Two figures of the historian of computer science.

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November 16, 2019

Abstract

The computer scientist-turned historian, and the journalist-turned the same. A meta-analysis, or sociological historiography...

Introduction

In the vacuum left by historians – these gentlemen and gentlewomen were too preoccupied with the Habsburgs, and continue to be – a history of computer science nonetheless emerged.

Its actors, we have argued in the past already, having also gone through their works, fit into two categories : the computer scientist- and the journalist-turned historians.

This was not by accident as much as by default.

(As to why this is so, we must assume the combination of mutually exclusive cultures.)

We give a brief overview of trends here.

1. Journalists-turned historians

Journalists-turned historians : authors of some the best and worst works encountered.

The best is found in books such as Black's *IBM and the Holocaust* or Levy's *Hackers*.

The former is a real grand book that is unlikely to be surpassed soon. It does not stop to reflect on us and our times : when reading descriptions of Thomas Watson, the paternalist head of IBM, in the Berlin of the 1930's, we think of course of today and various executives from Microsoft (parent company of Github) to Gitlab; after Watson, they are set on convincing us that "serving everyone" is a public interest virtue...

This is history with a real potential (for the present).

The other has reestablished in all of its richness the original hacker : an academic or extra-academic modifier of systems...

(Less good is found in Hafner and Lyon's history of the Internet : the reader left to put together the pieces of their source material puzzles.)

2. Computer scientists-turned historians

These historians are most polite – this we must leave to them; Their books are like their algorithms.

Reading only them one could not be faulted for thinking that this is what history is, and all that history is capable of.

In their heads, Mommsen has just published vol. 1 of the *History of Rome* — historical science circa 1850. (They too have their heroes...)

Their most important value they do not make explicit so we will do it for them : neutrality.

Neutrality in all matters. And, lots and lots of dates — down to the last hour, of the last day, of the last month.

If the history of computer science – this most important and critical history – was left to them, it would take us another century just to reach Duby.

Let us be clear : what they have done is – for the most part – a history of digits and numbers equivalent to the old history of kings and queens.

(The expression “lackeys of numbers” might have not been from Marx...)

To put it less mildly : the scientific equivalent of centrist politics.

The best that has come out of this are the contributions by Donald Knuth for instance : the historical references found in *The Art of Programming* that help us put back in their historical context the variety of algorithms evoked there, his many articles (e.g. on early computer languages), and more biographical and auto-biographical writings (e.g. on computer science at Stanford, including bias).

Another example of this is the sum produced by Goldstine, computer science from Descartes to today...

The existence of such historians is in no way specific to computer science, but is common to most other disciplines (astronomers-turned historians, mathematicians the same, etc.).

Historians did not write their history, so they wrote it themselves :

This was the law of the history of science as it had been for a long time (thought not it only).

3. The so-called “*historians*” of science

This category is little more than an extension of the previous; but whereas computer scientists do not seem very insistent on historian titles (presumably holding their own discipline in higher regard), they are.

Historians of science are perhaps one of the most eclectic groups amongst historians, but among them one demographic has always struck us as peculiar : physicists-turned historians, found in such great numbers here... Because we have met so many of them now, we cannot ignore any longer, and should try to make sense of them :

Having received no education or training in history, these improvised historians summon theories drawn randomly from places as diverse (and incompatible) as 18th c.-style history and the latest intellectual fashions from Goldsmiths; resulting in a true hodgepodge science that could only pass as history, and science, amongst themselves, and in their institutions.

At one of the Max Planck institutes, we heard for instance a young and hungry future administrator boast :

“Everyone in my research group has at least a Master’s [degree] in physics”!

My, my, but we must remind : a mere sense of chronology does not make one a historian. No more than boundless emotions qualify one as an ethnographer or anthropologist.

As to this last group, encountered again recently :

Their teenage diaries lead them straight to ethnography;

a strange one where the studied subject all too often, all soon disappears – usually about one third into their books – such as to make room for what had been their center of interest all along, chiefly themselves;

their own feelings, and anxieties, and head-splitting confessions... The “*exhalation of subjectivity*” evoked in distaste by Georges Canguilhem in the context of Sartre : their philosophical predecessor, we could say the same of them today.

This was, briefly, the context in which we developed our work.
(The most critical parts of the history of computer science came from feminist perspectives, as found in Abbate for example; but this alone, though important, is not enough. Reevaluations of Turing's legacy also seemed promising, if only at first.)