Hospitality and IT

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> " Der Mensch ist jenes Nicht-bleiben-können
> und doch nicht von der Stelle Können."
>
> (Martin Heidegger)

"Den klara himlen har ställt sig på lut mot väggen.
det är som en bön till det tomma.
Och det tomma vänder sitt ansikte till oss
och viskar
' Jag är inte tom, jag är öppen'"

(Tomas Tranströmer)

Introduction

In a world populated by mobile, nomadic "hordes" (Dahlbom, 1998) there will be hardly a hotter issue than the one of hospitality. Since ancient times, hospitality has been an important (actually, even "sacred") institution (Benveniste, 1969) able to establish a much needed bridge between the nomads, the pilgrims, the "Wanderer" and the settlers of the cities; more in general, between the inside and the outside of a settlement, a house, and a persona. (Lévinas, 1971; Derrida, 1997; Raffestin, 1997) Hospitality has worked over the centuries as a time-economizing institution: it is an institutional device to cut down the time needed to merge cultures, and to integrate alien mindsets and costumes. Hospitality can precipitate the turning of an ephemeral contact into a relationship that "looks (and feels) like" a long acquaintance.

If we draw the full consequences of imagining an economy filled by ephemeral, knowledge-based organizations, able to move, disassemble and reconfigure themselves according to the latest incoming customer demands and technological innovations, we need to shift gears, and drop the language of planning, controlling and measuring through which organizations, teams, projects have been managed so far. That language stems from "heavy" and slow industries and infrastructures, driven by the concerns for static economies of scale. Instead, a new language for the age of "dynamic efficiency" (Klein, 1977) is highly needed. An

inquiry into the phenomenon of "hospitality" can introduce a genre of discourse closer to the life world for the next millennium, with which to frame the relationship between new (information) technology and organizations.

A phenomenological perspective points out that the way such a relationship is managed today, for example by applying various structured methodologies, may create severe obstacles to face the challenges of building and living in nomadic organizations with their ever changing routines and structures. In particular, by skipping over issues like hospitality to adopt the scientific genre of discourse, systems methodologies turn their shoulders away from everyday human dealings with technology, and find a (shaky) refuge into general and abstract dispositions and norms. They dislodge the problem of human existence out of the development and use of systems, and try to fill the ontological gap with the appearances of logic, objects, standards and measurements. Concerned practitioners all over the world can testify: to a scarce avail.

We submit that the abstract and sanitized models & methods, which represent today's prevailing forms of dogmatism, (Petitot, 1981) need to be abandoned in favor of a new constellation of issues, words and understanding, concerning in particular existential dimensions, (Ciborra, 1998) such as life world, (Husserl, 1959) identity and commitment.(Flores and Spinosa, 1998)

The notion of hospitality offers an opportunity to explore anew the complexities of design, developing and implementing systems in organizations. A fresh agenda emerges which appears to be consistent with recent results in the social studies of technology, specifically the symmetry between humans and non humans proposed by Latour (1994) and others. (Callon, 1991) Last but not least, we can contrast the idea of hospitality with the ones supposed to prevail in the organizational landscape of the future, such as markets and transactions. (Dahlbom, 1998) Surprisingly, our final, brief exercise underlies, rather than undermine, the modernity and power of the idea of hospitality.

A Methodological Wasteland

Put into brackets what you think you know about systems development and implementation processes, <u>before</u> jumping into finding better ways of improving, streamlining and re-engineering them. It is a first step to grasp systems development (and more in general our relationship to technology and design) from a phenomenological perspective. (Husserl, 1959) Bracketing what we tend to take for granted, allows us to get rid of those self-evident <u>appearances</u> which may stand in the

