# Tech dogma # 1 : The Great Separation, between the "technical" and the "political". Documents towards a history.

Camille Akmut

"– So, ... how long have you been evil?
– Oh, I just mix the potions ...

– My impression is a lot of these guys are just opportunistic. They'll go with the flow."

(*Angel*, season 5 – End of the Buffyverse.)

# Introduction : Lessons from science

There is perhaps no more defining dogma – a set of deeply believed, implicit, common values – for computer science and technology than what we call here "the great separation" of concerns between the technical and the political.

They are like the comments found in their codes. – we use the number sign, #, here on purpose, they will know why.

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These attitudes and behaviors are nothing new to those who have studied the history of the sciences.

The philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard had highlighted them, before anyone else perhaps : the "unconscious" and "unthought" of scientists, he called them.

While Georges Canguilhem, this other great philosopher and historian of the sciences, spoke of "milieu" – the "milieu" of scientists.

The historian of intellectuals Jacques Le Goff, no greater authority can be named than him where the Middle Ages that saw their birth are concerned, also spoke of "milieu" to describe the world of intellectuals, material and mental structures alike.

In this "wooden panel" that we continue to paint, computer scientists are now included; they who, for so long refused, and escaped such an inclusion.

They convinced us that there was such a thing as a separation between "the technical" and "the political".

We have shown them, and continue to show them otherwise : their mirror, turned to themselves.

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In *Martha*, Fassbinder screamed in atrocity at himself. In here, they do.

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"*It's a good lesson to learn from science.*" – says one of them.

They, who want to teach us lessons on science? We will teach them a trick or two.

Their tortured casuistic reminds us of that of Medieval scholars.

Their wishy-washy arguments are the superstructures of their sweaty palms and tortured smiles, when politicians finally call them to answer.

Their most adroit ways, we leave them those if nothing else : lukewarm, neither too cold or warm; never too much of this, or that; never too much of one thing or the other; but, they only ever play their side, make no mistake about this.

They claim to speak for the people, "*the population*" as they so gently put, but "the populace" they say and think amongst themselves; of which they do not come from. We remind them of their place.

These scholars of semantics...

"*You have to be very careful*" they warn, knower, as they are, of the many pitfalls and complications of science... except that of their minds.

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But, we warned you : you do us violence, we will return it a thousandfold. And, if there is one game you cannot win : the game of smarts. You always lost at those, and hence you became what you could only become.

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And, because we know them to be unsophisticated, we already know their counter-argument :

"If it was down to you, we would have no technology." – they say.

"But, what have you given us?" – we answer.

Promised, vast areas of freedom have turned into vast areas of surveillance instead. Convenience turned into control; Data into currency.

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And, so, we cannot repeat ourselves enough, when we say that if we do not define computer science, it will define us – and perhaps do worse.

They, who fashion technology in their image, but, never never ours...

# Document # 1 – Aleksandr Kogan hearing : "*I didn't bother.*"

Description : *As part of a Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee hearing that took place in the UK in 2018, in the context of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, Labour MP Paul Farrelly questions Aleksandr Kogan, creator of an application that collected data from millions of users.*

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Sociological characteristics

Education : Berkeley.
Subject : psychology.
Occupation : lecturer/researcher at Cambridge.
Affiliation : Facebook, Cambridge Analytica.
Clothing : suit.
Color of skin : white.
Age : early thirties.

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**P.F.** – If you were doing this work, *why* would you not want to know, who the client was?
**A.K.** – It's a good question. Uh... I knew it was for Republicans. So, I think, that's true. But, honestly, I wouldn't be able to recognize the names. I mean... I don't know the specific candidates, in most primaries or elections in the United States. Uhmm. It's just not something... [frowning] That level of granularity is not something I've ever been interested in.
**P.F.** – So, you didn't care, really?
**A.K.** – Oh, in terms of like, the specific candidates? No! I mean that's...
**P.F.** – There are some nice politicians around, and some really nasty politicians around. So, why wouldn't you, why wouldn't you care?
**A.K.** – Whether the politician is nice or not? [smirking, and lowering head to the side] Uh, Sir, my personal position on life is, unless I have a lot of evidence, I don't know. It's a good lesson to learn from science. Where, typically, we just don't know. So, in terms of politics, *in particular*, I don't really have a strong opinion about a candidate, uhm, whether they're nice or not. My general perception though, especially in the United States, most folks are trying to do what they believe is right : for most major candidates, major parties. Uh, I can understand where they're coming from, even if I personally would not agree with that position. There are exceptions obviously. Uh, but, *by and large*, I would say that... most candidates are coming from positions that could be viewed as "reasonable" by a substantial portion of the population.
**P.F.** – Sure enough another lesson from science is, if you don't ask the question you don't get the evidence.

