

Some clarifications on economic negationism

By Pierre Cahuc and André Zylberberg

We would like to thank Xavier Ragot for permitting us to respond to his comments about our book, *Le Négationnisme économique [Economic Negationism]*. Like many critics, Xavier Ragot considered that:

1) “The very title of the book proceeds from great violence. This book is on a slippery slope in the intellectual debate that is heading towards a caricature of debate and verbal abuse.”

2) The approach of our work is “scientistic” and “reductive”, with “faith in knowledge drawn from natural experiments” that he doesn’t believe has a “consensus in economics”.

3) We “want to import the hierarchy of academic debate into the public debate”.

We would like to respond to these three allegations, with which we disagree.

1) On economic negationism

The term “economic negationism” does not caricature the debate. We chose it because the notion of “scientific negationism” is an expression used in debates about science, and we are talking about science here. This term is in common use, for instance on the scientific blog of the newspaper *Le Monde*, “Passeurs de Sciences”, which was named the best blog in the field of science. Our work reviews the significance of the term in the introduction, and then further develops this in Chapter 7. We note that scientific negationism is a strategy based on four pillars:

- Throw doubt on and castigate “la pensée unique” [doctrinaire, dogmatic “group think”];
- Denounce moneyed and ideological interests;
- Condemn science because it can’t explain everything;
- Promote “alternative” learned societies.

This strategy aims to discredit researchers who are getting what are considered disturbing results. It affects all disciplines to one extent or another, as is shown by the works of Robert Proctor[1] and Naomi Oreské and Erik Conway[2]. And this is precisely the strategy adopted both by the Economistes Atterrés[3] and in the book entitled *A quoi servent les économistes s'ils disent tous la même chose* [What good are economists if they all say the same thing][4]. These texts all rely on the four pillars of scientific negationism set out above. They loudly proclaim the existence of dogmatic “group think” (pillar 1), which more or less accedes to the demands of the financial markets (pillar 2), and is thus unable to foresee financial crises (Pillar 3), resulting in the need to create alternative learned societies (and while the AFEP, the French association of political economists, already exists, there are demands to open a new economics section in the University) (pillar 4).

This strategy does not nourish debate. It annihilates it. It is intended solely to discredit researchers, both recognized and anonymous. Jean Tirole was recently the victim of this kind of discrediting by some self-proclaimed “heterodox” economists.

2) With regard to a scientific and reductive approach

Xavier Ragot says that “giving a consensus among economists the status of truth” (Cahuc, Zylberberg, p. 185) is troublesome, because it ignores the contributions of “minority” efforts. We are not erecting some consensus about truth; rather, we say very specifically (p. 185) that a consensus, when it exists, is *the best approximation* of the

“truth”. The use of quotation marks around the word *truth* and the qualification *best approximation* show clearly that we are not advocating some notion of scientific absolutism. Our use of the terms *consensus* and *truth* seems to us to correspond to the usual practice in the scientific process.

To bolster our position on this point, we’d like to cite our book once more, on pages 184-185: “Trusting in a community made up of thousands of researchers remains the best option for having an informed opinion about subjects that we don’t really understand. It is nevertheless a form of betting, because even if science is the most reliable way to produce knowledge, it may be wrong. But to systematically call into question the results obtained by scientific specialists on a given question and prefer to rely on self-proclaimed experts is far riskier”; and on page 186: “The development of knowledge involves a collective undertaking where every researcher produces results that other researchers then test for their robustness. ‘Scientific knowledge’ is the photograph of this collective endeavour at a given point. This is the most reliable picture of what we know about the state of the world. This image is not fixed, but is in fact constantly changing.”

So when no empirical study on the reduction of statutory or contractual working hours (excluding the reduction of charges) finds a positive effect on employment, there are no grounds for asserting that reducing working time can create jobs ... so long as no published studies find the opposite. Economic negationism leads to denying these results, saying that they stem from dogmatic thinking guided by either ignorance of the real world or a conspiracy. We affirm therefore that further debate is necessary, but to be constructive it must follow certain rules: the arguments must be based on contributions that have passed “peer review” to be certified as relevant. Of course, on many topics the existing studies do not make it possible to identify convergent results. When this is the

case, it has to be acknowledged. There are several illustrations of this in our book.

3) On our recommendations for opening up debate and making it transparent

As we have mentioned before, our objective is not to close the “intellectual debate” to public access by laypeople, but to make the debate more constructive and informative. Debates on economics, even when simply presenting the facts, are often treated as political confrontations or boxing matches between different schools of thought. We’re simply saying that to organize informative discussion (page 209), “Journalists should stop systematically calling on the same people, especially when they have no proven research activity but are nevertheless capable of expressing themselves on every subject. They should instead seek out genuine specialists. The ranking of more than 800 economists in France on the IDEAS website can help them select relevant speakers. In any case, the web pages of researchers should be consulted to ensure that their publications appear in reputable scientific journals, a list of which is available on the same IDEAS site. If an economist hasn’t published anything in the last five years in one of the 1,700 journals listed on this site, it is clear that this person has not been an active researcher for a long time, and it is best to talk to someone one else to get an informed opinion. Journalists should also systematically ask for references to the articles researchers rely on for their judgments and, where applicable, request that these items be made available online to readers, listeners and viewers.”

So, far from wanting to “import the hierarchy of the academic debate into the public debate”, as Xavier Ragot puts it, we simply want for non-specialists to be better informed about the academic debate, so that they are able to distinguish what are matters of uncertainty (or consensus) among researchers with regard to the political options being presented.

[1] *Golden Holocaust: La Conspiration des industriels du tabac*, Sainte Marguerite sur Mer, Équateurs, 2014.

[2] *Les Marchands de doute. Ou comment une poignée de scientifiques ont masqué la vérité sur des enjeux de société tels que le tabagisme et le réchauffement climatique*, Paris, Editions le Pommier, 2012.

[3] *Manifeste des économistes atterrés (2010) and Nouveau manifeste des économistes atterrés (2015)*, éditions LLL.

[4] Editions LLL 2015.