

How can we still argue about the climate? Double irony and opacification of positions in a Pascal Praud's topic launch

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In this post, I want to highlight a particular use of irony as a polemical resource for constructing a sceptical position towards climate change. The issue of climate change seems to be relatively consensual in public opinion nowadays. How then can we still make it an object of controversy, without being trapped in a “climate sceptic” position, which is now largely disqualified? This is the rhetorical stake that I will study in the following lines, based on a specific case: Pascal Praud's launch of a topic on global warming in the television programme *L'Heure des Pros* (C NEWS) on 16 May 2019.

[The sequence](#) lasts barely 40 seconds, but offers a condensed strategy of double irony that allows the presenter both to delegitimise the environmentalist position on global warming, yet to reiterate the stigmatising stereotypes of climate scepticism, while himself escaping both positions.



The sequence is organised in three parts. In the first part (0:00-0:20), Pascal Praud begins by illustrating the phenomenon of global warming with a series of meteorological data that seem to contradict it in an obvious way (many negative temperatures observed in France in the middle of May). In the second part (0:20-0:35), the comic effect of this contrast is immediately put at a distance: “global warming is not a joke” (“*on ne plaisante pas avec le réchauffement climatique*”), and those who persist in questioning it are called “philistines” (“*béotiens*”). Finally, the last part of the sequence states a sort of general maxim that illustrates a change in attitude towards meteorological oddities: “In the past we used to say ‘there are no seasons any more!’, today we march so that the scooter replaces the car and the bicycle, the trucks” (“*Jadis on disait ‘y’a plus de saison !’, aujourd’hui on défile pour que la trottinette remplace la voiture et le vélo, les camions*”).

Irony is a rhetorical tool that consists of dissociating the speaker (the concrete source of speech production, in this case the presenter Pascal Praud as he appears on the screen) from an instance of enunciation, which assumes responsibility for the content stated. In an ironic discourse, the speaker thus constructs an enunciator figure who says things that the speaker does not assume for himself, or that he wishes to make fun of. This enunciative simulacrum allows the speaker to escape the riposte, since he can always hide behind the literalness of his statement and leave the interlocutor with the sole responsibility of a negative interpretation of his statement. Irony thus makes it possible to construct a point of view that hides another.

On the topic of global warming, this rhetorical tool appears particularly fruitful for activating a polemical reading of the issue, while also recognising its now apparently consensual nature.

What are the viewpoints constructed here by Pascal Praud?

Section 1 constructs a climate sceptic viewpoint, basically assuming the following astonishment: how can we still believe in global warming when the temperature is so cold in May? This point of view appears to be ironic towards environmental activists: to say “global warming is here” (“*Il est bien là le réchauffement climatique*”), and then to list negative temperatures, is to mock those who believe in global warming.

Section 2 constructs a point of view that is supposed to discredit the ironic point of view of climate scepticism: the recourse to expertise (“so that he can clearly explain it to us” [*pour qu’il nous explique bien*]) is there to silence the laughs and demonstrate the “evidence” that “the philistines” refuse to accept.

This point of view of serious expertise (as opposed to climate sceptic irony) is, however, itself the target of a third point of view, again ironic: the prosodic features of the statement (see in particular the way the adverb “precisely” [*précisément*] is pronounced), the use of the qualifier “philistines” [*béotiens*] and the way the very counter-intuitive evidence of warming that produces temperature drops is stated, are there to show the speaker’s distance from an enunciator constructed as a foolishly docile and ridiculously learned global warming advocate, who is moreover contemptuous of those who would doubt his scientific word.

Section 3 takes a step back from this polemical ground: it seems that it is the speaker-presenter who takes over to embody a hyper-relativistic point of view on climate activism: the environmentalist cause is presented as a somewhat derisory and naïve avatar (“today we march so that [...] bicycles [replace] trucks” [*aujourd’hui on défile pour que [...] le vélo [remplace] les camions*]) of a kind of popular wisdom towards the vagaries of the weather (“In the past we used to say ‘there are no seasons any more!’” [*Jadis on disait ‘y’a plus de saison !’*]). The apparent neutrality of this concluding statement takes on a more polemical meaning when related to the ironic processes that precede it: these have constructed a representation of climate activism as a position that refuses to be debated and joked about.

This example shows how the media discourse manages to make a subject controversial, though it should not be anymore, while avoiding the accusation of challenging the consensual norm. At no point does the presenter take on the climate sceptic posture, but he constructs a dialogical dynamic of viewpoints that ultimately contributes to discrediting the seriousness of ecological activism. Climate sceptic irony is exposed to ecological expertise, which is itself ironically distanced for its very resistance to any form of irony.

This is a particularly underhand way of opacifying the positions of a debate, while artificially activating its polemical charge.