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Climato-scepticisme in France

Stephanie Posthumus

During the French presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron made the following controversial statement at a televised event on 4 February 2017: ‘Il n’y a d’ailleurs pas une culture française’ [‘There is moreover not one French culture’].¹ Unsurprisingly, Macron was subsequently attacked by defenders of ‘French culture’ who retorted that the Musée du Louvre, the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Opéra National de Paris were all examples of France’s highly regarded and well-established culture. But if Macron had wanted to say there was no French culture, he would have said: ‘Il n’y a pas **de** culture française.’ In other words, the grammatical structure of the sentence refuses the kind of interpretation that was taken up and widely spread by the French media. As the subsequent sentence of Macron’s speech clearly demonstrates, he was speaking about cultural diversification in France: ‘Il y a une culture en France. Elle est diverse, elle est multiple’ [‘There is culture in France. It is diverse, it is multiple’]. In the end, the debate did little, unfortunately, to challenge the notion of culture as a collection of canonical works, art, music, from the past; in other words, the notion of high culture.

Whatever one thinks of Macron’s pragmatic neoliberal politics, I begin with his words because they trouble the idea that ‘French’ exists as a single, homogeneous block of traditions, habits and ways of thinking. I am not interested in being the gatekeeper of what is French and what is not. On the contrary, I use the term ‘French’ in this chapter to speak of a loosely held together and constantly evolving assemblage of terms, ideas, thinkers, places and responses. In part, I refer to the notion of French with language in mind – which is why I have kept citations in the original French whenever possible – but I remain aware of the kinds of power that are deployed to bolster claims about language use. For example, when French is used to counter the hegemony of English, it is seen as a form of cultural resistance. But when it is considered in the history of colonial expansion, it becomes the powerful tool of the oppressor.

While this chapter's main objective is to survey the (hi)stories of climate scepticism in France, it will also explore how the notion of 'French' is reinforced or complicated by this debate. How do climate sceptics identify as 'typically' French? How is their climate scepticism constructed by the media as 'French'? How is the notion of French used in comparative, cross-national analysis of climate scepticism? How are differences mapped back onto specific traits or socio-historical events? By carefully contextualizing my responses to these questions, I hope to avoid the danger of 'making other' (Abu-Lughod) in my analysis of anti-environmental sentiment and climate scepticism in France.

A brief prehistory of French climate scepticism

Scepticism has a long history in France. Before making the fundamental claim, 'I think, therefore I am' (*Discours de la méthode* (1637)) [Discourse on the Method], René Descartes instituted doubt as the quintessential philosophical method. Since one can be absolutely certain of nothing, thinking must start with absolute doubt. This method quickly became one of the three pillars of the French philosophical tradition along with rationality and dualism. Certainty of anything but doubt became a sign of ignorance or simple-mindedness. French literature, too, has been imbued with the spirit of sceptical doubt. Denis Diderot's *La Promenade du sceptique* [The Sceptic's Walk] – written in 1747 but not published until 1830 because of its heretical attack on the church and religious belief – set the tone for intense questioning of entrenched social beliefs. A form of cultural critique, literature was given the express task of revealing and ridiculing unquestioning faith in church or state.

Placing French climate scepticism in this 400-year-long intellectual history is both useful and problematic. Can an attack on climate change science really be traced back to Descartes's method of doubt or Diderot's disdain for Christian dogma? Not directly, no. But it is helpful to keep these historical figures in mind when examining examples of anti-ecological sentiment in France. Intellectuals such as Claude Allègre, one of the most mediatized French climate sceptics, often identify with historical figures who attempted to overturn truths espoused by the majority. Allègre even claims that doubt is specific to the French philosophical tradition: 'Le doute méthodique, n'est-ce pas un illustre français – René Descartes – qui l'a inventé ? Doit-on en France être condamné pour cela ?' (*L'Imposture climatique* 25) ['Did not a famous Frenchman – René Descartes – invent the method of doubt? Should one be condemned in France for that?']

The pro-/anti-nature debate in France dates back to the eighteenth century that pitted Jean-Jacques Rousseau – the tortured Romantic who preferred wandering the countryside to the French *salons* of the time – against his former teacher Voltaire – the satirical polemist who enjoyed rubbing shoulders with European aristocracy. In his response to Rousseau's philosophy of *le bon sauvage* [the noble savage], Voltaire wrote:

Il prend envie de marcher à quatre pattes quand on lit votre ouvrage. Cependant, comme il y a plus de soixante ans que j'en ai perdu l'habitude, je sens malheureusement qu'il m'est impossible de la reprendre. Et je laisse cette allure naturelle à ceux qui en sont plus dignes, que vous et moi. (Letter to Rousseau, dated 30 August 1755). ['Reading your book makes one want to walk on all fours. However, it's been almost sixty years since I abandoned this habit, and so I feel, sadly, that it is impossible for me to do so again. I leave this natural posture to those who are worthier than you or me.']

The caustic, often humorous, tone of Voltaire's retorts can be heard in climate sceptic debates in France today. Moreover, rationalist thought – like the kind upheld by Voltaire in opposition to Rousseau's Romanticism – is often cited by climate sceptics as foundational to critiquing (overly political) environmentalist agendas.

The history of pro-/anti-nature attitudes in France cannot however be reduced to the opposing positions of Rousseau and Voltaire. Nineteenth-century anarchist geographer, Élisée Reclus rejected both Rousseau's Romanticism and Voltaire's rationalism in his view of ecology. As early as 1875, Reclus writes about 'unifying physical and economic data with a view to studying interactions between man and its natural environment' (Guest 76). Rather than separate nature and man, Reclus spoke of 'their cohabitation and dialectical interaction' (Guest 77). While much less known today than his American counterpart Henry David Thoreau, Reclus, too, mixed an ecological view of the world with revolutionary politics. As a libertarian, he participated in the Paris communes and refused the idea of democracy as a path to universal freedom: 'Voter, c'est abdiquer, c'est renoncer à sa propre souveraineté. N'abdiquez donc pas, ne remettez donc pas vos destinées à des hommes forcément incapables et à des traîtres futurs. Ne votez pas !' (1855) ['To vote is to abdicate, to renounce one's own sovereignty. Do not abdicate, do not put your destiny in the hands of clearly incapable men, future traitors. Do not vote!']. Because Reclus remained anti-establishment until the end, his outstanding work in human geography and ecology was conveniently 'forgotten' by academics for many years.

And yet it is a revolutionary spirit similar to that of Reclus's that energized the movements of May 1968.² Although the claims of students protesting the elitism of French universities and the demands of unions striking in favour of improved labour conditions were more red than green, the seeds of political ecology were planted in the late 1960s. Student leaders and participants such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Brice Lalonde went on to become prominent green politicians. As Roger Cans explains in his short history of the ecological movement in France: 'Les enragés de mai ont déroulé un tapis rouge sous les pas des futurs écologistes' (110) ['The rebels of May 68 rolled out the red carpet for the feet of future environmentalists']. Despite early exposure to the far left, political ecology and more specifically green parties in France did not necessarily take up the socialist agenda. I will discuss this in more depth later in the chapter, but it is an important point to be making here: there is no pro-nature left and anti-nature right schism driving climate scepticism in France. Instead, there are shifting alliances on a micro-political scale with scientists and intellectuals momentarily taking up positions on the right or the left depending on what brings the most public attention.

May 1968's socio-economic upheaval and unrest on a national level was echoed in following years by more environmentally oriented causes in local settings. For example, sit-ins and demonstrations were organized at Larzac in the 1970s to protest against the government's proposed expansion of a military base. Local farmers came together with anti-capitalists, feminists and environmentalists at different Larzac gatherings over the years to continue their protests until 1981 when President François Mitterand finally abandoned the government's plans. The Larzac movement remains a highly regarded example from which many contemporary eco-movements in France draw inspiration: for example, the *Zadistes* who protested the building of a new airport in the rural area of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2009 (the name *Zadiste* comes from the abbreviation Z.A.D., or *zone à défendre* [Zone to Defend]); the underground actions of *faucheurs volontaires d'OGM* [GMO volunteer reapers] who have destroyed Monsanto crops in different areas around France since the early 2000s; the *alter-mondialistes* [alter-globalizationists] whose movement began in 2003 at Larzac with the gathering of 200,000 people to protest the widening socio-economic gap between the North and the global South.

