Computer science is a social science.

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Abstract

Neither meant as a complete and full biography – a foolish and by definition always incomplete enterprise (in the tradition of prosopography) – nor a Festschrift, yikes.

In the most simple of ways, a former student remembers their beloved teacher here. Such relationships are always complicated, but we do so:

So, that those who come after him, and after them, will remember them, and know what they stood for and what they were trying and hoped to accomplish. Not alone. You are not alone.

Computer science can, and never will be the same again.
1. Introduction: “His name commanded great respect”

Intentions and memories. (counter-biography)

By the time I met Christophe Charle, his reputation was already immense.

He had perfect academic credentials and wrote books of the highest intellectual caliber and academic rigor at a rhythm of 1 or 2 per year, and it was a mystery to everyone how he did it, and where he found the time to do so, because he was also a father and had a family.

His name commanded great respect, and for him, and for us perhaps too, researchers from all over the world came for just a chance to speak at one of his/our seminars.

45, rue d’Ulm was the address, 5th district. A legendary school of barely a few hundreds students that has produced more Fields medalists than any of Cambridge, MIT, Berkeley or Stanford, and the rest – home of the Bourbaki group, the “mathematicians’ mathematicians”, home of too many great intellectuals to give a full list, everyone from Michel Foucault, to Jean Cavailles, to Georges Canguilhem, to Pierre Bourdieu, our heroes – “and through them and through him”.

For him : they came from Italy, from Austria I think, the United States, and a hundred of other places I’ve since forgotten; while he regularly was invited to speak and stay at institutions such as Normal University in China – I don’t remember which of them.

In his uncomplicated and endearing ways, he had shown us a photo on the projector once of him posing in front of it next to cherry trees.

It was the tradition then, that a graduate student should attend the seminar of their professor. It probably, or perhaps still is.

I became aware of him through Pierre Bourdieu, whose entire writings I had read, and I believe he had been one of his students, certainly one of his (many) collaborators. This is the kind of stuff that can be found in books, hence we don’t focus on it here.

The only other information I can provide here, that made me want to work with him, was that one of his photos showed him as a young man wearing a turtleneck and glasses that by any standards were far too big for him (this was before certain fashion trends became normal, to be clear). And, that inspired me – rightly it turned out – with some confidence.

With some other professors, one can already tell my such small details as their photos that one is dealing with what can only be accurately described as strange, strange birds of strange colors, and strange feathers: “bowl cuts”, dyed hair, and Bob Dylan poses, where everything screams “run away”, if only, and it only gets crazier afterwards, sideways and upside down... Queer, and not in a good way, and probably not even queer.

As one becomes an adult, with some principles, one learns to say no often, promptly, and vigorously; a lack of answer can and should be taken to have equal meaning.

But, no such things can be said to have been the case here : he had looked like a dork in his twenties or thirties, and was fair and square in his
sixties, providing advice, that was sometimes harsh, but useful. If, and
when he was a bit cocky, this was a feature that he had won the right to
be a thousand times over and over again – this is how I felt and I believe
everyone felt with intellectuals of his caliber.

Among his books, was one on the formation of the Medieval university
collected with Jacques Le Goff; whose work on Intellectuals in the Middle
Ages (Les Intellectuels au Moyen-Age) was one of the great intellectual
shocks of and on my life and remains to this day perhaps my favorite
history book – a small but expert book completely devoid of footnotes,
the kind that can only be written by someone with great command over
and authority over their subjects, and a clear-cut sense for what can be
left out, and what can stay.

Our heroes, living and dead, guide us to the right places – “and through
him and through them” again and again.

2. A selfless magician

His seminar was of the “general research” kind, and so much so that I
don’t remember its exact title, nor do I feel this has any importance.

This seminar, of his, which took place under the roofs of our college,
in a room hidden away and only reached upon ascending many stairs.

One had to already have paid their dues to be here, for certain.

In this seminar – the only seminar deserving of such a designation I
have ever known or attended despite having attended god knows many –
real, real, non-abstract science was done.

Science as it was being done, was done. And, put on display for anyone
who was willing to watch and learn.

It was not only that we were given the fruits of science, but how to do
it and how to extract them ourselves.

In this seminar, of his, that was simultaneously ours, because he had
made it so, and made us...

He brought obscure books to class, from the 19th century, which was
his century, then created tables of data in front of us based on them.

This great, selfless magician showed us the tricks, and the bag of tricks.

It’s hard to not feel some form of adoration for intellectuals like that.

They remind us of what it truly means to be an intellectual.

They were selfless : they wanted to create thousands more like them,
because one person could only do so much alone, and only lived for so
long.

This seminar also took place late at night, which added to its unusual
nature – which I try to render here to the best of my abilities.