**A.K.** – [laughs out loud] Uh, not quite. It's : you have to be careful, to make a judgment too quickly. And, in something like "is this person a nasty person, or a nice person", I think that's quite a complex question. And, it's difficult for me to know that about a politician (...) I could look at their positions, uhm, and there's positions I agree with, and positions I personally disagree with, uhm...
**P.F.** – But, you didn't bother?
**A.K.** – I didn't bother.

# Document # 2 – Linus Torvalds interview : "*the whole traditional freedom thing*"

Description : *Linus Torvalds, creator of the Linux kernel, is interviewed about a variety of topics. One question is on the links between software and the wider world, outside. (Interviewer : Swapnil Bhartiya.)*

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Sociological characteristics

Education : University of Helsinki.
Subject : computer science.
Occupation : software engineer (Linux kernel).
Affiliation : Linux Foundation.
Clothing : t-shirt (and jeans?).
Color of skin : white.
Age : forties.

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**S.B.** – How much, you know, do you really just care about the code, it has to be open source, or do you also care about, you know, either the business practices...
**L.T.** – So... Me, personally? *I only care about the code.*
**S.B.** – Mmm-mm.
**L.T.** – I mean, when I say that, maybe a lot of people worry about the walled gardens and cloud providers, and they own ownership of the data ... the obvious Facebook's, Google's, Apple's, whatever. Uh, that's actually not what I care about. It's not what I do. I do code. And, I'm just saying I understand that a lot of people who care about open source, because of the whole traditional "freedom thing". Uh, they will find it much more, I mean worrying to how much is happening inside the walled gardens of big companies. And, I actually don't think it's so much the code. The code... is, is often open source even in, in a proprietary environment. What big companies have is, they have all the data. And, uh, and that is obviously their bread and butter. And, I... It makes perfect sense. But, but, it's... It's maybe a real issue.

# Document # 3 – Richard Cheshire interview : *"the pure, technical operations"*

Description : *Richard Cheshire/Cheshire Catalyst, well-known phreak (i.e. phone hacker), publisher of TAP (Technological American Party), presented as the predecessor of hacker magazine 2600, regrets the invasion of politics in technology.*

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Sociological characteristics

Education : unknown.
Subject : unknown.
Occupation : unknown.
Affiliation : unknown.
Clothing : t-shirt, shorts (sandals?).
Color of skin : white.
Age : unknown (fifties?).

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– You are in New York, which is an activist center, primarily because you have a large population to draw from, can get together from the various boroughs, they're just a subway ride away. But, mostly because New York is the communications capital of America : all the TV networks are here, the news organizations are here, and if it's going to make noise anywhere, it's going to make noise in New York. And, so, because it's a communications capital, we get all these political activists; and, they happen to come to the technology convention of ours. They get up and bring their politics in to our technical sessions. And, so, *it seems*, like it's a more political convention. Uh, ask people running it, we'll go : "Politics? Uh, what?!".

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– Lately, we've had to get into political issues, because the politics are invading the technology. Ordinarily, we don't really like to mess with politics. Because, that kind of adversarial relationship, has nothing to do with "the pure, technical operations", and the sophistication of what we like to play with. The hardware.

# Document # 4 – Mark Zuckerberg : *"I don't know of any surveillance organization in the world that operates that way"*

Description : *Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and CEO of Facebook, testifies before a joint hearing of the Senate Judiciary and Commerce committees in 2018. Some hold back punches, some seem to have disturbingly cozy relationships with their guest, while others yet are a little too polite – Senator Dean Heller sets a few traps.*

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Sociological characteristics

Education : Harvard.
Subject : psychology and computer science.
Occupation : CEO.
Affiliation : Facebook.
Clothing : suit.
Color of skin : white.
Age : thirties.