The 1970s Larzac movement also contained the key characteristics of what historian Michael Bess has identified as France's 'light green society': a strong attachment to a long agricultural past and a mix of nature-culture politics. According to Bess, France has developed a shallower, but wider, environmentalism

– hence, the adjective light-green – than other Western European countries because of its commitment to rolling farmland and *le petit paysan* [the small farmer], on the one hand, and its embrace of new technologies such as the Concorde, the TGV and more importantly nuclear power, on the other. France's light green society exemplifies, Bess argues, the happy marriage of modernity and ecology, giving birth to a nature-culture sentiment that sustains many different urban and rural ways of life. Bess concludes that France, 'a country with few surviving wildernesses and a great variety of partially humanized *paysage* [landscape] – may turn out closer to the shape of things to come' (294).

In 1971, France became the first Western European country to create a *Ministère de la protection de la nature et de l'environnement* [Ministry for the Protection of Nature and the Environment]. Even if Robert Poujade, the first minister, had little room to make real changes under moderate conservative President Georges Pompidou who loved driving, highways and fast cars, the Ministry was created to make a strong statement to the French people. Poujade explains that he found the word environment in an American or British newspaper and decided to adopt it even if it was considered to be an Anglicism at the time:

Quand on l'a utilisé en 1971, les gens sont tombés des nues. Heureusement, l'appellation du ministère incluait les termes « protection de la nature »; cela ils comprenaient, mais « environnement », ils ne connaissaient pas. C'est un terme anglo-saxon démarqué du français. (52)

['When it [the word "environment"] was used in 1971, people were completely taken aback. Fortunately, the ministry's name included the words "protection of nature"; this they understood, but "environment," they didn't understand. It's an Anglo-Saxon term, different from French.']

Under Poujade's direction (1971–1974), the Ministry combined old attitudes about nature with new concerns about environment: urban parks were created, policies to clean up water and air were established and laws to reduce urban noise pollution were introduced. Despite its name, the Ministry clearly understood nature not as a wilderness to be protected – as per the American model – but as human habitat.³

It is from the perspective of nature and culture as necessarily imbricated that the French Green Party – *les Verts* – emerged in the 1980s. Although eco-thinker René Dumont had run for the presidency back in 1974 and eco-candidates were on the ballot from the municipal to the European level throughout the 1970s, an official party was not created in France until 1982 and *les Verts* not until 1984.

Part of the party's success during the eighties and nineties can be explained by the increasing anxiety about nuclear power plants. But the party had difficulty becoming a major figure on the French political scene with support at the presidential level at 3.8 per cent in 1988 and no legislative seats won until 1997. This difficulty can be explained in part by the party's refusal to make alliances with either the right or the left. As the then leader of *les Verts*, Antoine Waechter, stated early on in the game: 'Ni droite, ni gauche, l'écologie n'est pas à marier.' ['Ecology will not be married, neither to the right or the left.'] For the early *Verts*, this meant that a new political paradigm was needed, one that was radically different from what had preceded it, and one that did not adhere to the rules of political posturing.

Such an approach was more or less successful in the following years. By 1994, under the leadership of Dominique Voynet, the Greens decided to side with the socialist left to gain more support for their campaigns. Over the years, debate continued to rage about how 'leftist' green parties needed to be. For example, Brice Lalonde established his own Green Party, *Génération Écologie* [Ecology Generation] in 1991 that adopted a more centrist and at times right-leaning politics. This lack of a firm position on the left-right political spectrum meant, for some, that the Greens had succeeded in making environmental issues a widespread, non-partisan issue in France (Bess). For others, the centralization of environmental issues weakened the Greens as they became less and less distinct from the socialist left and the republican right (Sainteny). In the end, France's Green Party was most successful at European Parliament level, holding seven seats in 1997, its strongest year until 2010 when it merged with the European Greens, reflecting the general trend towards transnational ecological politics.

In the face of an emerging green politics in the 1960s and 1970s, French philosophy remained unmoved to say the least, with well-known thinkers rejecting outright both nature and *éco-pensée* [eco-thought]. For example, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre exhibited a deep dislike of the natural world. One need only read the description of Roquentin's appalled fixation on a tree root in Sartre's novel, *La Nausée* (1938) [Nausea], to understand the existential *malaise* [discomfort] brought on by 'raw' nature. Jean Baudrillard's postmodern thinking goes further, exposing the world of pure representation into which the referent has completely collapsed. According to Verena Andermatt Conley, Baudrillard is 'the prototype of the brilliant *persifleur* whose world of simulacra does away with what seems to be an old-fashioned and hopelessly antiquated, indeed pre-electronic, materiality' (9). Such attitudes towards nature on the part of highly respected French philosophers and theorists have no doubt

contributed to the impression that France harbours much anti-environmentalist sentiment.

Direct attacks on ecological thinking do not, however, become officially written into French intellectual history until 1992 with the publication of Luc Ferry's *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* [The New Ecological Order]. Even if other anti-ecological books were appearing on bookstore shelves at the time, including Gérard Bramoullé's *La Peste verte* (1991) [The Green Plague], Yves Lenoir's *La Vérité sur l'effet de serre. Histoire d'une manipulation planétaire* (1992) [The Truth about the Greenhouse Effect. History of a Global Manipulation] and Philippe Paraire's *L'Utopie verte écologie des riches, écologie des pauvres* (1992) [Green Utopia. Ecology of the Rich, Ecology of the Poor], they did not have the same impact as Ferry's book.⁴ There may be a couple of reasons for this: (1) Ferry was already a well-known essayist and philosopher, having published *La Pensée '68* (1985) [May 68 Thought] in which he and Alain Renaut critiqued leftist intellectuals who had participated in the student uprisings of May 1968; and (2) his book, *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* [The New Ecological Order] attacked ecological thinking not only because of its supposed fascist tendencies, but also as a means of defending the French tradition of secular and universal humanism.⁵ Lumping together thinkers as diverse as Aldo Leopold, Hans Jonas and Michel Serres, Ferry's book equated deep ecology or *écologie radicale* with a dangerous return to a state of (animal) nature. Reasserting the dualist logic of the Moderns, Ferry argued that humans must detach themselves from nature if they are to gain access to the arts, culture, beauty and ethics.

Despite what was largely a reductive reading of environmental ethics and animal rights, Ferry's book had a long-term negative effect on the development of *éco-pensée* [eco-thought] as an academic discipline in France. In a 2008 interview, French philosopher Catherine Larrère spoke of the 'censoring effect' that Ferry's book had throughout the 1990s in France. Emerging philosophers feared that any association with ecological issues would marginalize their work as mere 'applied ethics' or worse as 'anti-humanist' and 'anti-French'. It has only been since 2005 or so that disciplines like environmental history, environmental philosophy and ecocriticism have come to be recognized as valid subjects of enquiry in France.⁶

Attributing so much weight to a single book in the prehistory of climate scepticism may seem disproportionate, but Ferry does not disappear from the anti-ecological scene after publishing *Le Nouvel Ordre*. On the contrary, his voice is heard again and again on the same stage as France's most vociferous climate sceptic, Claude Allègre. Although it may be coincidental, Ferry held the

position of *Ministre de la Jeunesse, de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche* [Minister of Youth, National Education and Research] from 2002 to 2004, two years after Allègre (1997–2000). Both Ferry and Allègre were nominated by right-wing UMP President Jacques Chirac. Later, Ferry more clearly aligned himself with Allègre, defending the climate sceptic in 2010 in an article in *Revue de la presse*, “L’Imposture climatique” et l’indignation des belles âmes’ [‘The Climate Imposture’ and the Indignation of the Noble-Minded’] and again in 2015 in *Le Figaro*, ‘Claude Allègre vu par Luc Ferry’ [Claude Allègre as Seen by Luc Ferry]. Moreover, it is not difficult to hear the echoes of Ferry’s 1992 attacks on deep ecology’s fascist tendencies in Allègre’s repeated warnings against an ‘écologie totalitaire’ [‘totalitarian ecology’] in his 2010 book *L’Imposture climatique* [The Climate Imposture].

The term *climato-scepticisme* does not appear in the French press until 2007, relatively late compared to Australia, Britain and the United States. But if one takes a longer view of anti-ecological attitudes that predate the use of the actual term, the year 1992 was pivotal. On the one hand, the Green Party was gaining more and more votes. On the other, intellectuals and scientists were mobilizing against what was seen as a rising ideological eco-order. As sociologists Hélène Guillemot and Stéfan Aykut explain:

On peut faire remonter la généalogie du climatoscepticisme hexagonal à 1992. En réaction au Sommet de la Terre de Rio, se constitue une mouvance intellectuelle et politique s’opposant à une « écologie irrationnelle » au nom d’une « écologie scientifique ». Elle se manifeste par la publication d’ouvrages comme *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* du philosophe Luc Ferry, et par des initiatives tel l’appel d’Heidelberg, signé par près de 4000 scientifiques dont 72 Prix Nobel, qui dénonçait « une idéologie irrationnelle qui s’oppose au progrès scientifique et industriel ». (75)

[‘The genealogy of French climate scepticism can be dated to 1992. In response to the Rio Earth Summit, an intellectual and political group came together to oppose “irrational ecology” in defence of “scientific ecology.” Expression of such an idea can be found in texts such as philosopher Luc Ferry’s *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* and in initiatives such as the Heidelberg Appeal, signed by over 4,000 scientists, including 72 Nobel Prize winners, who denounced “irrational ideology that opposes scientific and industrial progress”.]

