

# The merchant, the scientist and the citizen

## The competing approaches of social science education in the French High School

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- A little more than 50 years ago, an integrated and pluralistic teaching of social sciences, including economics, was created in the French lycée.
- It was aimed more at training enlightened citizens than at direct preparation for the labour market.
- However, this approach is rapidly being called into question, both by certain economic lobbies and by some university economists.
- The current reform of the high school and the baccalaureate tends to confirm their victory.
- Beyond this example, it is the very objectives of training in and through the social sciences at school that are posed.

**Purpose:** The aim of this article is to give a bird's eye view of the main issues surrounding the teaching of economic and social sciences in the French high school

**Approach:** This article is based above all on a synthesis of the existing primary and secondary literature on Economic and social sciences ("sciences économiques et sociales") teaching in France and the controversies surrounding it.

**Findings:** This text gives a general overview of the situation of SES teaching in France, by going back to the original intentions of its authors; by analysing curricular developments, which show a progressive distance from them; and finally by highlighting the main collective actors involved (SES teachers and other neighbouring disciplines, national education hierarchy, academics, political actors, employer lobbies, etc.).

**Practical implications:** Beyond the French situation it presents, this article raises a number of more general questions about the objectives that can be assigned to social science teaching in high schools, the opportunity to mix several academic disciplines and the pedagogical methods that can be implemented.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: A CONTESTED HIGH SCHOOL REFORM UNDERWAY

The teaching of social sciences at the lycée in France immediately refers to the discipline of economic and social sciences (sciences économiques et sociales, hence referred as "SES"), created a little over 50 years ago and which constitutes a specificity of this rather centralised educational system. Several times threatened with extinction, opposition to this education is now focused on its place in the overall architecture of secondary education, but also on its content, and in particular on the articulation of the economy with other social sciences. Such debates have been revived by the latest reform of the high school and baccalaureate, launched under the chairmanship of Emmanuel Macron by his Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer, which led to a teachers' strike during the baccalaureate examinations for the first time in the long history of this national institution created by Napoleon (Battaglia & Morin, 2019). Economic and social science teachers were particularly involved in this mobilization, for example by organizing a demonstration in Paris on the first day of the tests, joined by the unions (Association des professeurs de SES, 2019). They then make demands specific to their discipline, which they accuse the reform of "distorting", but also more general criticism of this law, which they accuse of increasing social inequalities between students. Even more revealing, these teachers criticize the introduction of new interdisciplinary teaching that may put teachers of different subjects in the same school in competition as to who should teach them. A fear that does not lack foundations, but which surprises us when they claim at the same time the disciplinary crossing in their own teaching, against a tendency to separate the economy from other social sciences. This recent conflict is yet another episode in a confrontation as old as the discipline itself, and which raises, explicitly or implicitly, certain questions about the aims of social science education for school-age adolescents. In order to better understand these as well as the actors and positions involved in these debates, it is important to first review the eventful history of this discipline.

## 2 THE CREATION OF THE SES AND THE INITIAL ORIENTATIONS

After having been experimented the previous year in some 200 Year 11 classes<sup>1</sup>, SES teaching was generalized at the beginning of the 1967 school year under the title "Introduction to economic and social facts" ("*introduction aux faits économiques et sociaux*") as part of a more global reform of the high school aimed at modernising it by opening it up to society and widening access to the baccalaureate, and thus to higher education<sup>2</sup> (Chatel, 1993)<sup>3</sup>. However, the very existence of the SES is threatened even before their birth, in particular by philosophy professors who consider that the social sciences are part of the university and require intellectual instruments that philosophy teaching, taught exclusively in the final year of high school until today, must provide them (Chatel and Grosse, 2015, p. 25). They thus launched a "call for the preservation of the philosophy class" signed in particular by prominent intellectual figures from all political parties, from Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to conservative figure Raymond Aron, but the Minister of Education at the time ignored it.