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**D.H.** – Do you believe you're more responsible with millions of Americans' personal data than the Federal government would be?

[pause]

**M.Z.** – ... Yes. But, Senator, the... uh your point about surveillance, I think that there's a very important distinction to draw here. Which is that when organizations do surveillance, people don't have control over that. Where, on Facebook, everything that you share there you have control over. (...) And, you can get rid of all of it. And, I don't know of any surv... uh, uh any surveillance organization in the world that operates that way, which is why I think that that comparison just isn't really apt here.
**D.H.** – With you here today, do you think you're a victim?
**M.Z.** – No.
**D.H.** – Do you think Facebook, as a company, is a victim?
**M.Z.** – Senator, no. I think we have a responsibility [promises to do better] And, I think that we haven't done enough historically. And, we need to step up, and do more.
**D.H.** – Okay. Do you think the 87 million users, do you consider them victims?
**M.Z.** – Senator, I think... Yes.

# Document # 5 – Sundar Pichai : *"I lead this company without political bias"*

Description : *Sundar Pichai, Google CEO, in a habit that technology CEO's will now need to get used to it appears, appears before the House Judiciary Committee in 2018. Representative Jim Jordan asks uncomfortable questions.*

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Sociological characteristics

Education : Stanford; University of Pennsylvania's "Wharton School".
Subject : engineering; MBA business.
Occupation : CEO.
Affiliation : Google.
Clothing : suit.
Color of skin : other-than-white.
Age : forties.

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**J.J.** – Mr. Pichai, in your opening statement you said : *"I lead this company without political bias, and work to ensure that our products work that way."* Mmh, Eliana Murillo is Google's head of multicultural marketing. Does Ms. Murillo do good work?
**S.P.** – I'm not particularly familiar with her work, but she's an employee of Google. And, you know, we're proud of our employees.
**J.J.** – Well, you praised her work the day after the 2016 election. In a 4-page email she wrote about her work with the Latino vote, she said *"even Sundar gave our work a shout out"*. Is she referring to you there?
**S.P.** – Uh, she was referring to my communication around translation for a different related effort.
**J.J.** – Okay. Well, I'm going to look at two other sentences she had in that long e-maill; again, recapping her work in the 2016 election (...) She said : *"We pushed out to get the Latino vote with our features in key states."* And, she specifically cites : the states Florida and Nevada. In the end of her e-mail, she says : *"We supported partners like Voto Latino to pay for rides, to the poles, in key states."* With me? [pause] I kind of want to analyze these two sentences. (...) Is it fair to say the "we", in both sentences, Mr. Pichai, refers to Google?
**S.P.** – Uh, Congressman, we, we, we are very concerned whenever allegations like that, we, we, our team look into it...
**J.J.** – I'm not asking you that question. I'm asking you : Is it fair to say the "we" in both sentences refers to the company Google?
**S.P.** – As Google, we wouldn't participate in any partisan efforts, around any civic process(es), so, I don't, I don't think so.
**J.J.** – So, [repeating the sentences]. And, how where they getting that done? They were getting that done by, according to Ms. Murillo, your head of mul-

ticultural marketing, by altering your features, or configuring your features in such a way. And, [by] paying for rides for people to get to the poles. Is that an accurate reading of those... That's, that's all I'm asking : Is that fair to say what those sentences are talking about?

**S.P.** – I'm not aware of all the specifics, but we did look into it, we found *no evidence* that, you know, there were any activity like that from Google, towards that organization.

# Sources

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Dedicated to Labour MP Paul Farrelly; and
Greek Minister of Finance, economist, politician Yanis Varoufakis.

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Their education, contrary to that of many others, was never an obstacle to real action, and they never had to separate one from the other.

When MP Paul Farrelly was done listening to the strange notions on life and science of the psychologist Aleksandr Kogan, he interjected :
*"You should have been a professor of semantics instead."*

*Bless him!* If only all of our politicians could be like them...