While I wholeheartedly agree with Guillemot and Aykut’s genealogy of climate scepticism, their description of Ferry’s book needs to be corrected. *Le Nouvel Ordre* is not defending scientific ecology against irrational ecology. In fact, the book speaks very little of science. However, Ferry does argue in the final chapter of his

book for what he calls ‘democratic ecology’, that is, ecology based on the humanist ideals of liberty, beauty and finality (258–62). According to Ferry, humans must maintain their position above nature: ‘L’homme peut et *doit* modifier la nature, comme il peut et doit la *protéger*’ (247; italics in the original) [‘Man can and *must* modify nature, just as he can and *must* protect it.’] However un-ecological the first part of this claim may seem, Ferry establishes a precedent when he qualifies his ecology as democratic and dismisses other ecologies as radical or irrational. As I will explain later, French climate sceptics do not throw the ecological baby out with the bath water; instead, they prioritize their ecological issues as the ‘right’ ones and dismiss climate change as the ‘wrong’ one.⁷

Climate scepticism can be seen as the most recent manifestation of what is an evolving climate change controversy. In their 2012 article, sociologists Stefan Aykut, Jean-Baptiste Comby and Hélène Guillemot offer a comprehensive snapshot of the ‘career’ of climate change in France (158).⁸ While drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS) to analyse this ‘public problem,’ the article does not reduce climate change to a social construction. On the contrary, Aykut, Comby and Guillemot assert the importance of framing climate change with respect to different actors, stakeholders and discourses to better deal with its present and future effects. Comparing articles published in three major French newspapers from 1988 to 2012, they identify three phases in the career of climate change: (1) the first phase (1988–2001/2) when climate issues were identified as largely international, with France participating in global summits (where there was much room for disagreement and debate); (2) the second phase (2002/3–2008) when the issues became more domestic, with France creating its first comprehensive climate action programme and placing emphasis on individual moral choices (where there was less room for debate and controversy); and (3) the third phase (2009 to the present) when the issues give rise to more diverse controversies, with a broader group of visible actors both within and outside the scientific community participating in the debate (the emergence of climate scepticism *per se* in France).

While I will be focusing largely on the last two phases in my discussion of French climate scepticism in the next section, it is helpful to keep a longer view in mind. Looking back over the history of anti-nature and anti-ecological sentiment in France, one can see the emergence of three important characteristics: (1) the use of a sarcastic, at times, *persifleur* tone to critique pro-nature sentiment; (2) the dismissal of ecological science that becomes too embroiled in political affairs; (3) the method of doubt as central to scientific and intellectual thinking more broadly in France.

Climate scepticism in France: An overview

Comparative studies of attitudes towards climate change in different countries tend to offer a generalized summary of national differences. Toussaint Nothias and James Painter conclude that climate change is 'not subject to the same degree of intense political controversy' in France, that 'climate sceptics are present [...] but nothing like as consistently vocal a force', and that 'opinion polls normally show that the French public is more convinced by the science of climate change and the need to do something about it than in the UK and the USA' (89). Reasons given for these differences vary from one scholar to the next. Some have remarked on the small number of right-wing liberals who are both pro-free market and anti-big government in France, and others on the fact that the French media takes largely the side of climate change scientists. A more telling explanation can be found in a point I made earlier about environmental issues being non-partisan in France. While socialist centre-left President François Hollande successfully introduced environmental reforms and carbon tax initiatives, so did his republican predecessor, Nicholas Sarkozy, who pushed hard to launch the *Grenelle de l'Environnement* [Grenelle Environment] in 2007. Even parties on the far right in France such as the National Front have been heard favouring the reduction of greenhouse gases (Nothias and Painter 91).⁹

What then is driving the controversy? Initial assessments tend to identify individual motives and underscore 'une irrépressible mise en avant des ego' (Godard 61) ['an irrepressible show of egos']. The leading scholar of climate scepticism in the United States, Naomi Oreskes, points out that climate sceptics in France are for the most part 'scientifiques âgés, qui ont eu énormément de succès à l'apogée de leur carrière et qui à présent reçoivent de moins en moins d'attention' (47) ['aging scientists, who had great success at the height of their career and are given much less attention now']. It is true that the debate in France has been dominated by older, male scientists who published widely in the 1980s and 1990s and were well respected in their fields.¹⁰ Specific to the French context is the fact that the two most mediatized French climate sceptics – Claude Allègre and Vincent Courtillot – are both trained geologists, the former a geochemist and the latter a volcanologist. Even if other voices have since joined the climate sceptic debate in France – mathematician Benoît Rittaud, economist Rémy Prud'homme, science historian François Ewald,¹¹ to name a few – geologists have dominated the scene in France. According to Antonin Pottier, research funding for geologists diminished at the same time that ocean and atmospheric sciences were emerging. Climatologists were seen as the new players on the

block, and their methods such as computer modelling were looked upon with suspicion: 'Climate models impinge on territories where other disciplines claim legitimacy, leading to competition between different epistemic cultures' (Aykut, Comby and Guillemot 169).

French climate scepticism cannot be reduced, however, to a schoolyard spat between a small group of geologists and climatologists. The controversy began in the sacred halls of the *Académie des sciences* when in 2007 Vincent Courtillot was invited with his co-author Jean-Louis Le Mouél to publicly defend an article they had published in *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, which argued that solar cycles were the driver of climate change. While in the United States, climate scepticism has been driven by conservative think tanks funded by multi-national oil companies, it first appeared at the very heart of the scientific institution in France. Environmental journalist Stéphane Foucart identifies this factor as specific to the French context:

Ce sont les hautes instances scientifiques elles-mêmes qui, sous l'influence d'un petit groupe de chercheurs tendent à renvoyer dos à dos les climatologues et les climato-sceptiques [...] Situation extravagante et qui n'existe à peu près nulle part ailleurs. En France, le flou est entretenu, ou au moins permis, par les garants mêmes du savoir. (*Le Populisme* Kindle, Loc. 10 per cent)

['Under the sway of a small group of researchers, prominent scientific authorities have themselves tended to dismiss both climatologists and climate sceptics [...] A ludicrous situation that exists almost nowhere else. In France, uncertainty is maintained, or at least permitted, by the guarantors of knowledge.']

To understand how climate scepticism came to be taken so seriously by the Academy, it is helpful to consider the larger context of climate change as a public controversy in France.

In the 1990s, two separate groups emerged in France with expertise in the area of climate change issues. The scientific group, *l'Académie des sciences*, published dry, factual reports about global warming for their colleagues and peers, while the executive group, the GIES (*Groupe interministériel sur l'effet de serre*) [Interministerial Group on Global Warming] which later became MIES (*Mission interministériel de l'effet de serre*) [Interministerial Commission on Global Warming], reported directly to the president about socio-economic effects of climate change:

En France, expertises scientifique et technique, d'une part, politique, d'autre part, sont soigneusement séparées. L'Académie des sciences et Yves Martin [GIES/MIES] représentent deux sources de légitimité différentes,

mais complémentaires dans le processus politique français. Ils incarnent le désintéressement et l'excellence par leur statut et garantissent ainsi l'objectivité du processus d'expertise. (Aykut, 'La Construction' 104)

[‘In France, scientific and technical expertise, on the one hand, political expertise, on the other, are deliberately kept separate. The Academy of Sciences and Yves Martin [leader of GIES/MIES] represent two sources of legitimacy, different but complementary in the French political process. They epitomize neutrality and excellence because of their status, and thus guarantee the objectivity of the process of expertise.’]

When a peer-reviewed article disputing anthropogenic climate change was published in 2005 in a scientific journal by a renowned French volcanologist, it was the duty of the Academy to address the issue. And so, in 2007, esteemed researchers from the *Centre National de Recherche en Sciences* (CNRS) and the Academy attended a series of debates between climate sceptic scientists and climatologists. This problematically placed two kinds of science on the same footing, disguising the fact that climate change was not the area of specialization of climate sceptic scientists.

