Governance, architecture and action: Claudio's Shih

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Introduction

I cannot start this brief essay without first remembering the persona of Claudio. Having known him initially as a great academic, he has had a major influence in the development of my scientific path, reasoning and analytical skills. His intolerance for stylised facts, his outstanding intellectual curiosity and capacity to experiment with 'borderline' concepts and ideas have earned him the solid reputation he has in the Information Systems community and Organisation Studies all over the world. From the outside, and by the majority of those who had the luck of meeting him, Claudio was certainly not known for his overwhelming aura of humility.

Indeed, he was a man self-conscious of his capacities, taking any opportunity to demonstrate them by combining good humour, innocence and the alertness of a deceptively sharp intellect. In my experience as his student, friend and co-author of a paper on e-government initiatives in Jordan (Ciborra & Navarra, 2005), I had the fortune of experiencing the many facets of his articulated personality. Witty, light-hearted and profound, at once he introduced me to an alien discipline. He greatly changed me in a process, which – I remember him saying – changed him too. When we first met, he had little interest about issues of international development, my topic of study prior to information systems. Over time, his interest grew, thanks to our many discussions and conversations about the possible connections and intertwining between the two subjects. In such a process, we have both been able to learn from each other's strengths, planting a tree, which, years on, is now a strongly developing object of study in the discipline.

I still remember when I went to visit him after he moved to the hospital in Milan. Upon his request I drove his car from London, but at the hospital they would not let me in with it. Then, he came down with an energy unusual for a person who was suffering as he did and said 'Look, that is how it's done' he showed the man at the gate his growing tumor and he let us both in. Shocked and staring at the wheel I could not believe what I saw. Noticing that probably I was a little confused about such endeavour he said 'Remember when we were in Jordan? There, like I did here today, we could not hold onto a specific methodology but had to try and experiment ourselves and create a course of action with no prescribed guideline… this is the essence of Shih, Architecture and Action'.

His words crystallised in my mind. Interestingly, these concepts can be used beyond Claudio's original problematisation, namely the study of organisations operating in the private sector, but also to conceptualise the development of governance forms emerging in institutions of government as well as in those with a public/private mandate. Therefore, now I would like to take the reader by hand to explore this topic, which I believe is one of the most important messages of Claudio's work and one that he has transferred to me. Nevertheless, his enduring humour and his lucidity even

in the most adverse circumstances is perhaps the greatest lesson in life I received from him.

Recombining resources

The essence of Shih is experimentation, improvisation and tinkering. In the seventh chapter of his book 'The Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems' (Ciborra, 2002), Claudio dedicates the central argument of the book to the explanation of a concept which constantly accompanied him in his approach to the research and study of information systems in organisations. And especially his predilection for a non-rationalist approach, since in the method he envisaged both the cause and the consequence of the crisis existing in the field of information systems. A pure rationalistic model for the analysis and improvement of the problems faced by the introduction of a new technology within an organisation does not seem to conduce to its stated intentions; therefore, questioning the accepted paradigms of the discipline and appreciating the real-life existence of human constructed organisations is the way to move to a new frontier.

In nuce, Ciborra (2002, pp 119–149) points out that the daily activities of any organisation are about recombining resources. Such a process is a fundamental contributor not only to gain competitive advantage but also truly to achieve economic development and positive growth. Thus, if one could plan for gradual breakthroughs instead of radical changes, it would be possible to create an ideal type of organisation, alias a platform where the interchangeability of products or parts combined with the capacity to recombine resources innovatively can add to its capacity to generate continuous economic growth. Such a capacity seems to be reachable irrespective of what the organisation chart may look like in the first instance because the 'intersecting, penetrating and collating of different organisational arrangements' (Ciborra, 2002, p. 121) may be simultaneously fragmented and intertwined.

