claudio. Prior to entering the LSE, I spent most of my adult life in the U.S. state of Montana, which is a world away from the rich cultures that shaped Claudio. In short, he was as foreign to me as I was to him. I used to joke with my fellow Ph.D. candidates that Claudio was surprised when I showed up for my studies and I actually wore shoes. Even though we came from two very different worlds I was astonished to learn that we were both shaped in meaningful ways by a tragedy that was much closer to my world than to his.

For those of us who have spent time with Claudio's writings, we know that he was strongly influenced by the work of the esteemed scholar Karl Weick of the University of Michigan. In particular, he was drawn to Weick's

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seminal paper titled *The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster*. In this paper, Weick analyzes a tragedy that occurred in 1949 in the rugged mountains of Montana. During this tragedy 13 U.S. Forest Service Smokejumpers died trying to battle a violent forest fire that burned fiercely in very difficult terrain. Weick uses this event to examine how the sensemaking processes of highly trained groups breakdown when 'the orderliness of the universe is called into question because both understanding and procedures for sensemaking collapse together' (Weick, 1993).

Smokejumpers are highly trained firefighters who are hand picked for the perilous job of parachuting out of airplanes and into forest fires to put them out. This program, which has become the hallmark of the U.S. Forest Service, almost did not get off the ground because a senior member of the organization wrote in a report that, 'The best information I can get from experienced fliers is that all parachute jumpers are more or less crazy – just a little bit unbalanced, otherwise they wouldn't be engaged in such a hazardous undertaking.' Fortunately for me, the Forest Service ignored his recommendation and went ahead with the program. You see, during the phase of my life that I affectionately refer to as 'my misspent youth' I spent 6 years assigned to the U.S. Forest Service Smokejumper program where I made approximately 150 jumps without killing myself or anyone else for that matter.

When Claudio learned of how I occupied myself during my misspent youth, he wanted to know everything about my experience and what I knew about the events that transpired at Mann Gulch. Once, when he asked me what it had been like to jump out of airplanes for a living, I replied that from 6 years of Smokejumping I learned one of the greatest lessons of my life which is: *if you are going to be tough, it helps to be dumb*. He thought about that for a moment and then let loose with his great laugh. I will never forget his laugh. We talked about him visiting my wife and me in Montana where I could take him to the Smokejumper base and we could hike into Mann Gulch so he could see for himself what it must have been like for the men who died there. Unfortunately, that will never be.

Similar to the debt I owe Claudio, I am also indebted to the men who died at Mann Gulch. From their deaths the Smokejumper organization learned many lessons about what *not* to do when the 'universe is called into question.' From those lessons many in my generation were able to develop a type of wisdom that enabled us to survive in

this most hostile environment. My friends and I drew upon that wisdom many, many times.

I began this paper by stating that I owe Claudio a great debt that I will never be able to repay. In this I am not alone. In Claudio's work and his life, he taught us all how to lead a vigorous intellectual life – perhaps that is his greatest gift. Claudio eschewed the bland, cookie cutter research that is so often found in academia. I believe he viewed this type of scholarship as a byproduct of those trying to merely survive in the world of ideas. Admittedly, at times, my own research has taken this form, but I have used Claudio's example as motivation to seek more original and interesting explanations and approaches in my work. For Claudio, surviving in the world of ideas was not nearly enough. Instead, he worked to develop bold and interesting explanations that embrace human existence rather than reducing it to the form of a multivariate equation. In our own work, we should follow Claudio's example and seek to 'abandon the neat, but artificial world of models, structures and univocal meanings, enter the world of sensemaking and experience in the everyday life of organizations, and call into the picture a hidden, but powerful presence: our existence, or Being-in-the-world' (Ciborra, 1999).

Claudio and I will never have a chance to walk the mountains around Mann Gulch as we had hoped, but I think it is fitting to say goodbye to him there. Jannis Kallinikos and I plan to make the difficult journey to the top of the mountain Claudio had such a deep interest in. Near the highest point on the mountain lay thirteen crosses where the Smokejumpers died in 1949. At sunset, just above this area we will open a bottle of Sicilian Chardonnay and I will make two toasts to recognize debts I will never be able to repay. The first is to the men who lost their lives there, and from their loss, the valuable lessons that flowed to my generation, which helped keep us alive. For the next, we will turn to the southeast and raise our glasses toward Claudio's native Italy. It is at this time that I will thank a man who showed me that mere survival in the world of ideas is not enough. Instead, we must seek knowledge in bold and interesting ways about the human condition that is intertwined in the expansive organizational and societal institutions of our time. More importantly, when we are successful in this enterprise, as Claudio was so frequently, we should celebrate by dancing with someone we love. After all, I believe Claudio and the 13 young men who lost their lives at Mann Gulch would all agree that in the end, this is what 'Being-in-the-world' is all about.

About the author

Cameron Lawrence has just been awarded his Ph.D. from the IS department at the London School of Economics. He is also a visiting Assistant Professor in the School of Business Administration at the University

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