The debate quickly moved from the halls of the Academy to more public venues because of the tireless efforts of geochemist Claude Allègre who enthusiastically supported the work of his friend Courtillot. In 2006, Allègre wrote a newspaper column about climate change for the popular press *L'Express* in which he raised doubts about diminishing snow caps in the Himalayas. But it was not until Allègre published *L'Imposture climatique ou la fausse écologie* [The Climate Imposture or Fake Ecology] in 2010 that climate scepticism came directly into the media spotlight in France.¹² Even though this happened at a later date in France than in the United States, it immediately captured the public's attention because of the legitimacy and loudness of the speakers involved. Media coverage of climate scepticism in France is unique in that it gives prominence to a select few voices, and so has 'the highest level of visibility for individual sceptics' (Grundmann and Scott 231). As I noted earlier, Allègre held the position of minister of education in the 1990s and Courtillot was a well-established researcher within the Academy and the CNRS. Their 'autorité institutionnelle' ['institutional authority'] and their 'carrière au sein de l'administration' ['career in administration'] lent much weight to their objections (Aykut, 'La Construction' 105). In addition, the rise of environmental journalism in France throughout the 1990s meant that there was an informed, well-read audience able to respond immediately to the allegedly falsified scientific content of Allègre's book. Sylvestre Huet, environmental journalist for

the left-wing newspaper, *La Libération*, published his rebuttal *L'Imposteur, c'est lui* [The Imposter, It's Him] soon after Allègre's book. This was followed closely by *Le Populisme climatique* (2011) [Climate Populism] written by *Le Monde*'s environmental journalist, Stéphane Foucart. Though both books strongly disputed Allègre's claims, they also increased the book's impact.¹³

While other climate sceptic books have since been published in France – a handful of which I will discuss in more detail later – much of the debate has moved to the internet.¹⁴ For example, the *Association des climato-réalistes* [Association of Climate Realists] whose founding members include Courtillet and Rittaud regularly publishes monthly online bulletins that critique the politics and science of climate change issues in France and around the world. Spearheaded by 'big names' in French climate scepticism, this website has an extremely active online community. Another popular website, *La Pensée unique* [Single-Mindedness], created by retired physicist and former CNRS lab director, Jean Duran, adopts the slogan 'En matière de Sciences, le scepticisme est un devoir' ['In matters of science, scepticism is a duty']. In other words, Duran invokes '[le] réflexe de "scepticisme ordinaire" qu'il présente comme la première qualité du scientifique, en confondant le doute méthodologique que devrait pratiquer le chercheur avec un scepticisme général' (Godard 62) ['the habit of "ordinary scepticism" that he [Duran] presents as the scientist's main quality, confusing methodological doubt that should be practiced by all researchers with general scepticism']. Additional websites such as *Le Portail des climato-sceptiques* [Climate Sceptics' Portal], *Climato-optimistes* [Climate Optimists] and *Climat de terreur* [Climate of Terror] target a French audience, but largely repeat information found on Anglophone forums and blogs.

In addition to moving to the internet, climate scepticism no longer offers a strong united front in France since the almost complete disappearance of Claude Allègre from the media after he suffered a heart attack in 2013. No longer driven by a small group of vocal scientists, it has morphed into a more general critique of ecological catastrophism. Right-wing intellectuals such as Luc Ferry and Pascal Bruckner have taken up their own battleaxes to attack a politics of austerity and heavy-handed government interventionism that result from, according to them, a dogmatic response to climate change. While scientists like Courtillet and Allègre were for the most part attribution sceptics, questioning the causes of global warming, intellectuals like Bruckner are typically policy sceptics, refusing to believe that current patterns of consumption need to change. In *Le Fanatisme de l'Apocalypse* (2011) [translated into English as *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse*], Bruckner shifts attention away from the question of climate

change science in order to attack environmental thinking as a new form of religious belief. He defends technology and capitalism – his first chapter ends with a defence of the automobile as a symbol of liberty and his final chapter with an apology for consumerism as a form of spiritual ‘blooming of the self’ (Kindle, Loc. 95 per cent) – and his book is read widely.¹⁵ What makes Bruckner’s arguments appealing to readers is the fact that he denies environmentalism its sense of righteousness and its visions of future apocalypse. In addition, he traces his position back to Voltaire who embraced the ‘good life’ in opposition to Rousseau’s call for a simpler life. Much like the British science writer Matt Ridley, Bruckner asserts that humanity will only free itself ‘par le haut’ (by moving upwards), proclaiming his faith in the human capacity to invent, meet new challenges and go beyond limits.¹⁶

The shift in climate sceptic discourse from questioning climate change science to critiquing climate change politics can also be seen in the work of Benoît Rittaud, whose relatively youth compared to the large majority of ‘scientifiques âgés’ (Oreskes) [‘older scientists’] has made him something of a poster boy for French climate scepticism. As a mathematician and more generally an epistemologist, Rittaud rejects climate change models and climatology’s methods in his book *Le Mythe climatique* (2010) [The Climate Myth]. Even though he is critiqued for parroting the ideas of other climate sceptics – ‘Il faut ainsi noter l’ampleur des phénomènes de reprise servile d’arguments et de références venus des États-Unis’ (Godard 60)¹⁷ [‘It is therefore important to note the widespread phenomenon of servile repetition of arguments and references from the United States’] – he gives a French spin to his book by carefully engaging with tone and narrative techniques. Witty, well-read and poised, Rittaud has appeared on French television in debates against well-known climatologists such as Jean Jouzel. But Rittaud’s position seems to be broadening out from that of attribution sceptic. In his most recent book, *La Peur exponentielle* (2015) [The Exponential Fear], he turns his attention to the cultivation of public fear that drives, he asserts, the politics of climate change. (Adopting a new target for his climate scepticism means that Rittaud does not have to address the fact that five years after his climate myth book, climatology’s supposed ‘faulty models’ have accurately predicted some of the effects of global warming.) In *La Peur exponentielle*, Rittaud continues to play the ‘science’ card, using the mathematical concept of the exponential to explain fearmongering around global warming. But his position is more that of the intellectual as public figure than that of the scientist contributing to an epistemological debate. In this way, he models the transformation of climate sceptic discourse in France from scientists like

Courtillot and Allègre to intellectuals like Bruckner and Ewald, from the halls of the Academy of Sciences to the general public.

While advocates of climate change politics have certainly dominated the scene in France – with media stars such as Nicholas Hulot being the most prominent¹⁸ – their tactic has often been to beat the drum of disastrous future scenarios. French climatologist and glaciologist, Jean Jouzel, also former vice-president of the IPCC in the early 1990s, has consistently been the voice of such dire warnings. The prologue to his most recent book, *Le Défi climatique* (2014) [The Climate Challenge], speaks of climate change as ‘trop rapide pour que l’espèce humaine puisse s’y adapter sans souffrances’ [‘happening too fast for the human species to adapt without great suffering’], and asserts that ‘il n’y a pas d’autres issues possibles’ (n.p.) [‘there are no other possible solutions’]. However, it is not only climate sceptics and anti-ecological intellectuals who have become quite critical of these dire tones. Leftist intellectuals such as Isabelle Stengers have argued, for example, for a less reactionary, less globalizing response to the ‘intrusion of Gaia’. In *Au temps des catastrophes* (2009) [In Catastrophic Times], Stengers speaks against both unlimited capitalist growth and imposed global eco-measures; she calls instead for experimenting with new modes of thinking and politicizing in local contexts, something she experienced personally during the ‘GMO event’ in France (*In Catastrophic Times* 35–36).¹⁹ While taking planetary climate change very seriously – she warns against ‘not paying attention’, ‘stupidity’ and the dangers of not doing anything (quotes taken from her chapter titles) – Stengers concludes hopefully with the following conviction: ‘Joy is what makes me bet on the future in which the response to Gaia would not be the sadness of degrowth but that which conscientious objectors to economic growth have already invented’ (*In Catastrophic Times* 156).

New groups are emerging in France to take up the call for a more creative, experimental, response to climate issues. While extremely critical of anxiety-provoking environmentalist discourse, *néo-écologues* do not dispute the fact of global warming. In this way, they steal some of the rhetorical fire from climate sceptics while still advocating for changes to Western lifestyles of overconsumption. Using humour and lighthearted critique, groups like *Génération Cobayes*, or the ‘Guinea-Pig Generation’ in English, cultivate an ‘écologie souriante’ (Berland) [‘smiling ecology’] that undermines the oppositional narrative of ‘écologie démocratique’ [‘democratic ecology’] versus ‘écologie totalitaire’ [‘totalitarian ecology’]. As digital natives, these groups utilize social media much more playfully and subversively than climate sceptics do.²⁰ In addition, they organize public demonstrations to poke fun at anti-ecologists, but do so satirically, using slogans

such as 'CO₂, j'en veux!' ['We want CO₂!'] 'Monsanto Président' ['Monsanto for President'], 'Les engrais, c'est le progrès!' ['Fertilizer as progress!'] and 'Sauvons la bourse, pas les ours!' ['Save the Stock Exchange, not the bears!']. On a different note, eco-documentaries like *Demain* (2015) [Tomorrow] highlight the many examples of communities around the world that are already making some of the radical changes needed to face climate change. These new voices of satirical optimism and joyful ecological awareness have done much to weaken the authoritative, institutionalized and, at times, unimaginative arguments of climate sceptics and warmists alike in France.