way of an authentic understanding of the phenomenon and trying out alternative ways to approach it. (Heidegger, 1927) Appearances, such as goals, plans, control procedures, measurement techniques and the vaguely pervasive and seductive notion of technology as a familiar, domesticated tool, (Autrement, 1992) are what the phenomenon under consideration is <u>not</u>. Instead, take time to reflect upon the puzzling evidence provided by the continuous <u>apparitions</u> which punctuate any systems development effort and system in use: unexpected consequences; drifting of the technology; (Ciborra, 1996) frequent tinkering and improvisations (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orlikowski, 1996) coupled with limited or partial acceptance of the methodologies; (Introna and Whitley, 1997) implicit resistance to continuous improvement methodologies, if not open critique of their scientific foundations put forward even by specialists and practitioners. (Bollinger and McGowan, 1991; Saiedian and Kuzara, 1995) Such apparitions are symptoms of a *malaise* in the current ways of understanding and approaching systems development and use. Boutinet (1996) has come up with a working list of some related pathologies:

- excessive idealism: the gap between daily tinkering and bricolage on the one hand, and the unfulfilled ambitions of abstract methodologies on the other, creates disillusion and frustration, if not cynicism, among the practitioners;

- speed & oblivion: in many organizations the relentless sequences of projects and development initiatives seem to go nowhere. New master plans, accompanied by new methods follow each other at an increasing pace. The new supplant the old ones still under implementation. The impacts and raison d'être of the latter get quickly forgotten. Learning is scant and time becomes yet another severe constraint that hinders fatally the orderly application of any method;

- "carbon copy" projects: new projects and methods are forced from the outside and are followed disgruntly by members as yet another bureaucratic procedure: instead of action one finds perfunctory compliance;

- narcissism: in order to overcome passivity, loss of meaning and drifting, strong actors, champions or leaders become the main driving force to keep the methodologies alive. (Bach, 1995) Thus, the neutral and scientific approaches can be operationalized only through a quasi-charismatic leadership style, which lies at the opposite end of the spectrum of the scientific/methodological paradigm. Hence, a double bind paralyzes the practitioner: is it all about systematic rigor or forceful leadership?

- technical bias: projects get encapsulated into a maze of grids, charts, measures and spreadsheets. Any creativity and personal touch are evicted: the concern for the careful management of the means takes over any consideration for the (uncertain, complex and risky) ends;

- totalitarian bias: the projects simplify drastically reality, eliminating complexities and risks, for example by using apparently neutral measures extracted from questionnaires. This creates a gap between the life world surrounding the project and the abstract world constructed via the models introduced by the methodologies. Such a gap is an extremely fertile ground for so called "unexpected (?) consequences" to obtain;

- ideological drift: projects get sold as utopias. Methods are kept alive by ideological discourses to defend positions and seek legitimacy. Preaching encapsulates science. Painful and long alignment of people, methods and systems is the stuff of which actual implementation processes are made of. (Monteiro and Hepsø, 1998)

The phenomenon we want to come closer to generates both the (false) appearances and the apparitions, (actual symptoms) but usually stays hidden. A way to unveil it, is to start from what is carefully left out from the current approaches to systems design and management. (by both the managerial and the participatory ones[1]) We refer here to human existence, i.e. the designers' and users' practical dealings in the life world of a development project and systems use. In particular, their concerns as human beings facing uncertainty; their being thrown into situations; the intertwining between their personal trajectories and the project execution; their identities as subjects; and the unavoidable openness of any project or innovation, which rarely fails to resonate with the existential openness of the participants' life projects. Indeed, the successful completion of any initiative may well depend upon the "alignment" of the existential traits with the "objective" characteristics of the project.

In general, one cannot separate human life as a whole from what it can achieve during an innovation, the launch of a project, or a new development. Although such initiatives are all future-oriented, and the accompanying methodologies put exclusive emphasis on the management and execution of the "in-order-to's" of the project, (Schutz, 1967; Boutinet, 1996; Ciborra, 1999) they inevitably share a lot with the participants' experience and personal history. The "in-order-to's" injunctions are supposed to mobilize the attention and resources of the project members towards a future state of affair, but it is the members' biographic, historic and ethical "because-of" motives which can endow the innovation or the project with meaning and momentum.

