UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TRENTO
Facoltà di Sociologia

Phenomenology and the Social Study of Information Systems: Conversations with Kenneth Liberman

Kenneth Liberman
with
Giolo Fele, Vincenzo D'Andrea, Gian Marco Campagnolo, Ylenia Curzi, Gianluigi Viscusi

DIPARTIMENTO DI SOCIOLOGIA E RICERCA SOCIALE

QUADERNO 46

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GIOLO FELE
VINCENZO D'ANDREA
GIAN MARCO CAMPAGNOLO
YLENIA CURZI
GIANLUIGI VISCUSI

QUADERNO 46
Ottobre 2009

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1. FOREWORD

GIOLO FELE AND VINCENZO D'ANDREA

In February 2005 a composite group of scholars from different disciplines met in a nice Casa Rustica close to the Antica Vetreria on the Sarca river, at the entrance of Val di Genova, a small valley in the Italian Alps. It was the first of a series of events called Alpis: Alpine Ski Seminar on Information Systems. Since 2005, the purpose of that gathering of people has been to promote the social study of Information Systems in the Mediterranean region and the emergence of a European/Mediterranean identity for the scientific community on Information Systems. The Alpis ski seminar has been an "institute des hautes Ètudes" with a ludic/sport component, where high quality contributions from young researchers in the field have been presented in four subsequent days of discussion with peers, in an environment enriched by contributions of established senior researchers.

Both the format, promoting interaction and sociality, and the scientific dimension, promoting interdisciplinarity while maintaing a specific focus, have been the distinct trait of the Seminar series.

According to the invitation of Claudio Ciborra and Gianni Jacucci - the Scientific Coordinators of the Alpis Ski Seminars first edition - the research on Information Systems being presented and discussed in the Alpis community has been characterized by the reference to philosophical inquiry and to phenomenology in particular.

This publication is based on the inspirational talk the philosopher Ken Liberman gave to the Alpis Sky seminar 5th edition in 2009. Liberman teaches sociology at the University of Oregon and has been Fulbright Senior Specialist at the Faculty of Sociology, University of Trento in 2009. Liberman centers his talk around the topic of situated knowledge, a growing concern in the field of information systems. Liberman adopts a phenome-

nological perspective, with a strong ethnomethodological orientation. A student of Peter Berger and Herbert Marcuse, but especially of Harold Garfinkel [2002] and Hubert Dreyfus [1990], Liberman discusses and presents his argument starting from an examination of Section 29 of the fundamental text of Heidegger's Being and Time. Essentially, this very complex text deals with the question of the adequacy of our modes of representation of social forms and with the ways in which these forms are experienced in our daily lives. It is well known that technological solutions create patterns and structures of social organization which impose life forms completely outside of our experience with which we must come to terms, often with difficulty. As we know much of the engineering culture which is at the base of these technological solutions is not oriented towards a social or sociological perspective. Recently, however, we have seen a growing interest in the social contexts of technological innovations [for a reconstruction see Fele 2009]. This shift of attention by the specialists in business sciences, management, and information systems, has led to a deepening of social approaches into the constitutive mechanisms and the fundamental forms of social life [cfr. Dourish 2001; De Michelis 2008]. Here we see the important role, on the theoretical level, of phenomenology and ethnomethodology, and on the methodological level, of ethnography, in identifying, recognizing and describing the most profound and most subtle aspects of our social life [see Fele 2008]. Heidegger's philosophy provides the ideas for a non-trivial reflection on the foundations of situated understanding [Dreyfus 1995; Winograd 1995; Ciborra 2004].

The issue of situated knowledge covered by Liberman's essay goes far beyond the usual (although by no means obvious) importance attributed to context in the processes of communication. See the following passage from Winograd & Flores [1985]: "The computer, like any other medium, must be understood in the context of communication and the larger network of equipment and practice in which it is situated. A person who sits down at a word processor is not just creating a document, but is writing a letter or a memo or a book. There is a complex social network in which these activities make sense. It includes institutions (such as post offices and publishing

companies), equipment (including word processors and computer networks, but also all of the older technologies with which they may coexist), practices (such as buying books and reading the daily mail), and conventions (such as the legal status of written documents)"(pp. 5-6). Winograd and Flores seminal perspective recognizes the role and value of the network of relations within which social action acquires meaning. Liberman's contribution invites us to look further and deeper. From an ethnomethodological perspective [Garfinkel 2002], Liberman invites us to explore the depths of our ordinary social world, the primitive place of our experience. As an anthropologist who spent two years with some Australian Aboriginal tribes [Liberman 1985] and three years in a Tibetan monastery [Liberman 2004], he encourages us to reflect on that world taken for granted that we call reality. Similarly, as philosopher [Liberman 2007], he sees the limits of reason and the difficulties we fall into when we overconceptualize our worldly relations, when we entrust entirely to what he calls "the formal analysis", when we don't recognize the very carnal, practical and experiential character of social life. Starting from this basis, the paper offers grounds for reflection on the field of information systems. In the second part of this publication, Gianluigi Viscusi, Ylenia Curzi and Gian Marco Campagnolo discuss the role of formal representations in information systems, action-research framework and fieldwork, and the possibility of research which addresses post-local concerns.