French climate sceptic texts: An ecocritical analysis

A socio-historical overview is necessary for understanding the emergence and development of climate scepticism in France, but a closer reading of individual climate sceptic texts reveals more culturally specific differences. Although not literary in the received sense, these texts adopt techniques for engaging readers that go beyond the simple presentation of scientific facts and arguments. While sociologists analyse climate scepticism as one of the evolving discourses about climate change, and environmental journalists refute climate sceptics' inaccurate scientific claims, ecocritics have the tools for analysing climate sceptic texts in terms of narrative framing techniques and modes of expression. In this way, ecocriticism creates a space where climate sceptic texts are taken seriously while also having their rhetorical strategies challenged, where the textual 'appeal' of climate scepticism is better understood in terms of culturally specific tropes and touchstones.

To some extent, the French texts I will be considering invite such an ecocritical reading because of the ways in which arguments are presented as part of a larger *histoire*. For example, Allègre begins *L'Imposture climatique* [The Climate Imposture] by referencing 'une histoire unique, improbable, fantastique, et pourtant bien réelle' (7) ['a unique, improbable, fantastic, and yet real story'], a story about 'un commando d'hommes – les uns scientifiques, les autres politiques' (7) ['a commando of men – some scientists, others politicians']. He uses the term *histoire* to dramatize the account of the rise of the IPCC he is about to give but also to sow doubt in the reader's mind about the neutrality of such a group. Similarly, Rittaud starts his book by speaking of the emergence of climatology as 'une histoire tragique et belle' (*Le Mythe* 12) ['a tragic and beautiful story'] as a way of undermining truth claims about anthropogenic climate change.²¹ But

the term *histoire* means both story and history. This second meaning invites the reader to interpret these texts as part of the history of climate change and part of the history of science as social discourse. While the word is meant to be understood negatively, it opens up a conversation about the history of science in the public sphere, a point to which I will come back later in the chapter.

French climate sceptics pay careful attention not only to the 'what' of the story they are telling, but also to the 'how'. For example, the paratext – the supplementary materials that are part of a book's presentation such as the cover page, title, front matter, back matter and footnotes – play an important role in creating a narrative frame and establishing a relationship with the reader. Rittaud includes an *avant-propos* in which he speaks honestly about his career as a mathematician. Likewise, Allègre uses a prologue to reassure the reader that he is not *anti-écologiste*, that he did much to introduce laws against air and water pollution in France in the early 1990s. This paratextual matter allows the climate sceptics to clearly state their legitimacy as actors in climate change controversies and anticipate objections that could be made, for example, about being anti-environmentalist. To further strengthen the pact with the reader, Allègre's book adopts an intimate often humorous tone, playing up the conversational side of the interview format with emotional asides included in parentheses (such as '(sourire de Claude Allègre)' (23)) ['Claude Allègre smiles']. Rittaud, too, interrupts the telling of the 'story' to address his reader directly – 'lecteur' (11, 13) ['reader'], 'repreçons' (14) ['let's start again']. Both Allègre and Rittaud are clearly aware of the importance of increasing readability and appealing to a larger public.

As a literary critic, I have to admit that it is more entertaining to read the climate sceptic texts than the rebuttal texts (or rather, not all climate sceptic texts, but the ones I have singled out here). Rittaud begins his book with an example of a previous 'hoax' in the history of science when a handful of astronomers asserted in the nineteenth century that valleys on Mars were actually canals, vestiges of former human or alien life. He compares these beliefs to current theories about climate change and predicts the latter will soon be disproven much like the earlier explanations about signs of life on Mars. Anticipating the reader's objections about using history to establish his analogy, Rittaud quotes late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry: 'L'histoire justifie ce que l'on veut. Elle n'enseigne rigoureusement rien, car elle contient tout, et donne des exemples de tout' (22) ['History proves whatever one wants. It teaches strictly nothing, because it contains everything, and has examples of everything']. Again, Rittaud reinforces the pact with the

reader by admitting the problems with his astronomy-climatology analogy while also demonstrating that even a mathematician has a well-developed general literary culture.

This careful attention to form is not, however, what sets French climate sceptics' texts apart from those of their Anglophone counterparts. Such an assertion would be too generalizing and too reductive.²² What can be seen as specific to French climate sceptic texts are the tropes that have tended to dominate the debate. First, I will examine the recurring notion of the *imposture* which is used to refer to the act of trickery, intentional or not, in climate change controversies.²³ From the Latin word *impostura*, the word is related to the verb 'to impose', and thus closely linked to the second trope, that of *ordre* in the sense of a group of people driven by a set of beliefs or ideology. French climate sceptics claim to be fighting a global environmentalist order that bolsters its position by using the faulty reasoning of science imposters. They see their role as combating this *ordre* (ideological battle) and exposing the *imposture* (scientific territory).²⁴

One of the most well-known French literary examples of the imposter is undoubtedly Molière's *Tartuffe*. First performed in 1664, the play tells the story of a supposedly religious and devout man, Tartuffe, who ingratiates himself as a guest into the home of Elmire and Orgon. Friends and family see through Tartuffe, but not the head of the household, Orgon, who remains under Tartuffe's spell throughout the play. Mocking both the religious community and the bourgeoisie, Molière's play stirred up quite a bit of controversy in its time and remains highly popular to this day. Moreover, it inscribed the figure of the Tartuffe into the French imaginary to the extent that the word can be found in the dictionary to refer to a hypocrite. By entitling his book *L'Imposture climatique* [The Climate Imposture], Allègre is most certainly appealing to this practice of calling out the duper. He asserts that climatologists are intentionally tricking the public, pretending to do real science when their results are based on fabricated models and uncertain predictions. In Molière's play, it is King Louis XIV who intervenes when it looks like Tartuffe will end up with all the household's possessions. The problem with playing the monarch, as Allègre seems to want to do, is that this power, too, can be suddenly overturned (as the French monarchs painfully discovered during the French Revolution).²⁵

By using the term *imposture* in his title, Allègre calls out a kind of knowledge construction that is unable to 'free itself' from political and social uses, that remains 'mired' in human interests and partiality. This practice of policing the borders of science brings to mind a text with a very similar title published at the height of the science wars in the 1990s. In *Impostures intellectuelles* (1997)

[translated into English as *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*], physicists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont castigate thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan and Bruno Latour for their use of scientific concepts and terms of which they have no 'real' understanding. The book builds on an earlier hoax: Sokal's publication of an article in the peer-reviewed journal *Social Text* that was, the author later revealed, a string of terms from quantum physics and complexity theory meant to confuse the reader. According to Sokal and Bricmont, literary scholars and philosophers, or the humanities more generally, lost their way when they began using concepts from the pure sciences. In other words, disciplinary borders needed to be respected.

A similar viewpoint about defending science's borders drives part of the controversy about climate change in France. Allègre denounces climatology as a pseudo-science because it has gotten 'mixed up' with politics (see also Rittaud who uses the term *climatomancie* [climatomancy] to decry climate change predictions used for socio-political ends). Allègre's book participates in a larger conversation about the limits of scientific discourse, about who is qualified to discuss science outside of the lab and about the ends to which scientific data and theories can be applied. Like Sokal and Bricmont, Allègre sees himself as reasserting the traditions of French rationalism and objective knowledge. But climate sceptics like Allègre and Rittaud are not the only ones critiquing science when it becomes too embroiled in socio-political debate. While supporting climate science as a legitimate field of enquiry, Stéphane Foucart, too, disparages the coming together of science and politics. He dates this problematic 'marriage' back to 2007 when Al Gore and the IPCC were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize conjointly. Foucart goes so far as to call this 'la grande erreur du comité Nobel' ['the Nobel committee's great error']: 'Les scientifiques étudiant le climat sont devenus, dans l'esprit d'une bonne part de la population, des idéologues au service d'une cause' (*Le Populisme* Kindle, loc. 2 per cent) ['Scientists studying climate became, in the minds of much of the population, ideologists working for a cause'].

