

In 1807 the counter-revolutionist Louis Gabriel Ambroise, Vicomte de Bonald (1754-1840) composed a small essay on a conflict that was tearing at the fabric of intellectual life in France. Never one to mince words, he called the work “Sur la guerre des sciences et lettres.” Bonald believed the war between “science” and “letters” had developed slowly during the previous century, but had entered a new phase as the two groups battled over influence in the triumphant Napoleonic regime and the subsequent direction of the quantitative social sciences. While the moral sciences had traditionally “ruled” through theology over the exact sciences and the arts, Bonald explained that the success of the Enlightenment claim to a universal and practical moral education had managed only a partial victory: while they discredited many of the positions of the Catholic Church, they were unable to replace them with a system of similar authoritative legitimacy. The authoritative and legitimizing *institution* of course existed in the person and bureaucratic reforms of Napoleon, but in Bonald’s view it would be the *content* of this institutional message that was up for contestation.

Bonald had perhaps the clearest perception of his self-described “war.” Writing in the aftermath of the socially and culturally disruptive French Revolution, Bonald was amazed at what he took to be a historically unprecedented discord between science and art. The ancients, he argued, certainly saw no difference between science and letters; for centuries, the two worlds worked together in the production of knowledge: science as the means by which people acquired knowledge and the arts and letters the way in which it was expressed and transmitted. For Bonald, the division of labour was clear and concise: “science is the content (*fond*) and letters are the form.” The complementary nature of science and letters progressed as such until its peak

during the reign of Louis XIV, as “the sciences became more literary and more ornate, and literature more knowledgeable.”

An inability to be knowledgeable and eloquent had created a perverse consequence for how objects of inquiry were treated. Poems were being written on the sexes of plants while naturalists wrote of the “affections of vegetables” and the “families of shellfish.” Conversely, humans had been reduced to just another species: “It seems that one humanizes the material things in proportion to how one materializes man,” Bonald insisted. Through the combination of a devalued literary form and an increasingly technical content, the traditional relationship between content and form had been destroyed. Summing up the intellectual situation in the early nineteenth-century, Bonald captured perfectly the state of the conflict: “on the one hand there are letters without science; and on the other, science without letters.”

Through an evaluation of Bonald’s writings, along with his fellow-aristocrat Joseph de Maistre, it may be possible to unearth one of the earliest critiques of Big Data, or algorithmic thinking. Bonald and Maistre have largely been overlooked because of their reactionary politics during the French Revolution, but between apologies for the monarchy and denunciations of revolutionaries, they provided a surprisingly coherent and sustained argument against viewing human beings through the prisms of quantification and mathematical equations. Though they were roundly mocked during their time for supporting Louis XVI and suppressing revolutionary speech, they may offer one of the more effective critiques of modern data collection and evaluation.

