



Imagining Claudio Ciborra's next research agenda

Andrea Resca¹

¹IULM University, Milan, Italy.

Correspondence:

Andrea Resca, via Corticella, 22,
40128 Bologna, Italy.
Tel: +39 333 9464507;
E-mail: andrea.resca@fastwebnet.it

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These reflections originate from a discussion that took place in May 2003 at IULM University, Milan, on the occasion of Claudio Ciborra's presentation of his book: *The Labyrinths of Information* (2002). At that time, the author, thinking back to his research activity, focused on the publication of *Teams, Markets and Systems* (1993) and the recently published *The Labyrinths of Information* as turning points in his work. The former sees the transaction cost approach at the centre of the analysis of organizations and information systems whereas the latter focuses on phenomenology as the main instrument for detecting those concepts able to give new insights in this type of analysis. However, not too many hints have been suggested about the future course of his investigations other than a new track was going to be followed.

Therefore, the objective, now, is to tentatively reconstruct this new track on the basis of Claudio's latest publications. The inaugural lecture held at London School of Economics and Political Science on 24 October 2002 and later published in *Information Technology and People* (Ciborra, 2005) with the title 'Interpreting e-government and development: efficiency, transparency or governance at a distance?' is the point of reference for this proposal even though even other works are going to be taken into consideration.

The presence of the word government and development in the title of this work suggests a new scenario compared to his typical works. Even though a chapter of *Teams, Markets and Systems* is dedicated to the introduction of information technology to public administration, markets and their institutions have been the main focuses of his research activity and just the letter 'e' before the word government indicates a sign of continuity. Having a glance through the references of the inaugural lecture, it emerges as a confirmation of this picture. Bibliography related to organization theory and information systems is partially substituted by one related to government, socio-economic development and even international relations. This means that the centre of attention shifts from an economic and business perspective in which information technology is seen as an instrument for improving organization functioning to a wider perspective in which efficiency and efficacy are important elements to take into consideration but other elements are important too.

Focusing on e-government gave a chance for Claudio to include in his analysis themes such as economic development, social progress and democracy. The so-called good governance could summarize these themes. But the inaugural lecture sees other innovative elements. For example, actors that contribute to e-government initiatives. Even though public administration continues to play a pivotal role, consulting firms, software and hardware vendors and relationships between public and private sectors are outlining a new environment in which the international level is not neutral too. E-europe programme and G8 interventions are just two examples in this proposal.

Therefore, the research field has been significantly reformulated. A horizon populated by companies gives space to government agencies involved in service provisions to citizens. Efficiency and efficacy as main

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steering principles are put beside principles like equity, progress and development. In addition to economic globalization, international organizations, NGOs and aid agencies contribute to redefine this research environment.

If we use the lenses of new political economy, for example, many overlapping points emerge. Claudio touches contents that are normally in the research agenda of this discipline. For sure, his staying at London School of Economics and Political Science contributed considerably to the reorientation of his activity in this sense and the indication of Robert Wade's (an exponent of the new political economy approach) works among inaugural lecture references is a confirmation of this influence.

However, even in this new scenario, the role of information technology continues to be on the scene outlining an almost unexplored research field that sees how this technology, included, in this case, by the term e-government, not only contributes to improve public administration functioning but also to redefine essential elements of the state's existence like the level of democracy and of economic development.

Can all of this be considered one of Claudio's main legacies? That is, the idea to bring out the role of technology and mainly of information technology in any aspect of both personal and institutional life and the audacity not only to cultivate a specific research sector but also to explore continuously new and variegated fields?

At this point, we wonder how he could cross these fields without risking being superficial. This question introduces another pillar in Claudio's work and specifically a constant dissatisfaction about current research methodologies and particularly about the conception of human beings that they assume. The first chapter of *Teams, Markets and Systems* is already dedicated to this point underlining the partiality of the strategic rationality as a basis of the transaction cost approach or generally of the economics of organizations. *The Labyrinths of Information* can be seen as the prosecution of this struggle against the simplification of both objective and subjective epistemologies in use turning to the phenomenological philosophy as a way for overcoming this dichotomy.