In his 1990 book, *Le Contrat naturel* [translated into English as *The Natural Contract*] – a text involved in earlier eco-controversies in France as one of the main targets of Luc Ferry's *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* [The New Ecological Order] – French philosopher Michel Serres examines the epistemological implications of the emergence of climate change: 'Global history enters nature; global nature enters history: this is something utterly new in philosophy' (*The Natural Contract* 4). In the face of this novelty, Serres lays the theoretical

foundations for a natural contract that will allow humans to live symbiotically with the earth. But more important to my argument here is Serres's analysis of the intertwined stories of science and the law since the trial of Galileo:

The sciences begin in such legal actions; they enter history through the courtroom door. [...] The internal history requires a judgement of truth, a decision about whether Anaxagoras and Galileo and Lysenko are wrong or right [...] The external history has the sciences join or develop into schools or pressure groups, and it demands that their truth be socially canonized. Individuals or associations appear before a given court, and fragile truth is thereby reinforced [...]. In the final analysis, there is no general history of science that is not judicially recorded. No science without trials; no truth without judgements, whether internal or external to knowledge. Its history can't do without tribunals. (*The Natural Contract* 62)

Rather than decry such entanglements, Serres posits that we can never have science without the socio-judicial processes that establish what constitutes truth at a given time in a given place; scientific knowledge has necessarily emerged within the *polis*.

While such assertions may seem quite commonplace after the rise of STS and the work of Bruno Latour (a former student of Serres), climate change controversies continue to resurrect the spectre of pure scientific knowledge untouched by political bias. This may be because of the strength of a second trope that has dominated anti-environmentalist critiques in France since the early 1990s: the idea of an *ordre écologique* [ecological order]. Unfortunately, Ferry's characterization of ecology as radical militancy, as a return to fascist or totalitarian order, continues to be heard over and over again in climate change controversies in France. Much too reductively, Allègre affirms: 'Je soutiens que la tendance profonde de l'écologie politique est d'être totalitaire' (26) ['I maintain that political ecology's underlying tendency is towards totalitarianism']. Later, he uses the expression 'totalitarisme climatique' (94, 110, 140) ['climate totalitarianism'] to warn readers against a system that has no tolerance for those who challenge climate change theories. Finally, he describes a future 'écologie totalitaire' ['totalitarian ecology'] at which time earth will be run by a global governing body of technocrats who make decisions for all citizens based solely on saving the planet (264). Such reductive appeals to the trope of a totalitarian order are in part to be expected in the work of climate sceptics. But they also appear in defences of climatology and climate change politics. Recently republished in paperback, Foucart's book carefully counters many of the arguments put forward by climate sceptics like Allègre and Rittaud.

Yet Foucart, too, speaks of an ecological order that was instituted when the Nobel Prize was given to the IPCC:

Il a renforcé l'idée fausse que la climatologie est un ensemble de sciences militantes, tendues vers le même objectif que celui des ONG environnementalistes: asseoir un nouvel ordre écologique. Nouvel ordre impliquant un changement civilisationnel radical, une mutation profonde des modes de vie qui ont cours en Occident. (*Le Populisme* Kindle, loc. 2 per cent)

['This reinforced the wrong idea that climatology is a collection of militant sciences, working towards the same goal as environmentalist NGOs: the establishment of a new ecological order. A new order requiring a radical change of civilization, a profound transformation of current Western ways of living.']

Foucart redraws the lines around science, admonishing climatology to stick to its field of expertise and stay out of politics. According to Aykut, one of the particularities of climate change controversy in France is exactly 'cette défense de la Science (avec un grand "S") contre une idéologie dangereuse et obscurantiste issue de la "deep ecology" anglo-saxonne' ('La Construction' 88–89) ['this protection of Science (with a capital "S") against a dangerous and obscurantist ideology arising from Anglo-Saxon "deep ecology"']. Given that Foucart denounces Ferry as a 'philosophe climato-sceptique' (*Le Populisme* Kindle, loc. 81 per cent) ['climate sceptic philosopher'], it is unfortunate, to say the least, that he cultivates the same fear of an ecological order. This trope is clearly deeply rooted in the French environmental and anti-environmental imagination.

Rather than build walls around scientific knowledge, other voices have emerged in France that acknowledge climatology's increasing role within the political sphere. In *Climat: le vrai et le faux* (2011) [Climate: the True and the False], climatologist Valérie Masson-Delmotte targets a more general audience to explain the scientific and political challenges of climate change. However, she states in the book's foreword that it is better to keep these two kinds of challenge separate: scientific issues have to do with understanding and predicting climate change, and political issues with taking action and adapting to climate change. Oceanographer and climatologist Éric Guilyardi and his sister Catherine Guilyardi, a journalist, take a different approach. In their co-written book *Que feriez-vous si vous le saviez? Des climatologues face à la désinformation* (2015) [What Would You Do If You Knew? Climatologists Facing Disinformation], they acknowledge the responsibility of the scientist to transmit knowledge and the journalist to produce information about climate change. Narrating a climatologist's daily life in the laboratory and describing the constant pressure

faced by environmental journalists to produce the next big story, the book aims to educate the general public about climate change as a social problem. Its use of the first-person pronoun, alternating between the brother's and sister's perspective, demystifies Science (with a capital 'S') and embraces the model of embedded, embodied, situated knowledge.

Fictionalizing climate change controversies: A few examples

Whereas examples of climate fiction abound in contemporary Anglophone literature, the topic of global warming has appeared only intermittently in French contemporary literature, at least as far as adult fiction is concerned. As scholars of *littérature pour jeunesse* [children's literature] have noted, climate change has been taken up quite quickly and extensively in children's and young adult fiction in France. Pedagogical and at times moralizing, eco-literature for a younger audience does not shy away from teaching a lesson or conveying a political message to its reader. In adult literature, on the other hand, the *roman à thèse* [didactic/thesis novel] fell out of fashion not long after Jean-Paul Sartre's theorizing of *la littérature engagée* [engaged literature] in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) [translated into English as *What Is Literature?*]. The rise of the *Nouveau Roman* [New Novel] in works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Ricardou and Nathalie Sarraute sidelined the question of literature as a means for authentically representing the socio-historical real and foregrounded the practice of writing as producing its own kinds of reality.

The *ère du soupçon* [era of suspicion] so prevalent in French literary circles from the 1950s until the early 1980s continues to inflect attitudes towards politically engaged literature. Even though many contemporary novels adopt a *retour au réel* [return to the real] (Vercier and Viart), they do so with caution, often from an historical or autofictional approach. Climate change remains a topic that is difficult to tackle in the novel because its ethical and political stakes are so high. Most of the case studies I will consider here use satire to fictionalize climate change and so distance themselves from calls for radical lifestyle changes. The few texts that do portray climate change seriously use a form other than the novel such as the *bande dessinée* [comic book] or science fiction and thus avoid the accusation of reducing fiction to a *roman à thèse* [didactic/thesis novel].²⁶

The relative absence of French climate fiction does not mean that novelists are not aware of or engaged with environmental issues or more specifically the problem of global warming. In the 25 December 2014 issue of *La Libération*,

the directors of the *Maison des écrivains et de la littérature* (MEL) [Writers' and Literature House] in Paris made a strong statement about literature needing to respond to climate change. They then invited well-known authors such as Pierre Bergounioux, Éric Chevillard, Michel Deguy, Maryline Desbiolles and Olivia Rosenthal to write short literary pieces in response to the following questions:

Face à la menace, maintenant si précise, du changement climatique, face à l'espoir aussi que représente la mobilisation mondiale sur ce sujet, que peut la littérature ? Se fera-t-elle entendre ? Que peuvent les mots face aux désastres annoncés ? Témoigner ? Émouvoir ? Faire prendre conscience ? Pousser à la réflexion ? Que peut encore le langage dans ce monde de l'image, de l'immédiateté, dans l'urgence où nous sommes ? Si la littérature n'est pas que divertissement et loisir, si elle participe, du plus intime, de l'aventure humaine, elle ne peut tout simplement pas rester indifférente. Ses forces, même si maigres en apparence, ne doit-elle pas les mettre toutes entières dans la balance, pour peser contre la fatalité, la lâcheté, la tristesse d'un monde sans possibles ? (Gouttebaron and Boudier) ['In the face of the threat of climate change, now so real, but also in the face of the hope that global mobilization around this subject represents, what can literature do? Will it be heard? What can words do in the face of predicted disasters? Witness? Move deeply? Bring about awareness? Encourage reflection? What can language do in the world of images and immediacy, given the urgency we are facing? If literature is not just entertainment and leisure, if it participates in the most intimate of human adventures, it cannot remain indifferent. Should its forces, however weak they seem to be, not be measured in order to tip the scales against the inevitability, cowardice, sadness of a world without possibilities?']