The SES then has for vocation to ensure the diffusion of a "third culture", economic and social, between the classical arts, which gradually lose their aura, and the so-called "hard" sciences, mathematical and physical, which acquire on the contrary a growing prestige, opening the door to the best studies. Optional from Year 11 onwards, however, teaching is placed at the heart of one of the 5 series between which students must choose at the end of that school year and has an hourly volume of 4 hours per week for years 11, 12 and 13. The other reason for the clash took place within the commission responsible for designing the first programs, bringing together academics from the different fields concerned. The economists and lawyers present consider it preferable to restrict the scope of the discipline to the economic science alone, but it is ultimately the commission's officials who impose their project. It is not insignificant that these belong to the Annales school, a movement founded by historians Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre with the

aim of decompartmentalizing the social sciences. As summarized by Marcel Roncayolo, the geographer responsible for leading the work of this group:

"The social sciences were not intended to be vocational education. The opposite of vocational education itself. That was the goal: to give an education about the modern world, about the world in which they found themselves - and not just the best in our industrialized world - to the young people who were graduating from high school. Put them back in their time, not only in past historical periods, or even more so in ancient languages. The formula that often came up in the commission was: we must make them capable of reading *Le Monde*<sup>4</sup>. It was a bit of a line. But it was unprofessional. That is to say, we didn't want to train people to do economics, but to understand the world in which they lived, it's a little different" (Marcel Roncayolo, interviewed on January, 13, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

Two major characteristics are affirmed by the first programmes: on the one hand, the study of "social "problems" and [economic] issues, approached from a broad social and historical perspective" (Chatel, 1990, p. 21); on the other hand, the concern to favour an "active pedagogy", avoiding as much as possible the lecture course to start from the students' direct observations and especially their confrontation with documents selected by the teachers (Joigneux-Desplanques & Parienty, 2015).

"The problem is not to receive instruction, but to participate in it, since the teacher and students react - then not in the same way, nor with the same knowledge at the beginning of course - but they react from the same document that is external to each other. Precisely, it had always troubled me that history and geography were essentially taught at the time by what the teacher thought [and said]. And not with the reaction of the teacher and the students to the same document" (Marcel Roncayolo, quoted interview)

The first programs specify as follows:

"The very definition of this teaching does not make it possible to distinguish a lecture and theoretical course from exercises of application. On the contrary, it is desirable, in most cases, that the study of a theme derives from a concrete analysis, a set of observations, a comparison of statistics or texts. The interest of this teaching is, in fact, to gradually identify rules of reasoning and analysis. However, students do not automatically possess the necessary mental tools, they must be given "grids" (grilles); the vocabulary, the means of description or analysis that they lack, and finally, not all the themes proposed lend themselves equally to this method [...]. From this perspective, the most useful method seems to be the constitution and commentary of files that are gradually enriched and discussed, then summarized to draw general conclusions. Teaching method, but also method of checking the work of students [...]. The explanation, sometimes the elaboration of documents, therefore support this teaching. These documents may be texts, statistics, survey results, and, where appropriate, audiovisual documents" (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 1967)

The aim is thus clearly to contribute to citizenship education by drawing on the knowledge and methods of the social sciences. They are well perceived as instruments turned towards other ends - the acquisition of a rigorous intellectual posture - and not as ends in themselves, knowledge that should be recited by heart. Marcel Roncayolo thus compares this ability to treat the information that is to be transmitted to students as "the noblest work of the journalist", noting that "it

corresponds much more to what is now required in intellectual professions", implied in relation to the recitation and formal rhetoric<sup>6</sup> hitherto valued by the French school system. The first programs still warn against the temptation of excessive theorization at this level of education: "the too early teaching of models or explanatory schemes can harden young minds and make them unfit to undertake serious economic and social science studies later" (MEN, 1967)<sup>7</sup>.

