

The climate war

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The quarrel over global warming, originally a debate of specialists, is turning into a religious war, with the same excesses, the same debarments and an exacerbated violence, which happily remains purely verbal up till now. Will it come to blows? One can worry, reading the messages received *en masse* after the publication of an article by Stéphane Foucart on 1 March criticising the latest book by Claude Allègre, and on 4 March the latter's response in the form of a comments column.

'Climate sceptics' vs. 'warmists' are balanced in number, bearing witness to the profound division among our readers on this subject. This cleavage is new. Up to 2009, the great majority encouraged us to deal with ecological issues (notably climatic) bearing upon the world. One saw the excellent welcome given to the Planet pages, created in 2008, as was for the editorials and commentaries in this genre. The turnaround of a section of opinion has been dazzling. It began in November 2009 with 'Climategate', that is, the pirating of emails exchanged between climate scientists at the University of East Anglia (UK). The failure of the Copenhagen summit in December, then the polemic in January targetting the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the melting of the Himalayan glaciers, have finished by convincing the most swayed that the peril of global warming, without an easy solution, is a myth, or even a conspiracy.

Le Monde has by and large recorded these controversies. It has even been ahead of them in being the first, beginning 26 November 2009 in a little-noticed report, to throw doubt on the timing of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers predicted by the IPCC.

However, the accusations have not stopped raining down on the serious media in general, and on *Le Monde* in particular, suspected of participating in the 'plot'. The article by Stéphane Foucart, *The hundred faults of Claude Allègre*, has intensified them. "It is not serious to cover 'Climategate' with the view taken which is yours, when *Le Monde* is supposedly the French daily newspaper of reference" writes

Coline Bied-Charreton (Paris). "*Claude Allègre is certainly irritating. His provocative manner and his excesses lead one naturally to the response: 'he needs to be given what for'*". Joël André (Martigues, Bouches-du-Rhône) adds "*Your 'hundred faults' reveals this impulse, by noting errors which to my mind are rather benign. Le Monde should go past these quarrels and raise the level of debate, by investigating deeper some in-depth questions drummed out by this polemicist*". Jean-Claude Pecker (Paris) goes a step further: "*I would not know too much[?] to rise up against the ironic, even contemptuous tone of this article, which distorts the debate*".

The Claude Allègre column has given rise to equally clear-cut reactions. "*Claude Allègre shows in his response that he does not know what science comprises*" remarks Philippe Leconte (email). "*He has already proved this during the business of the La Soufrière volcano in 1976, by taking sides against Haroun Tazieff on pseudo-scientific grounds. The problem is that he discusses political questions while leaning on his claimed scientific authority*". "*Claude Allègre's diatribes on the climate do not advance the science*", adds Jean-Claude Courbis (Chambéry) in support. "*If that were the case, he would have published his work on this subject in a scientific journal, with a view to submitting it to examination by experts*". Since room is lacking here to quote all the messages, we are publishing a sample in Readers' Letters.

Let us note that the errors summarised by Stéphane Foucart have not been denied, neither by the numerous specialists who have written in, nor even by M. Allègre, whose column took up again the general thesis of his book without responding to the detail. To fend off all criticism, the [original] article should certainly have been able to give him a voice from the outset, which is good practice; but the paper has re-established the balance by opening its columns (and its front page) to the author three days later,.

The article shocked because it was in a form, rarely used, of a catalogue of errors; which, in full climate war, could seem like a taking of sides, or even a settling of accounts.

“This book is itself very polemical and designed in a way to let one believe in a conspiracy” explains Stéphane Foucart. “It represents an anti-ecological current of thinking which perhaps does not have enough coverage in the media, but when one totals up such a tally of errors there is a moment when one cannot put the ball on the centre spot; one must bring solid facts into the debate. The work of a scientific journalist does not consist of dealing with ideological, economic or political problems, but in putting forward the state of the art in science: what does one know or not know. Essentially I stick to what is published in the journals which are editorially reviewed by experts. On a complex subject like global warming, it is easy to create doubt. A lot of false information, even fantasy, is going around, above all in the blogosphere. In this framework, can journalism restrict its role to providing information, or should it become corrective?”

That is the root of the debate. It is not simple: if she/he contents herself by recording recognised facts and ignoring the rest, the journalist keeps her/his distance, but exposes themselves to the reproach of silencing certain countervailing views. That is the thesis notably upheld by a ‘conspiracy’ tendency, more and more virulent on the web, which justifies its allegations along the lines of ‘the dominant media are not telling us everything’. On the other hand, if the journalist rectifies established errors, she or he runs the risk of entering the arena and of seeing themselves accused of taking sides.

*“The primary mission of the paper is not to correct but to inform”, considers Sylvie Kauffmann, the editorial director of *Le Monde*. “But within the framework of a battle of experts, we must not prevent ourselves from using our expertise. It is difficult to establish a general rule. In the case of Claude Allègre, himself a scientist, if one reveals factual errors, why not demonstrate them? In the event the expertise of Stéphane Foucart was faultless. The line not to cross is that of partisan journalism. One must stay open to all points of view”.*

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Translated from the French by David Smythe