In total, thirty-one authors participated in the yearlong MEL event, and their texts were read aloud to the National Assembly on 15 November 2015 in support of the then upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, France (COP21).²⁷ The written texts range from brief philosophical essays to poetry, from short stories to personal letters written to future generations. To some extent, the diverse modes of expression adopted by the authors who participated in this event illustrate the continued difficulties of integrating climate change into the more traditional form of the novel in France.²⁸

One genre that has emerged in France to take up environmental issues related to plants, animals and human habitat more generally is the eco-thriller. In *Poison vert* (2002) [Green Poison], *H₂O* (2004), *Mort sur la forêt* (2007) [Death above the Forest], Patric Nottret develops the character of Pierre Sénéchal, a detective fighting eco-crimes such as the cloning of dangerous tropical plants, the spread of genetically modified soy-destroying insects and the strange reappearance of the

previously extinct dinosaur-fish, coelacanth. Published by a well-known French publishing house, Éditions Robert Lafont, these novels have yet to win a literary prize or attract the attention of literary critics writing for *Le Monde des livres* or the magazine *Lire*. A much more widely read eco-thriller is Jean-Christophe's *Le Parfum d'Adam* (2007) [Adam's Perfume]. In the novel, two American detectives, former CIA agents, are fighting an ecoterrorist group, the New Predators, who are conspiring to wipe out the world's poorest populations by developing a new cholera strain to be released in the waters of the Rio de Janeiro's favelas. In the novel's postface, Rufin cites Luc Ferry as one of the most direct influences on his thinking about the dangers of eco-politics. His novel clearly promotes Ferry's idea that a militant ecological order is driven by irrational thinking and global-scale violence and should be rejected in favour of a more tempered response to environmental issues. As a member of the *Académie française* and a former French ambassador, Rufin models a response to environmentalism that is rooted in a traditionally French humanist, secular republicanism.

Much less embedded in the French institutional and political system, Russian-born, French-speaking novelist Iégor Gran has been building his literary *oeuvre* on social critiques of political correctness. In many of his novels, the satirical mode is used to target commonly held views of the left; for example, his novel *O.N.G!* (2003) [NGO!], which won the literary prize for Black Humour in France, recounts the increasingly violent encounters between two neighbouring NGOs, the one environmental (*La Foulée verte*) [Green Stride/Momentum], the other humanitarian (*Enfance et vaccin*) [Childhood and Vaccines]. The two groups' idealistic hopes of 'saving the world' are reduced to petty, vengeful acts that escalate over the course of the story and eventually lead to the imprisonment of one of the members of the environmentalist group for attacking a woman from the humanitarian aid group. To some extent, Gran's writing can be placed in the lineage of satirical writing dating back to Voltaire's novel *Candide* (1759) that tells of a young optimist who, after encountering multiple hardships, gives up the hope of creating the best possible world. Similarly, Gran portrays the disillusionment that follows from experiencing the difficulties humans have in overcoming self-righteousness and one-upmanship.

More specific to the topic of fictionalizing climate change controversy, Gran's novel *L'Écologie en bas de chez moi* (2011) [Ecology Below My Place] pokes fun at environmentalists who aim to reduce global warming by implementing token actions such as turning off lights, driving hybrid cars and using recycled toilet paper. With his usual biting tone, the narrator mocks events like European Bike Week, Earth Day, the Paris Sustainability Show that his friend Vincent

regularly attends, but that do not, in the end, require Vincent to make any real changes to his bourgeois lifestyle: 'Le sacerdoce de l'environnement remplit le calendrier. [...] La pratique d'une religion prend du temps [...] Vincent n'est ni moine ni un intégriste. Il est pratiquement croyant – dans la mesure où sa foi n'empiète sur sa mode de vie' (30–31) ['The calling to be an environmentalist makes for a full calendar. [...] Practicing a religion takes time [...] Vincent is neither a monk nor a fundamentalist. He is a practical believer inasmuch as his faith does not encroach on his lifestyle']. But Gran's satirizing of Vincent, as a prime example of an eco-Tartuffe, is not a gratuitous fictionalizing gesture. Even if such a person does not exist in Gran's life, he wrote the book based on an incident that happened in his own life. After publishing a critique of Yann-Arthus Bertrand's eco-documentary *Home* in the daily newspaper *La Libération*, Gran was bombarded by letters and emails from readers accusing him of anti-environmentalism. This *fait divers* [news item] is recounted in the opening chapters of the book as the catalyst for the subsequent estrangement between the narrator and his friend Vincent.

The book blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction further in its attack on environmentalism. Gran includes his original newspaper article at the end of the book as a 'Bonus'. He reinserts lines comparing Bertrand's film and Nazi propaganda film-maker Leni Riefenstahl's work that had been deleted by the *Libération*'s editors. Although Gran never identifies himself as the narrator of the book, the story is told from the first-person perspective and so reduces the distance between the reader and the author. In addition, the book is full of footnotes that constantly interrupt the plot. At first, this seems reminiscent of Michael Crichton's novel, *State of Fear* (2004), in which footnotes are used extensively to dispute climate change findings. But where Crichton cites scientific articles, Gran uses footnotes (over a hundred of them!) to mock the ecological wave that has flooded social media, popular culture and advertising, Hollywood movies and even literary studies. The targets of Gran's cutting social commentary are numerous; no stone of eco-political correctness is left unturned, from sustainable development in Third World countries to 'greenwashing', from Nicholas Hulot and Al Gore to COP 21, from the fourth IPCC report to the famous hockey stick graph curve.

The novel is clearly meant to engage in *humour noir* [black humour], that is, a rhetorical mode that critiques commonly held beliefs from a position of detachment, bitterness and at times amusement.²⁹ For the narrator, this also means targeting unfounded climate sceptic claims; he scoffs at his dentist's explanation of Greenland's name as proof of climate change cycles (77–78) and

then speaks of 'freeing himself from his own side's stupidity' (82). At times, the reader is overwhelmed by the narrator's derision and searches for evidence of a lighter humorous touch or a more sincere tone. It's not until the end of the novel that a partial response is given to the question of what is left standing in the wake of *humour noir* [black humour]: the narrator offers a glimpse of his belief in humanity's capacity for invention, creativity, innovation and civilization, the so-called 'ABCs of humanism' (123). Despite his pessimism in the face of increasing eco-zealotry and fears of global apocalypse, the narrator speaks of turning the page, writing other books, moving on to other subjects. The reader is left to conclude that literature has a role to play, however small, in challenging hegemonic views and holding open alternatives.³⁰

Philippe Vasset's *Le Journal intime d'une prédatrice* (2010) [The Diary of a (Female) Predator] also relies heavily on satire as a mode for fictionalizing climate change, but the novel's main target is capitalism's far-reaching death grip on the planet. For the 'Ice Queen' – the moniker given by the media to the head of the multinational company ICECAP – global warming represents a multitude of moneymaking opportunities such as the creation of an Arctic amusement park, new terrain for mining and drilling, and ice-free global shipping passages. The 'female predator' of the story is portrayed as the epitome of advanced global capitalism that destroys every living thing in its path. And yet the third-person narrator of the story through whose eyes we view the main female character (which raises the question of how this story is the 'diary of a female predator') remains sympathetic to his boss, her weaknesses, her failed attempts to appear fearless. When, at the end of the novel, ICECAP stocks plummet because of a possible scandal involving the Ice Queen, it is the narrator who responds to her silent supplication for death, putting his hands around her neck and strangling her.

Vasset is not critiquing advanced capitalism's total lack of concern for life in order to convey an environmentalist message about caring for the earth. In the novel, those working to slow climate change are driven by the same desire as the Ice Queen: to get rich. The company THINICE, run by the Ice Queen's arch-enemy, invests heavily in emissions trading and new technologies for carbon capture. The novel bleakly portrays the current world economic system, leaving the reader with little hope for the future. Yet literature is still held to its role as social critique. Like Gran, Vasset mixes fictional characters with real events and people, including references to then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Russian scientists working on cloning the woolly mammoth and proceedings of the UN Climate Change Summit in

Copenhagen. In addition, Vasset experiments with the novel's form. Two-thirds of the story is told in parenthetical 'asides' that convey the narrator's thoughts about the main character. The other third is different characters' direct speech, company memos and letters, and fictional news articles. Completely stripped of descriptive passages, the novel reads like a collection of voices filtered through a strangely disembodied narrative consciousness. Even if climate change serves largely as a plot device, Vasset invents a form that mirrors the effects of advanced capitalism on human behaviour and experience.