The first curricula for each class level contain a limited number of broad themes that are relatively undetailed, which in effect gives teachers a great deal of pedagogical freedom. Thus, in Year 11, "Les Hommes" (human beings, that imply demography and family), "les besoins" (needs), "les activités" (activities) and finally "l'étude comparative du travail et du progrès technique selon les époques et les régions" (comparative study of work and technical progress according to time and region) are addressed, and a note specifies that "Depending on the progress of the program, students will be introduced to the development of statistics and their expression: graphs, maps, pyramids, etc.". In Year 12, education is centred on "the economic and social life of the nation", with the main themes "the enterprise" (considered in the diversity of its forms and with its "human problems"), "communities, nation, State" (where the social groups, culture and the political and economic functions of the State are discussed) and "the national economy". It should also be noted that civic education is explicitly integrated into the teaching of SES, which brings the weekly volume to 4 hours and a half for students. Finally, the program for Year 13, entitled "growth and development", addresses the themes of "levels of development and economic and social systems" (with a comparison between liberal economies, the USSR and developing countries), "economic growth", "social change" and "international relations" (economic, but also socio-cultural). It is difficult to blame these programs for their lack of ambition. Their synthetic writing therefore offers teachers a certain latitude to put them into practice, particularly in the choice of documents to be used as supports, which, in the initial absence of textbooks, leads them to compulsively collect all the documents (articles, graphs, tables, etc.) likely to be studied with their pupils. A working habit that has remained effective until today, as evidenced by the teachers we were able to interview and the course documents that are shared today through the website of the *Association des professeurs de Sciences Économiques et Sociales* (APSES), which gather around 40% of SES teachers, 2200 out of 5500, and which we will discuss later. Although there is now an ever more diversified supply of textbooks - which are produced in France by teams of teachers on behalf of private publishers endorsed by the Ministry of Education<sup>8</sup> - teachers tinker and mix documents of their own making with those they select from these books without carrying out a linear follow-up. On the other hand, it reveals that, despite the stated concern to make it a vehicle for social openness, this education has a certain elitist dimension at its origin, by being reserved for a fringe of pupils, and by adopting an educational approach that is not necessarily accessible to all pupils, who are unequally familiar with current events and the major challenges of the social world.

Be that as it may, these epistemological and pedagogical innovations have thus formed the basis of a real "school culture" (Chervel, 1996) of the SES that distinguishes it from the social sciences, including economics, as taught at the university, which will not go without encouraging the desire to make it a standard economic education.

### 3 A GRADUAL DEVIATION FROM THE INITIAL PROJECT SURROUNDED BY PERMANENT CLASHES

The discipline of SES has gradually taken root in the French lycée, as shown by various signs of institutionalization: the creation of a general inspectorate from the outset, the training of a specific body of teachers, initially recruited from among voluntary teachers of history/geography and economic and management techniques - the other teaching of economics for students in the technological field, created in 1952 and now simply called Economics and Management -, during courses organised by Marcel Roncayolo himself with the help of many academics, the creation of

a dedicated *Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire* (CAPES, Certificate of Aptitude for Secondary School Teaching-) in 1969, then an agrégation in 1977<sup>9</sup>, the creation of the SES Teachers' Association in 1971, discipline-specific textbooks and journals - in particular the independent monthly magazine "Alternatives économiques", created in 1980 specifically for SES students and teachers - and the creation of preparatory classes for the "grandes écoles" focusing on SES in 1982-1983<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 1: Frontpages of the APSES newsletter, respectively calling for a strike and demonstration by SES teachers in March 1996 and showing the national office of the association interviewed by the Minister of National Education in 2008 (© APSES)**



These various elements do not prevent the recurrent occurrence of public attacks against the SES and responses from mobilized teachers, which ultimately constitute a continuous struggle to define what should constitute "good" social science teaching in high schools. The first attacks actually come from within the education system, with teachers of neighbouring subjects worried about their land being encroached upon. These tensions thus arise with history and geography professors at the time of the creation of a single college for all students in the mid-1970s<sup>11</sup>, where it was considered to introduce SES, as well as with economics and management professors with whom, from the 1980s onwards, their merger with SES was regularly considered (Chatel & Grosse, 2015, pp. 30-31)<sup>12</sup>. At the end of the 1970s, Prime Minister Raymond Barre, Professor of Economics at the University, entrusted one of his fellow professors in Dakar, Joël Bourdin<sup>13</sup>, with an audit assignment. His final report radically condemns the SES and the B series which is organised around them. It provokes a strong mobilisation of the profession organised by the APSES, with a 2-day strike and a demonstration in Paris, where many prestigious intellectuals are involved, representing the different academic disciplines which form the basis of the discipline. The slogan carried by APSES is then that it is a "fight for an adjective" (the "social" of economic and social sciences).

The *Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques* (INSEE, National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) Director Jean-Claude Milleron, himself then assigned to coordinate a new report, which turns out to be much more favourable to the SES. These ones are finally maintained, and even integrated into the common core curriculum in the second year,



at the rate of 2 hours per week. However, the new programs drawn up entirely by the Inspectorate General, which came into force in 1981-82 and then in 1988, commit some observers to a "universitarisation" of the SES, which is reflected in particular in the increasing separation of economics and sociology and the removal of the historical dimension (Chatel, 2018, p. 123). In 1981, the year 11 program thus began with a "summary and tidying up of the knowledge acquired in order to place the French economy and society in their current state in relation to the main forms of economic and social organisation, past and present" and a "reminder" of the notion of economic circuit, thus addressing the active population, the company, the family, the household (income, consumption, savings) and the national economy. The first and final year students seem to evolve only marginally, and are even slightly shortened.