But, there were many more things that were exceptional about it, and
about him :

I can safely say this is the only class I know to have been attended by
other professors.

There was so much to learn, (that) they put their pride away.

Discussions were sometimes harsh, but we all did it, gave, and received,
and we received much – we did in order to help one other. No shams.
I have a hard time, this being said, picturing such a seminar existing in our current times. There would be some uproar, and they would be so wrong.

The seminars of Pierre Bourdieu were said to be about the same – and I did get a feeling of what they must have been like by attending those. I don’t talk much about the content, because – contrary to my peers, and to their dismay – I perhaps never cared particularly for it. It hasn’t particularly helped me, but what did matter were the many novel methods, and ways of approaching problems, including the difficult task of being an intellectual, in this, and the past century, that stayed with me.

3. Escape from the Ivory Tower: “Double imprisonment”

I had become somewhat disillusioned with being what I was, and by some folly, one day late in the evening, since this is when his seminars ended, I had confided in him.

What was the point of it all? The writings of Marx and Engels had been with us for over 200 years now, and the revolution they promised was nowhere to be seen.

He answered – he who had been an intellectual of the very first category for all of his life over 40 years by that point – that it was still better than being a dumb banker. (I’m pretty sure he used a word stronger than this, but here it is.)

And, I think, it was in this same discussion that I had learned the biggest lesson I did end up learning from him.

He, who had spent decades researching the history of universities – these in fact strange places full of people dedicating their lives to knowledge, though some better than others – had emerged with much wisdom out of it.

He thus told me and warned of what he had established as the dangers of “double imprisonment”: when academics only study other academics, and this is all they do. They are to be pitied for sure.

It should come as no surprise, and it certainly has not done so for us, that such academics could be found in abundance in such fields as the history of science. Most of it, so absurdly bad, it is neither one or the other, and they are neither one or the other (neither recognized as historians by real historians, or scientists by scientists, most of them failed physicists for a reason we have not yet determined).

Going forward, I had always thought I would be surrounded by intellectuals of the caliber and nature of Christophe Charle. Boy, was I wrong.

I had also gotten in my head, that I should wait for him after class. Which he accepted.

He would ride back home on his bike – an intention, theory and practice that was far from obvious in busy and dangerous streets – helmet, gilet jaune and everything.
From all the way up from the attic to the entrance, many steps needed to be climbed back down.

On the way down, back to everyday life, in what were mostly monologues by him, I continued to learn. About the politics of the day, and corrupt politicians, and cowards.

Christophe Charle was none of those things: a first-rate intellectual, who also regularly wrote political articles in newspapers such as Le Monde.

4. Kill your idols: social science is a computer science

Ends are always bitter sweet. (Like Jaffa cakes.)

I wrote my MA thesis under Christophe Charle on realism in theater and cinema – in the second part of his career, the one I knew, he had turned to the topic of theater in the 19th century in Europe and had become the worldwide expert on that question.

Subtitle: Liberation from melodrama.

Written while I was in Cambridge, and my life, my personal life, was changing so fast, I simply did not have the time to make it all it could have been.

Some things in life are more important than the history of philosophy or art history, for better and worse.

It was a short work of just over 100 pages, with which he wasn’t entirely happy, because it could have been more he believed, that ended abruptly on a chapter entitled approximately: “Subversions: homosexuality and transexuality.”

He wanted me to continue, and stay “on path”, and do a PhD with him, but I did not feel ready, in many, not only intellectual ways, and did not want to – even though I loved him, and them.

He was the closest thing to an intellectual father to me, of all those that remained and were alive.

And, learn, I did.

Would he be proud of me now?

“A prosopography of Turing Award laureates” – that was entirely him.

Forget Lawrence’s definition.

But, not entirely. My second girlfriend contributed much to it, by being who she was.

Freedom through knowledge? Yes, but it is not enough.

If there is ever anything like a general theory of intellectual activity in the humanities, it will read: empty lives = empty works.

These strange, strange birds that are so unlike us, and will never be like us, not even in their wildest dreams, have not learned this. They cannot.

I took his lessons, and pushed them so far as I could: so far, that, now, I have almost no peers, and there are no maps, and no way to go back. And, no wish either.

Moving from the history of intellectuals to art history – as he had done, and I had done – was not enough of an escape from the ivory tower
I studied computer science – by reading textbooks and modifying programs – at the price and the benefit of becoming one.  
A social computer scientist.

**Contributions**: towards a social computer science.

What is computer science?  
Let us shout, loud and clear, for all and everyone to hear, what it truly is: **computer science is a social science.**  
It can never be, and will never be anything else again from now.  
A science that reflects our society, and our visions, hopes of it.