



Ciborra disclosed: *aletheia* in the life and scholarship of Claudio Ciborra

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European Journal of Information Systems (2005) 14, 470–473.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.ejjs.3000580

'Life is a mess.' Such were the wise words once imparted to me by my vastly erudite professor of the history of religion, Jonathan Z Smith at the University of Chicago. I knew them to be 'true'. Even in my infancy as a scholar, I was repelled by the geometrification of human experience and drawn instead to the philosophers of the messy: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gendlin. These thinkers were not intimidated by the intricacy and 'lightness' of being. Instead of finding it unbearable, they embraced the naked pilgrimage to raw phenomena.

In that pilgrimage, stripped of intellectual armor, one must use one's self to feel. Fully alive, one strives to keep one's eyes wide open, to apprehend without prejudice, and – hardest of all – to unearth the words that justly reveal the meaning in the mess: One thinks of Merleau Ponty's famous 'notched like a lentil' and Gendlin's 'felt meaning'. I did not appreciate at the time how much these initiations and revelations would burn into me and mark me forever as an epistemological exile from the main streams in my discipline(s), and, indeed, in life itself. Allegiance to the intricate lentil-like phenomenon of one's own experience is a deserted departure lounge in the increasingly populous, frantic, cacophonous, and scientific mass transit of social science research. A pattern eventually emerged in which I became a magnet for, and was magnetized by, scholars and students who were, somehow, fellow travelers.

It was in this way, carving out a solitary career, that I first met Claudio Ciborra a quarter of a century ago. I don't remember how we met or who introduced us. He was at MIT on a fellowship and an ardent devotee of the lectures of Roberto Unger at the Harvard Law School. Our first conversation was about 'formative context' and other aspects of Unger's world view that captivated Claudio. I can see him leaning against the wall, his head nearly grazing the ceiling of my tiny assistant professor's office in the old Baker Library at the Harvard Business School. His presence was always an engaging puzzle to me, at once elegant, austere, and slightly goofy; his brilliant classicist's mind frequently shaded into that of the playful child. He dissented from the taken for granted routines one associates with adulthood and career. The precise contours of his life were elusive and ambiguous. He was a nomad. He took on different personae, depending on time and place and people – never one-dimensional, always polymorphic. He roamed countries, disciplines, and groups; he devoured and imparted; he played a significant part in each place and a central part in none (until, I think, he arrived at his beloved LSE). Often the stranger, he depended upon hospitality and was always quick to offer it too, though in his own unusual ways – conference organizer, restaurant and tour guide, menu advisor, intellectual critic.

The mutual appreciation that grew between Claudio and me over the years was largely tacit. I don't recall any careful discussions of the epistemological allegiances that bound us. We simply recognized in each

other an unshakeable commitment to the human as the grounds of all social inquiry. We were tethered to the same irony: an embrace of the central tenet 'life is mess' coupled with a fierce sense of responsibility to deploy our selves – our knowledge, sentience, art – to render the meaning in the mess. We were there to bear witness, to tell the truth as conveyed in the archaic Greek conception of *aletheia*.

Claudio loved this ancient word when he encountered it in Heidegger. It harkens back to Homer, who used it in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* strictly in connection with verbs of saying. The notion is that one speaks *aletheia* when one is committed to giving a complete and accurate account of what one has experienced and observed. The spoken truth is defined by the absence of concealment or deception. All is disclosed. The spirit of *aletheia* has found its way into modern life ennobled in the solemn oath of witnesses in court proceedings: a mindful pledge to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This is not the 'truth' of scientific inquiry, of perfect correspondence with some objective empirical reality. (That would come later, expressed in the Latin *veritas*.) This earlier archaic truth rested on a profound subjectivity. The speaker of *aletheia* must be guided by the intention to render experience candidly without holding back. This is the truth of an embedded subject faithful to the intricacy of personal experience and prepared to lay it bare. It was our code, though each of us expressed it differently.