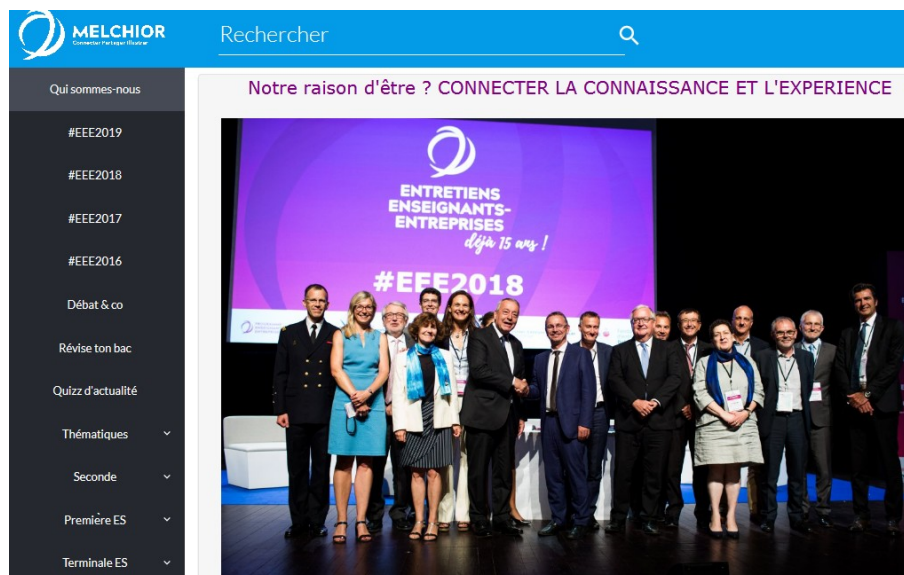
However, two things can be noted: on the one hand, a shift in the official presentation of the objectives of this teaching. The preamble to the 1987 programs states that its aim is "to open up the culture of secondary schools more widely to an order of realities and reflections that their previous studies have only allowed them to address in a summary and non-specific way", "to take advantage of what the information and communication media offer them", and to "prepare them to work and act as adult producers, consumers, but also citizens - more lucid, more free and therefore more aware of their responsibilities". However, it stresses that "it does not seek to impose dogmatic conclusions on the study of phenomena that are often open to diverse interpretations" (Ministère de l'Education nationale, 1987) and recalls the primacy of active pedagogy and the teacher's freedom of action while respecting curriculum coherence. At the same time, however, an instruction column is being created in the programmes that strongly specifies how what has hitherto only been presented in the form of major themes is to be addressed.

The programs, which came into force in 1993 as a result of a new reform of the school structure, are now drafted by specific working groups including academics and field teachers in addition to the Inspectorate General<sup>14</sup>, while a National Curriculum Council is created to advise on all school programs. SESs are becoming an option (in competition with classic languages (Latin and Greek) in particular), but now have a three-hour weekly schedule. The programmes still give pride of place to economics at this level, with two main themes that organize it: "men produce" and "men consume", and open up to the question of scarcity, "fundamental economic and social problem", especially from the point of view of the dominant neoclassical current, while this naturalization of rarity and needs has been widely challenged by researchers, anthropologists in particular, opposed to the formalist school (Sahlins, 1972). And it is not insignificant that, when it comes to dealing with family and kinship, the additional indications specify that "it is highly desirable to avoid any systematic study of too long a duration". While the presentation of the objectives does not change much, additions such as "The important role played in our discipline by statistical documents calls for the use of the computer tool that allows both access to and processing of data" and the program explicitly invites students to commission research "based on observation of the economy and local society and/or current events", while making it clear that these "concrete learning" is not additional to the program but is a means of processing it. The curricula were extensively revised in Years 12 and 13, with a growing de facto separation between economics and other social sciences. In Year 12, the program is divided into two main parts: "economic activities and the social framework" with first the former (the economic circuit and national accounts), then the latter (socialization, individuals and social groups, cultural phenomena) without any real bridge between two; then "The regulation of social activities", which begins with "market economy and society", where the neoclassical market model is presented, followed by its limits and finally its institutionalization, then "public institutions" (part giving a large place to economic and social policies and their limits) and finally "social regulation" where the question of mass consumption and the measurement of opinion and social control are successively addressed. It is also worth noting the introduction in 1996 of a "political science"

option in Year 12 of 2 hours per week to be chosen in competition with applied mathematics or a modern language.