A seminar delivered on 8 June 2004 at the London School of Economics and Political Science 'The Mind or the Heart? It depends on the (definition of) situation' can be seen a prosecution of this struggle but in the same field of methodologies based on phenomenological philosophy. A particular object of debate is works related to the so-called 'situated' perspectives. Claudio, turning to Heidegger's early lectures on phenomenology of religion, underlines how even innovative works in organization theory and information systems tend to pass over important aspects of human nature as emotions and moods contributing to deprive these analyses of the richness of this branch of philosophy.

Turning back to the question about Claudio's ability brilliantly to cross different research fields, the solidity of the research methodology is the answer. Through his interpretation, phenomenology has shown itself a flexible instrument not only for analysing organizations and information systems but also other fields as underlined by his inaugural lecture. Another example in this understanding is his work on Milan and its networks (in Italian, Ciborra, forthcoming). Even in this case, the phenomenological approach, always according to Heidegger's reading, puts light into the dynamics and phenomena regarding information infrastructures, economic and social networks, city economics and social development, intercity relationships etc. In some sense, this work brings together two main characteristics of Claudio's activity. On one hand, the will to discover new fields and, on the other hand, phenomenology as the main instrument for analysing them. Moreover, differently from many of his works, here both organizations and information systems are not at the centre of the analysis and again overlapping points with new political economy seem to come out. Claudio underlines how the present situation of Milan as a junction of a global network cannot be understood by only taking into consideration what he called platforms (a series of indexes, e.g., about population, economic growth, employment, migration, criminality, etc.) without going back to the core body that is at the origin of these phenomena. In other words, what surfaces is directly connected to what has been deposited for a long time. History and legacy of the past are crucial elements in this kind of investigation. Having the chance to have some talks with Claudio on this point and suggesting to him possible relations of this work with new political economy, he did not agree completely even though he realized the presence of a common ground of analysis.

In sum, probably trying to single out Claudio's next research track is a futile exercise. However, two main streams seem to come out rather clearly. A stream in continuity with his past studies, exemplified by the continuous perfecting of the research methodology, and a stream that differentiates itself from previous works because of the objects of research. Not only e-government and urban planning but also risk and regulation, in a further recent paper, suggest this change of perspective that leads to two considerations: (1) a partial shifting of analytical focus from organization theory and information systems to other disciplines and the new political economy could, in some sense, represent them and (2) a continuous readjustment of the methodological approach in order to follow this shifting.

A further step in this understanding brings me to the impact of Claudio's way of researching on my own work. Having been my supervisor from university days in Bologna, it is obvious that I feel especially indebted towards him because of his teachings and writings. However, this is not what I consider his main legacy. It is the investigating approach, the continuous effort to outdo current research efforts and the will to go over the

surface of phenomena that I try to keep always in my mind and even in my heart.

Thinking back to my steps in my scholarly career, I think that this attitude has been a point of reference of mine even because of his recurrent trenchant comments on the status of academic research. For example, my decision to move to South Korea to continue my studies was even made in this perspective. I believed that sojourning and investigating in a different context could be worthwhile to find out new research approaches and, in some sense, it was a way to imitate my mentor. However, Claudio did not agree with this decision (he was right and probably it would have been wiser to follow his suggestion) even though he continued to support me

and once I was back, almost 4 years later, he gave me the chance to follow him at IULM University in Milan. It was a gesture of generosity not so common in the Italian university system in which supervisor-student relationships form in a continuous interaction.

And what about now? I wonder if his way of investigating will remain my point of reference? There is the risk that I will fall back onto mainstream research approaches because I will miss his spur and tension toward new horizons and I do not know what I can do to stop this drift. For sure, personal commitment is not sufficient. On the other hand, this special issue may be an answer and, maybe, a cooperative effort can keep Claudio's unique style alive.

About the author

Andrea Resca is a Senior Research Fellow at IULM University, Milan, Institute of Economics and Marketing. He wrote his undergraduate thesis at the University of Bologna (Faculty of Political Sciences) under the super-

vision of Professor Claudio Ciborra, moved to South Korea where he obtained a Master of Arts degree in Korean Studies (Area Studies). Once in Italy again, he joined Claudio at IULM University researching e-government.

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