Aletheia was Claudio's remedy for the crisis in which he saw the disciplines of information technology and organizational theory and indeed of social science as a whole. His essay on that subject, 'Krisis', concludes by inviting readers to replenish their spirits, and their fields of scholarly inquiry, by dwelling in the purity of the ancient standard for worthy talk: 'The plea of this book can then be restated as follows: let us drop the old methodologies, in order to be better able to see the new dimensions the technology is going to disclose to us. It is not time for calculation, but for a sort of deep contemplation of the everyday life surrounding the design and use of technology. Let truth be always our goal, but understood as the Greek word *Aletheia*: the unveiling of what lies hidden; this time what is concealed beneath the phenomena of work, organization, information, and technology.

In what was to be the last year of his life, Claudio showed me a new paper on Heidegger and sentience intended as a rejoinder to the denatured conception of the 'situated' now enthroned in the so-called 'alternative' literature of organization theory and information systems. I sent him extensive comments and urged him, as I had many times before, to read Gendlin. When we spoke, I reminded him of my background in Heidegger (he seemed surprised, as if he had forgotten or perhaps never knew) and we talked about the contribution Gendlin's concepts of 'felt meaning' and 'felt sense' could make to his paper. I referred to the 'Appendix on

Method' from *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. Later, when he was confined to a hospital bed and in more pain than I can imagine, I received an excited email. He had read Gendlin and my section on method. He was rereading *Smart Machine* and *The Support Economy*. 'I am finally getting the picture', he wrote, 'now everything comes up so crisply!!!!' Soon after, our communications narrowed: pain, treatment options, love. I thought there would be time to ask him what new picture had been revealed. Now I shall never know.

Claudio is gone, but the bonds remain. As he reread me, I now reread him. I focus here in particular on the graceful essays rewritten in the full maturity of his scholarship and combined in an elegant volume as *The Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems*. They reflect a deep acceptance of the struggles that had shaped him as a man and as an intellectual. Though Claudio was not given to personal self disclosure, in rereading these essays I am taken aback by the clarity and candor of his voice. He speaks to us in the spirit of *aletheia* as each essay discloses a touchstone of his life experience; this is the raw material he transmutes into intellectual gold. I am finally getting the picture; everything comes up so crisply...

Having defined the rescue mission in 'Krisis', the essay 'Bricolage' identifies the rescuers. The *bricoleur* leverages the world. Small adjustments and subtle interventions have prodigious consequences when timed and aimed with Archimedean insight. The improviser relies on sudden inspiration, extemporaneity, and unpredictability to see through toward a new end, allowing surprising solutions to glide into place. The hacker, most glorious of all, devises and implements a program to perform a useful function by making use of technology in an original, unorthodox, and playful way. 'Hacking is an ingenious activity that through iterations, reuse, and reinterpretations of the existing programming environment leads to the implementation of new solutions.' The hacker transcends the orthodox, the centralized, and the planned.

These are the first responders to the distress signal, when rational methods and formal procedures chronically fall short, leaving us in the lurch and on the verge of panic. When things fall apart, we turn to the 'red light district of the organization' for the nomads, misfits, and undervalued craftsmen with enough common sense, practical intelligence, breadth of experience, and sheer self confidence to 'paste up' what's needed right here, right now. We live in the illusion of institutionalized control, but these free radicals pilot us home. That's when we learn the lesson: the marginal is central. We cannot survive, let alone be successful, without the freedom, playfulness, resourcefulness, and resilience that are routinely and universally squeezed out of The Plan.

Claudio himself was exactly this kind of hero: a hacker *par excellence*, a *bricoleur* who could not live for a day without the fresh air of improvisation and serendipity.

Unmarried, without children, and enjoying multiple academic affiliations, Claudio did not fit the mold to which he was born, nor did he conform to the role expectations of a professional scholar. Whatever pain derived from this difference was treated with the hacker's tools: imagination, playfulness, and resilience. He roamed a world populated by scores of friends and colleagues. His mobile phone was truly that: Claudio's voice there, but where? What country? Which group? What purpose? The mountains, the city, the sea, the academic conference, the opera, the club – they were destinations he encompassed within the space of a day or a week. His evenings were layered: work, dinner with these friends, perhaps another dinner with those colleagues, drinks, meet-ups with more acquaintances on street corners and in cafes, late night dancing, and more work.