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[1] Note that such existential traits come <u>before</u> any functional description of practices and (democratic) allocation of roles during development and use, even for the participatory and ethnographic approaches. Though undoubtedly closer to the life world and needs of people in organizations, also these approaches may lack a due concern for human existence.

If the project, goals and plans do not make sense for those called to implement them, only perfunctory, or distracted compliance will follow. To disregard the complex chemistry and balance between the because-of and in-order-to motives of action may lead to many of the unexpected consequences for both successful or failed innovations. (Ciborra and Lanzara, 1994) But such an existential balance is extremely precarious, if not contradictory. On the one hand, any development is supposed to lead along a carefully planned trajectory to a better future state. Any deviation can be controlled and the course restored or improved by feedback and learning. Thus, it is an endeavor full of rational promises laid out in front of the actor by the structured methodologies. On the other hand, the personal past experience and trajectory remain blurred, and the actor has to cope with the fact of being "thrown" into the project or use situation almost by chance, or by a series of circumstances largely outside her control. Furthermore, her past made up of cognitive frames and scripts can hamper her ability to learn, in ways she is hardly aware of. (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Ciborra and Lanzara, 1994) As a result, any development will result in a inextricable mix of failure and success, with many minor or major unintended consequences which can trigger new learning and innovations, or just lead to frustrating vicious circles. The sense of achievement and discovery will always be intertwined with the anxiety of failure, falling and drifting. Alas, none of these preoccupations closer to our being human gets featured in the countless methodologies developed by the software engineering institutes all over the industrialized world.

Systems Development and Use: A Hospitality Issue

Hospitality was first deployed as a likely candidate notion to interpret the surprising evolution of a groupware system in a large European consumer goods company. (Ciborra, 1996) The case dealt with a fairly large application of Lotus Notes coupled with a world-wide team-based organization for new product development. (Ciborra and Patriotta, 1996) Dedicated Notes applications were built to allow multidisciplinary and multinational teams to work jointly on common projects, regardless of distance between locations. Implementation of the new system was carried out according to a participative methodology, an incremental introduction and comprehensive training. Usage was immediate, ubiquitous and successful. One day, however, a cheering message broadcasted over the network by a top marketing manager in London made every user realize that the new transparent platform could be deployed by headquarters as a powerful controlling "eye", able to access any working document and local bulletin board of all the distant teams. Usage fell

immediately and significantly. Attempts to revamp the system succeeded only when the applications were redesigned to replicate the pre-existing routines and organizational structures, thus loosing much of the original innovative design, transparency and collaboration opportunities.

The case provides evidence, among other things, on the "ambiguity" of new technology: (Gallino, 1983) despite the careful planning and design and the extensive training, new technology appears suddenly to the user as an ambivalent, threatening "stranger". The latent tensions between the professional dimension and the existential one explode as a consequence of a small incident: underlying anxieties about the new ways of working and the new powerful tool could not be tamed even by an advanced design concept and a careful project management plan.

Hospitality describes the phenomenon of dealing with new technology as an ambiguous stranger. Hospitality is a human institution, which is about being receptive, adopting, managing boundaries between what or whom is known, and what or whom is unknown. It is a first step in accepting "the other". (Guattari, 1992) It deals with that "moment of truth", already recognised by marketing experts during the routinized, but still fatal check-in procedure in airports. (Normann, 1991) It is a singularity, or catastrophe point, (Thom, 1975) when the real world is hit and what it means to be human is put to a test. This "knot" (Laing, 1970) is carefully avoided by the methodologies, too abstract and high-flying to deal with such a human and worldly moment. Lest being caught by surprises when such events and forces creep in and burst out unexpectedly. Then, sudden apparitions coming from nowhere can disrupt irreversibly the carefully crafted appearances of rationality, planning and control.