A chameleon-like organisation

Such an ensemble of opportunities resembles one of those animals that can adapt themselves to the surface they lay on so well to be barely distinguishable from the rest of the picture in the background. The capacity of organisations to emulate such a behaviour via a combination of rapid adaptation to turbulent environment and uncertain circumstances is what Claudio calls chameleon-like organisations. They seek out the intrinsic dispositions of resources so that they can be recombined when needed more quickly and effectively (Jullien, 1995 in Ciborra, 2002).

And so it emerges from his in-depth study of Olivetti's restructuring, a case that Claudio studied for 13 years. Here, perhaps one of the most important points lies in the development of an identity in the process of learning and unlearning (Argyris, 1960), which follows the shake up of the ICT industry at a certain point in time as a result of product innovation or the expansion of a competitor's

market share. It is made clear that in such circumstances one should not forget that the simultaneous introduction of a set of ICT applications and organisational restructuring processes are not immune from drifting during implementation.

Since the design of the operations for the development of hardware is influenced by the infrastructure, which in turn influences the emerging structure, ICT impact not just on the possibility to transfer but also to create new knowledge, the core resource in a variety of human activities in the 21st century. Similarly, it is not automatic that this would lead to the deployment of a system able to encompass the organisation as a whole. Therefore, Claudio discovered that there are surprises that can arise in such processes and these can be addressed only if one is able to develop a platform embedded with a good degree of flexibility. On the other hand, relying on a method in such circumstances would at best result in a situation of 'perfect imitation' rather than a sustainable advantage since all other players are likely to be struggling with the development of the same set of (rigid) solutions.

Structure, strings and improvisation

The structure of an organisation (the real as opposed to the one formalised in charts) is thus, on one hand, made up of a sequence of strings, while on the other hand, lies also on a layer that connects these strings from time to time. So how do people go about in the process of recombining resources and dealing with surprises? In his evocative words Claudio determines what is needed to govern effectively in such an environment, in a way that conveys vivid images, 'dropping his tools' (Weick, 1996) and skillfully mixing the language of the practitioner and the intellectual, thus talking with command to industry leaders and academics alike. I believe that only a quote from Ackoff (1979) could give justice to what he would have said to them:

> *Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations messes …managers do not solve problems: they manage messes.*

Thus, the components are different over time and their integration is the result of the process of interconnection of a series of sedimented deposits that act as repositories of the organisational memory which is necessarily the result of the combined knowledge of databases as well as people. Such hybrids and blurry combinations upset any attempt to make sense of a particular situation with the rigid tools of method. Like the chameleon, the readiness to flexibly reconfigure the internal and external mechanisms of governance of informational and knowledge resources remains the counterpoint to respond to threats in times of crisis and turmoil. Thus Claudio's message is to rely on the multiplicity of resources available in an

effort that should be taken on by the broad architecture of the organisation concerned.

This neutrality is known as *loose coupling* (Weick, 1979). The benefit of a loosely coupled system is its agility and its ability to survive changes in the structure and implementation of the services that make up the whole application. Loosely coupled systems are necessary in order to promote applications based upon the needs of an organisation to adapt and to foster the integration and interaction of its various strings. Such an architecture is distinguished by the organisation as it represents its ideal form. However, the ease with which the former is modified makes it eager for legitimation and therefore contributes to its inconsistency in case of unexpected turbulence in the environment. On the other hand, the flexible configuration of a platform makes attacks harder to aim in the first instance since it builds on the possibility of fast response and apt reconfiguration and recombination of the resources available. Improvisation may (to say it with an oxymoron) be planned for if one can look at the governance of an organisation not by its individual components (well-known arrangements such as departments, functions, divisions), but by their integration, which ultimately shapes their possibility of reconfiguration.

Conclusion

One sunny afternoon in June 2002, outside the library of the London School of Economics, Claudio gave me a copy of his book 'The Labyrinths of Information'. Inside, I can still read the dedication he wrote: 'I hope that when the time will come you will be able to bring forward in your life and, why not, in the hypothetical (or real, or desired, or feared) scientific and/or academic career, some of the ideas discussed here'… Well, I am starting here and I know that you are on my side.

About the author

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