Another subgenre that has emerged in the last few years in France is the 'eco-farce' that uses climate change as a source of humour. Augustin Guilbert-Billetedoux's *Le Messie du peuple chauve* (2012) [The Bald People's Messiah] is an example of such a text. The first part recounts the existentialist musings of the protagonist who discovers he is going bald. Treating his physical condition as a mortal illness, he stops working and begins spending more and more time online exchanging messages with other balding men. To convey the seriousness of his 'physical condition', the protagonist heads to a UN climate change summit in India where he hopes to find the largest possible audience for his message. The power struggles and petty squabbles of various climate change stakeholders take up the entire second part of the novel and are narrated using the same deadpan humour as the first. In the end, the novel creates a perplexing analogy between the protagonist's overblown reaction to going bald and the UN's response to climate change catastrophe.

A much more successful eco-farce is Joël Baqué's *La Fonte des glaces* (2017) [Melting Ice] that is funny and ironic without any of the heavy-handedness of Gran's *humour noir* [black humour]. In Baqué's novel, the protagonist, a retired butcher whose life is reduced to a monotonous daily existence after his wife passes away, stumbles upon a taxidermied emperor penguin in a thrift store. He immediately falls in love with the animal and sets up his attic as a 'cold room' for other stuffed penguins that he calls his 'Dream Team'. But this is not enough to satisfy his love for a species going extinct. He travels to Antarctica and then northern Canada, experiencing one surprising adventure after another (including an intimate encounter with an emperor penguin looking for a mate). Even if the protagonist is eventually caught up in the green washing machine – he becomes a mediatized figure for 'Save Our Future', an NGO front for a company using melted iceberg water to produce a new beer – Baqué's text explores the affective and emotional ties of an individual to an iconic species in the era of the sixth great extinction.

While these contemporary novels use humour and satire to represent climate change, science fiction has tended to adopt a more serious attitude towards environmental issues. In *Le Procès de l'homme blanc* (2005) [The Trial of the Whiteman], Yann Quero imagines life on earth in 2143 when climate change has forced humanity to live in a few small pockets on the Asian continent. Leaders of the only remaining functioning state, the Republic of Singapore, attempt to prosecute the 'White Man' for bringing about such a catastrophe. In *L'Avenir ne sera plus ce qu'il était* (2010) [The Future Will Not Be What It Was], Quero situates the story in a much nearer future. On 1 January 2036, alien spaceships land on earth to warn humanity that global warming is threatening life on the planet. The aliens offer to help reduce the effects of climate change, but they are suspected of an ulterior motive: wanting to sterilize humans. Until the end of the story, the reader is left wondering whose side the aliens are on. In both these science fiction adventures, Quero avoids the dangers of an apocalyptic narrative while portraying (more or less successfully) the many complex socio-political threads of a truly global, even interplanetary, crisis.

In *Saison brune* (2012), available in English as *Climate Changed: A Personal Journey through the Science* (2014), Philippe Squarzoni explores the hybrid possibilities of an autobiographical graphic novel. Combining personal anecdotes, interviews with climatologists, explanations of environmental policies and ethical reflections, Squarzoni dives into the contradictions at the heart of individual consumer capitalist behaviour and global climate change issues. With an endorsement by Jean Jouzel and stark black-and-white images, the graphic novel conveys a largely pessimistic message: 'Of course we'll make this transformation one day. We'll do it because we have reached the limits of our natural resources. Or because the warming will suddenly cross a threshold, and a brutal climatic phenomenon will hit us hard. We will accomplish this change under the worst conditions. Forced by circumstance. And way too late' (Squarzoni 455). Taking climate change seriously means in this case adopting the most realistic view possible according to climate change scientists. Even if the novel ends with the question of how not to end on such a dark note, Squarzoni leaves the reader with the work of imagining alternative futures.

From (overly) satirical to (overly) realist, the few French contemporary texts that touch on climate change reveal the limits, dangers and potential of fictionalizing its ethical and political stakes. They challenge the limits of 'literary fiction' by finding other ways 'to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era' (Ghosh 33), but without really portraying a new reality in which 'non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought' (31).

Given the important theoretical work on non-human agency by thinkers such as Bruno Latour, we might ask why French contemporary literature continues to uphold a largely human-actor view of climate change issues.³¹ Without hazarding an answer, I point back to the division of knowledge and ethics that has characterized attitudes towards environmental controversies in France. If government deals with policy and scientific institutions with technological solutions, individuals are not required to change their way of living or thinking about the environment. And yet a radical shift in the imagination is what is needed to flourish – and not just survive – in a post-capitalist world.

Conclusion

Climate scepticism no longer echoes in the halls of France's most esteemed scientific institutions. While the year 1992 was key in terms of anti-ecological sentiment in France, the years 2007–2010 were the most important for French climate scepticism. Even as online sites such as *La Pensée unique* [Single-Mindedness] and the *Association des climato-réalistes* [Association of Climate Realists] continue to stir up impact and policy climate scepticism, the most vocal figures such as Claude Allègre have disappeared from the political stage. It's true that a few centre-right intellectuals such as Luc Ferry and Pascal Bruckner tirelessly uphold the principles of progress and reason in the face of what they see as rising eco-dogmatism. But their philosophical arguments lack depth and originality when compared to those of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, who address the problem of growing barbarism and global eco-modernism, respectively.

A more worrisome trend is the shift from print newspapers and magazines to online news sites whose coverage of climate change issues tends to be more limited. As a recent study of the media coverage of COP 21 demonstrates, BuzzFeed and Vice (as well as their respective equivalents in other languages) homed in on one or two issues during the summit, about which traditional media had presented a more complex view, including water scarcity, the use of renewable energy, health impacts and food security, to name a few (Painter, Kristiansen and Schäfer).³² By targeting the single, attention-grabbing image, social media simplify and even distort the complex social problem at hand. This is true of both anti- and pro-environmentalist websites (see, for example, *National Geographic's* video of a starving polar bear that went viral in early December 2017). Readers can counter these effects by engaging with a wide range of texts outside their linguistic,

cultural and political comfort zones. Part of the process of moving beyond the internet's echo chambers is being exposed to a polyphony of discordant voices. For ecocritics, this means reading texts like Baqué's *La Fonte des glaces* [Melting Ice] or Vasset's *Le Journal intime d'une prédatrice* [Diary of a (Female) Predator] that satirize climate change politics.

As for the current eco-political climate in France, there has been a subtle shift to a more global environmentalism since Emmanuel Macron's election as president in May 2017. Affirming his role as the 'saviour' of the Paris COP 21 climate accord after Donald Trump withdrew his country's support, Macron created the 'Make Our Planet Great Again' research fund. With a budget envelope of 60 million euros, the fund aims to lure American scientists who want to work on climate change issues to France. It can accommodate from 30 to 50 research projects of up to five years (so far, 18 American scientists have been accepted). Riffing on Trump's campaign slogan – 'Make America Great Again' – the fund clearly appeals to an Anglophone audience in order to promote a global ecological view of the planet. Macron is manoeuvring France into the position of main player on the world stage of climate change politics (in part to fill the void left by the United States). However, he does so by partially turning his back on the cultural tensions that continue to simmer in France (McCauley).

It is at this point that cultural ecocriticism intervenes to expose a problematic appeal to global environmental politics that glosses over social identities and differences. The objective is not to argue once again for culture over nature, as if ecocritics had not already fully exposed the pitfalls of such dualist thinking. Rather, it means analysing the ways in which climate change is embedded in different socio-cultural contexts, in which social and environmental issues are bound together. In a discussion with Bruno Latour and Baptiste Morizot, French philosopher Pierre Charbonnier explains that a new 'land/earth' politics is needed for considering climate change and social identities conjointly.

Nous avons toujours sous les pieds la même planète, mais plus tout à fait la même terre. Et avec cette transformation, ce sont nos relations sociales et politiques qui elles aussi prennent une nouvelle forme. Cela s'ajoute à l'équivoque que recèle la terre depuis plus longtemps: elle est à la fois ce dont on vit et là où l'on vit, ce qui donne les fruits qui garantissent la reproduction des individus et des groupes, et ce qui conditionne une partie de leur identité. Les frictions induites par cette équivoque sont parvenues aujourd'hui, sous la pression du changement climatique, à un seuil critique. à tel point que nous sommes sans doute poussés à modifier nos repères intellectuels, la boussole conceptuelle qui nous a servi, depuis l'avènement de la modernité, à nous repérer dans l'espace politique. (228)

[We still have the same planet under our feet, but no longer exactly the same land/earth. And with this transformation, our social and political relationships are also taking on new forms. This adds to the ambiguity the land/earth has harboured for an even longer period: it is both that from which one draws life and the place where one lives, that which gives the fruits that guarantee the reproduction of individuals and groups and that which conditions a part of their identity. Under the pressure of climate change, the tensions arising from this ambiguity have reached a critical threshold, to the point that we must now modify our intellectual references, the conceptual compass we have been using since the birth of modernity to find our bearings in political space.]