Is hospitality the hidden phenomenon that generates both the false appearances of systems development methodologies and the array of symptoms that point to the fact that such methodologies play ultimately a limited role in actual system development, despite their claims to the contrary, buttressed by their appeals to superior management knowledge?

A tentative answer is contained in the following inquiry into what hospitality is.

Multiple worlds in a word

The dictionary of the Indo-European institutions dedicates to "hospitality" a short, but dense section. It is a word that has multiple, twisted and even conflicting origins and meanings. (Benveniste, 1969) In Latin host is *hospes*, *hostipets* and *hostis*. The last word, however, means also enemy, thus revealing that ambiguity between friend and

enemy, which underlies the phenomenon of hospitality. Still in Latin, words which include *potis* refer to power, owner, *despot* and "*potest*" (can). Going further back, in Ittitian similar words mean "one's own" and "belonging to". *Potis* is, then, linked to *ipse* (same) and in general to the identity of the subject. *Hospes* is the lord, the owner who can receive guests.

Hostis (corresponding to the Gothic *gast*) is guest (favourable stranger) and enemy. ("hostile" guest) Originally, *hostes* were those foreigners who had equal citizen rights to the Romans. In a related sense, the verb *hostire* meant to be equivalent to, equate. *Hostis* reveals, then, a bundle of commitments such as reciprocity, equal exchange, balance, and compensation. With the establishment of more stable boundaries that defined the Roman citizenship, the institution of foreigners treated equally disappears, and *hostis* refers to enemy only, while host becomes *hospes*: or *hostipets*, the lord of the house who welcomes the "other".
We leave at this point the etymological analysis having retained the following suggestions. Hospitality is indeed a catastrophic point in social relations: it can turn into hostility. Hospitality has to do with identity, the one of the lord-subject and the foreign visitor, since identity gets defined through alterity. As an institution it includes a nexus of commitments, from reciprocity to fair exchange and compensation.

The organization as a host: a matter of identity

Effective hospitality creates a (partial and temporary) symmetry between the host/subject/lord/owner and the (weaker) guest. This is achieved by introducing a new asymmetry and adopting (culturally dependent) "rituals" by which the host becomes the "server" of the guest. (Centlivres, 1997) The latter can do as if she were at her own home. The importance of certain values within the hosting organization can capsize. For example, in studying the different degrees of hospitality sported by two French rugby teams, one with an established tradition and culture, the other with less of both, Darbon (1997) discovers that the "Great Rugby Family" can show quite different degrees of openness towards the outsider. High internal solidarity, if accompanied by a strong culture and long tradition, seems to make the team less permeable to the newcomer. While, paradoxically, weaker cultures are readier to extend their internal network of solidarity to include the outsider. This study raises doubts about the unexpected side effects of those heavy investments, recommended by the current management literature, towards the establishment of a robust corporate culture, especially when the stake is to be able to host the new nomadic hordes and technologies. On the other hand, hospitality has an advantage: her reaching out while

expressing hospitality through various forms of commitments, helps the host's (partially) new identity to emerge. This echoes the Maussian argument by which identity obtains from the network of exchanges and relationships with others. (Mauss, 1985; but also see Lévinas, 1971; Derrida, 1997a)

Hospitality is about crossing a boundary, reaching out to the Other, the Stranger, though without abolishing such a boundary. (Schérer, 1997) The host must deal with the ambiguity of the stranger, who can be a friend or an enemy. If hosting is about weakening one's own identity to enrich it, reaching out to the Other means establishing the new symmetry: recognising and accepting the identity of the other, at least on a temporary basis. Hospitality is the human process to "make" the Other a human as well. Hosting the new technology means, then, establishing a paramount symmetry between humans and non humans. (see the work of those scholars in the IS field, (Monteiro and Hanseth, 1996) who are beginning to explore this line of reflection following Latour (1994) and Actor Network Theory)

