

Le Monde

Backroom deals between geologists

A controversy around the laboratory that Claude Allègre directed shakes scientists: some denounce a conflict of interest when articles are published.

By Stéphane Foucart and Hervé Morin Published on December 26, 2008 at 3:09 pm - Updated on December 28, 2008 at 7:40 pm

For several months now, a sulphurous document has been circulating in the earth science community. And if many agree to comment on it in harsh terms, they almost always end up by saying, "*Don't quote me!*" The case is poisonous. The mysterious poison-pen writer or writers that started it remain in the shadows, hoping for the scandal to break out. It targets some of France's greatest geologists. Among them are Claude Allègre and his close guard, at the moment when it is rumoured that the geochemist is once again a candidate for a ministerial post.

What's this all about? It's a 100-page document. For the ignorant, it is just a compilation of research articles, published between 1992 and 2008 in one of the most prestigious earth science journals, *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* (EPSL), edited by the Anglo-Dutch scientific publishing giant Elsevier. The articles selected have in common that they were written by researchers from one of the flagships of French research, the Institut de physique du globe de Paris (IPGP). Why the unease? All were accepted for publication by scientists who were both members of the same IPGP and of the EPSL editorial board. So, judge and jury.

To understand, it is important to know that EPSL operates with a committee of seven eminent researchers, chosen by co-option and all with the rank of editor-in-chief. Each of them devotes part of their time on a voluntary basis to receive and evaluate work that they decide, or not, to publish. They do so without being accountable to others. However, in the event of a potential conflict of interest (same institution, recent collaboration, etc.) with authors who submit their work for evaluation, the editor must withdraw in favour of another member of the journal's editorial board. These precautions are fundamental: research teams and researchers are evaluated by their supervisors according to the number of articles published and the prestige of the journals that accept them.

Despite these practices, the three IPGP researchers who have successively sat on the EPSL editorial board - Paul Tapponnier (1992-1996), Vincent Courtillot (2003-2005) and Claude Jaupart (2006-2008) - have all taken responsibility for and agreed to publish work emanating from their own institute. The institute has been directed at several times by two of the three interested parties. The affair broke out in the summer of 2008. The compilation of suspicious articles was sent to Elsevier and, more precisely, to the publication director of EPSL, Friso Veenstra, who said that he had discovered a situation that had remained "*under the radar*" until then. He added that EPSL would henceforth keep the IPGP away from its editorial board.

Courtillot and Jaupart, for their part, assure that the situation now denounced has taken place "*in full view of all*" - the editor's initials, or his name in full, appearing in every article. Mr Courtillot added that he had checked with the editorial committee to ensure that the potential conflict of interest was limited to his research group and not to his institute as a whole.

Elsevier denies this, stating that *"the editors made it clear that they would not tolerate these unacceptable practices"*. Furthermore, adds Veenstra, *"we have not identified any other case of large numbers of articles originating from one institution and being processed by a member of the same institution"*. A formal regulation, issued in October 2006 and specifying all potential conflicts of interest, did not put an end to these processes.

In addition, Elsevier conducted a bibliometric study evaluating the articles according to their citation rate in other publications. It suggests that the work accepted by Messrs Courtillot and Jaupart from the IPGP was generally less interesting than the work they accepted from other institutes. That, in short, they would have been more lenient towards their institution. *"Some of these papers are highly cited,"* Mr. Veenstra said, *"but others should not have been published [in EPSL]."* Mr. Courtillot refutes Elsevier's bibliometric study, believing that the necessary hindsight is lacking to judge the quality of publications. As for Mr. Jaupart, he argues that these lower citation rates can be explained by the fact that French works would generally be less cited than those of Anglo-Saxon researchers for the same quality. Moreover, both believe that part of their mission at the EPSL was to give life to French work which, although of high quality, would not have emerged without them.

It is hard to believe in the case of Claude Allègre, former director of the IPGP, whose scientific stature does not to be proved, and who nevertheless benefited from this circle for four of his articles - his former ministerial advisor, Vincent Courtillot, for example, having edited one of his manuscripts in 2004. In the updated system, the authors of the said articles have their share of responsibility, since they choose the publishers to which they submit their work. *"No researcher in my institute would have thought of submitting an article to me,"* says a former EPSL editor. The CNRS directorate - which is the IPGP's coterminous body - is extremely embarrassed by the affair, as shown by the emails, copies of which *Le Monde* has obtained.

The identity of the righter(s) of wrongs remains... Who spent time searching the EPSL archives to exhume the murderous compilation? That's an open question. But we can think that Claude Allègre's attacks against climatologists are not unrelated to this counter-offensive. *"If it is true, this is a serious matter and I am surprised to see that no scientific body has seen fit to react or to initiate any procedure, even if only interrogatory. And this when everyone knows about it,"* says Belgian geophysicist André Berger, honorary president of the European Geosciences Union (EGU) and professor at the Catholic University of Louvain. *"If, as the contacts I have in France suggest, this leaden blanket is due to the fact that Claude Allègre could become a minister again, then it is urgent to question the freedom of expression of scientists"*. Stéphane Foucart and Hervé Morin

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