In life and scholarship Claudio ingeniously reinterpreted existing programs – Olivetti, IBM, Risk Management Systems, Strategic Information Systems, ICT infrastructures, Groupware, ERP, middle age, the academic career, geography, gender, fashion – to give us new solutions that transcended old frameworks. Everyday life was for him 'the artistic embroidery of the prescribed procedure; the short cut and the transgression of the established organizational order as embedded in systems and formalized routines.' Claudio understood the despised virtues of the red light district because he embodied them. He knew they could rekindle a world grown arid and fragile, because these qualities healed his own life. In his work he shared this hard won knowledge generously, modestly, and with enormous candor.

Claudio recognized the plodding death march of the *Gestell*: the taken-for-granted meanings that order and 'enchain' technologies from conception to design, implementation, and use. These meanings are lifted from the world and reimposed upon it, narrowing any possibility of awareness or escape. They organize everything – private life and public exchange. In his essay 'Gestell', the massive dimensions of this process are laid bare. Miraculously, though, instead of despair Claudio finds a way to break through the one-dimensionality of the *Gestell*. Once again, the sources of hope and joy and meaning discovered in his own life report for duty. The ability to jump gestalt, the moment of lightening insight, the rehabilitation of astonishment, the appreciation of marginal practices and their shift to center stage – these heroes of Claudio's life are ready to serve each of us and the world. We must only turn toward them, and ourselves, in a new way to gain access to ways of seeing that can heal 'the destiny of being'.

With these comrades by our side, Claudio showed us how to appreciate and channel the real forces of change he called 'drift'. Incompatible with the 'large chilly spaces of the high ground', real momentum is close to the ground, local and sudden, belonging to

the 'opaque, shapeless (boxless) world of the swamp, where time is fluid or out of joint.' Instead of regarding drift as an unfortunate accident, Claudio invited us into an erotic embrace of 'the unthinkable'. Control is all illusion; the only truth is encountered in the surrender to 'the intelligence of the octopus: flexible, polymorphic, ambiguous, oblique, twisted, circular.' Let it take you for a ride, bareback, as you would ride a dolphin or a wave. Cling to it! In this way one orients successfully to 'the complex and changing world' whose forces are anyway 'too strong to be fully controlled.' This wild unthinkable ride is the only way out of the dialectics of mastery, in which every effort at control leaves us more at risk.

Claudio was among the very few who, from his perch within the inner circle, was willing to think the unthinkable. 'Alas, it is fast, it is digital: still one is bored.' For all the preening and strutting of the information technology revolution, there was no revolution at all – only a velocity that brings us no closer to the life we crave. Those large chilly spaces constructed with such high hopes at such high cost are not, after all, a place to call home. Authentic existence, for each and for all, originates in an entirely different locale: a place called the body: its feelings, moods, sentience, and affection. But what has happened to our bodies up here on the high ground? In every direction, we encounter obstacles to the natural impetus to take care of the world that is the source of the unfolding of our existence. As time accelerates, the world becomes overwhelming and panic sets in. 'It ceases to appear as a set of tools ready for use; we lack the time to implement our projects... We quickly come to inaction or engage frantically in whatever activity comes to hand, after having considered all possible options and jumped to the conclusion that none will be successful. Angst for the lack of time to pursue further exploration of alternatives blocks decision-making...'

Claudio set himself the goal of rehabilitating the world. He had no taste for playing the grandmaster. His roles were that of the Falstaff, the soothsayer, the vagabond, and jester. He would enter from the margin, bringing the kind of insight and wisdom that those in the center were too preoccupied to glean. In this way, he stayed close to his own existence and spoke *aletheia*. He did not shrink from what he knew, and so he did not succumb to panic. He remained hopeful. Reading his hopefulness, and knowing him to be so, ignited hope in others. It was only in the last weeks of his life that panic entered his scene with force. But even then, it did not last long. It was a story he had prefigured in his own way when he described the denouement of angst: 'That our being – in-the-world is, from the moment of birth, permanently set towards death suddenly emerges as the only default alternative that has always been there, but which gets forgotten through being amidst the daily chores and care. Death sets in as the implicitly preferred choice, the only one that can

calm down the highest levels of anxiety determined by panic.' And so my sweet elusive brilliant friend drifted out on sleep, leaving behind his testimony, his healing

recipes, his *aletheia*. If you are brave enough – ride it! Cling to it! You will see how everything comes up so crisply.

About the author

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