Look now at systems development as a process by which the organization hosts the technology. The basic features of such a process seem to involve the following:

- being able to host the technology will redefine our identities; (see the excellent explorations of this point by Turkle (1995) and Flores and Spinosa (1998))

- unexpected consequences just signal the fact that any attempt to fully control the technology are doomed to failure: hospitality involves intelligent servicing the new technology;

- different cultures prescribe different codes, norms and rituals for hospitality: the guest has to put up with them. In the case of system development conceived as hosting the new technology, methodologies constitute today's rituals imposed by humans on the technology;

- following Kant's (1913) discussion of the universal right to hospitality, humans should grant a set of rights to technology such as the right to visit, but not necessarily the right to stay (Derrida, 1997) (it is not only human guests condemned to be nomadic, technologies should be able to dislodge, too - see also the idea of being able "to say yes and no" to modern technology put forward by Heidegger (1992), or the injunction by Weick (1993) to "drop your tools !" when in an emergency)

- if the guest is perceived as hostile, the host will treat him as an enemy. (recall the Luddites!)

Technology as a guest: the influence of the stranger

In a first instance technology as a guest presents itself to the host endowed with "affordances". (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1988) Affordances trigger a network of commitments by the host: they define the contours of her role as designer, sponsor or user. But that is just the beginning of an open-ended process: also the guest as an "actant" (Latour, 1994) possesses its own dynamics and will begin to align the host according to certain needs and constraints. Note how hospitality diverges from straightforward command and control prescribed by standard methodologies: in order to remain the master of the house the host must release control and serve the guest. Service is in the first instance compliance with affordances. (which can turn out to be a quite cumbersome endeavor - see Norman (1988))

Consequences for the guest/technology are:

- through hospitality technology is made human. The humanization of systems could be a more intriguing challenge than the virtualization of reality;

- technology can consider the hosting organization at its own service, but it cannot dominate it;

- when technology turns into an enemy, it will exploit the organizations and its members, finding allies among certain groups in the organization, but at the same time dropping them when it does not need them anymore. (see the description of the implementation of SAP (from an ally to a "monster") in a Norwegian multinational by Hanseth and Braa (1998))

The relationship: connecting two separate worlds

Hospitality connects the inside (the home) with the outside (the visitor). It links the settler with the visiting, mobile guest. Hospitality is about managing the threshold, in the real and figurative sense. (the edge of the catastrophe in human relationships between "friend and enemy" - see Schmitt (1963)) Hospitality leads to innovation and learning, because it requires a cognitive displacement in a foreign/territory culture (without travelling): it is a sort of spot cognitive nomadism. When the two cultures are too far apart, the role of mediators in facilitating hospitality can be crucial. (Callon, 1991) In any case, hospitality involves the risk of misunderstanding, since it typically has to deal with communication across different languages and cultural modes. The guest is intrinsically ambiguous, and can turn into an enemy. Both can become "hostages" of each other. It is thus a relationship that has to be based on trust, although trust that cannot be cultivated within the boundaries of a clan, (Ouchi, 1980) rather between separate clans. If the host becomes a guest in his own home, so the guest becomes a sort of host: thus, technology hosts the humans thanks to its own array of affordances. And systems development becomes the intriguing business for

humans to find ways of being hosted by the technology. (recall Kubrick's movie "2001" where the astronauts slowly discover of being HAL's, the spaceship computer, powerless guests!) Standards, the installed base, infrastructures, languages and interfaces can be now looked at as the rituals imposed on humans as guests of computer-based information systems.

In sum, hospitality, seen as the main phenomenon of the encounter between technology and organizations, shows that systems development methodologies are just the external appearance of a ritual imposed by the human host. They may be carefully planned but cannot dispose of the unpredictability and ambiguity of the guest. Understanding hospitality as a phenomenon we have to deal with when designing, implementing and using new technologies is not a purely intellectual exercise. Through such an understanding we can exit the program and priorities set by the rituals of methodologies, and be ready to explore new ways of re-arranging our commitments towards ourselves as designers and users and towards the technology as a non human, ambiguous guest. (Flores and Spinosa, 1998) A different agenda can be thus set out in dealing with new technologies.(Ciborra and Hanseth, 1998) Trust and friendliness must be coupled with a "releasement" of control. (recall: the host must play the server) Acceptance of the guest's intrinsic ambiguity and mystery, what Ciborra and Lanzara (1994) have called "negative capability" borrowing the expression from the poet J. Keats, should become part of the practical ways of coping with technology. To be sure, an effective host must be able to exercise various forms of "care" (Ciborra, 1996) depending upon the unpredictable circumstances in the unfolding of hospitality. Finally, host and guest will most probably be engaged in forms of reciprocal "cultivation" (Dahlbom and Mathiassen, 1993) by sharing and enriching the respective culture and practices.

Thinking, behaving and acting in terms of hospitality should leverage our encounters with technology and unleash those energies we usually invest in the methods' straight jacket. Processes like bricolage, tinkering and improvisation have recently been celebrated in relation to the design of organizations (Weick, 1998; Hatch, 1998; Ciborra, 1999) and the use of complex technical systems, (Hutchins, 1995) despite the massive pressure to adopt and deploy rational methodologies. Their resilience can then be appreciated in a different light. These highly situated human activities are far from being the result of the practitioner as an artist, or a snob. They belong to the core of the human institution of hospitality. They express the thousands, subtle ways in which humans ingeniously discover, discern, interpret and act upon the shades of the encounter with technology as an ambiguous stranger.

At the end of this short journey (definitely a nomadic wandering across disciplines!) it should be clear that the notion of hospitality can introduce a universe

of discourse closer to human existence and its basic institutions, able to grant an "existential indexing" to systems development activities, while avoiding those too readily accepted functional role definitions, such as "human factors". Thinking, acting and behaving in terms of hospitality allow something more constructive: (Flores and Spinosa, 1998) the re-registering of our networks of dues and commitments to a strange actant (the technology) around a strange attractor, (Thom, 1975) the multi-faceted and catastrophic point of encounter. (see Table 1)

Table 1: The old and new commitments in systems development

The old commitments as dictated by systems development methodologies	The new commitments dictated by hospitality
Strong identity and advocacy	Define identity in a plastic way depending upon the guest(s)
Enforce boundaries, standards, roles	Cross boundaries, test standards and roles
Be rational	Care
Seek consensus	Be the server
Be in control of the tool	Release control
Measure	Listen
Compare, learn and improve	Share
Be in control of unexpected consequences	Be open to mysteries and ambiguities (negative capability)

What about Markets and Transactions?

Dahlbom (1998) urges us to acknowledge that the nomadic society of the future is a <u>market</u> society, as was also suggested by various scholars of transaction costs economics. (Ciborra, 1983; Malone, Benjamin and Yates, 1990) What is the role of the existential dimension of hospitality in a market society? Are those two institutions compatible? To be sure, they are closer than it would appear at first. We can turn back where we started this essay. Etymology indicates that hospitality has to do not only with reciprocity, (for example, gifts) but, more economically speaking, with the measurement of equivalents in transactions and fairness in exchange. Once again, the dictionary of the Indo-European languages, ranging from Latin to Iranian, would show the multiple and surprising links between words such as: friend, contract, exchange, reciprocity and guest. (Benveniste, 1969) In the Iranian mythology the god

of hospitality is called Aryaman. Arya are the people belonging to the same linguistic community. Aryaman is the mediator who allows newcomers to become members of the clan, through marriage, contract and exchange. In modern Iranian *aryaman* is "the intimate friend". The closely associate word *erman* means "guest".

Acknowledgements

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