While the programs seem to mark a shift in favour of the economy, and the neoclassical trend in particular, it was at the end of the 1990s that a new collective actor entered the arena: the employers' lobbies. In 1997, the *Institut de l'Entreprise* (IDE, "Company Institute") - an employer think tank -, commissions a Inspector of Finances<sup>15</sup>, who had left public service to work for the private sector, to carry out an audit of SES' manuals. Not surprisingly, her report denounces a too negative view of the market and companies, and an overemphasis on the macro-economic approach to the detriment of the micro-economy. This creates a repertoire of action and argumentation that will be repeated over the next two decades, with the simple addition of a later denunciation of sociology as being too "*compassionnelle*" (compassionate)<sup>16</sup>. These criticisms will intensify when Michel Pébereau takes over the leadership of IDE in 2006, after a strong mobilization against the governmental project of the *Contrat première embauche* ("First Recruitment Contract")<sup>17</sup> that reflect on the image of private firms (Rozier, 2018). This senior civil servant, who led the privatization of Crédit Commercial de France and BNP in the early 1990s before taking the lead while teaching economics at Sciences-po Paris, where he also heads the Board of Directors, embodies the growing interpenetration of the public and private spheres, particularly marked in France (France & Vauchez, 2017), but also the academic and managerial worlds. With the General Delegate of the IDE, who has a similar profile, they put the teaching of SES in high school in the top of their political agenda.

**Figure 2: Page of the "Melchior" site presenting a stage photograph taken during the 2018 edition of the "Teachers-Business Talks" where business leaders, economists, director of the Ecole Polytechnique and inspectors from the French Ministry of Education are mixed together (© Institut de l'Entreprise).**



It is thus launching a website offering educational resources called "Melchior", and offers immersion internships in companies to teachers of the discipline as well as, since 2003, an annual 2-days conference just before the start of the school year, initially named *Entretiens Louis-le-Grand* ("Louis-le-Grand Talks") after the prestigious Parisian high school where they are held. They are renamed *Entretiens Enseignants-Entreprise* ("Teachers-Business Talks") after their move to the Ecole Polytechnique, only a few kilometers from the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* (MEDEF, French Companies Movement, the major employers' organization) Summer University

held at the same time on the HEC business school campus. A succession of mainstream economists and senior executives of the partner companies followed in front of an audience of hundreds of invited teachers, all expenses paid, under an agreement with the Ministry of National Education and the active participation of inspectors from the three disciplines concerned (SES, economy-management and history-geography). A few years ago, IDE also tried to launch a free newspaper for students with the approval of the Ministry of Education but had to back down in front of the outcry caused by the disclosure of this initiative<sup>18</sup>.

The mid-2000s saw the construction of a public problem (Gusfield, 1963): the supposed economic inculture of the French (Rozier, 2009). In connection with the ephemeral *Conseil pour la Diffusion de la Culture Economique* (CODICE, Committee for the Diffusion of Economic Culture) (2006-2010) created by the businessman Thierry Breton after his appointment as Minister of Economy and Finance, several surveys are commissioned to establish a diagnosis on very questionable grounds. This lack of knowledge of the economy is then blamed on equally questionable effects: nothing less than the sluggishness of growth and part of unemployment. Finally, there is the identification of the culprits: SES programs and teachers who would maintain a guilty mistrust of companies and "the" market. The arguments are used by other pharmacies, such as the liberal think tanks Positive Enterprise<sup>19</sup> in 2007, the "Institute of Economic and Fiscal Research"<sup>19</sup> in 2012 or the "Sapiens Institute" in 2018 (Martinache, 2018a). The method is always the same: an approximate overview of a few textbooks to point out supposed biases in curricula or teaching practices. It is not very scientific, but is also taken up by the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* (ASMP, Academy of Moral and Political Sciences). In 2008, its "Political Economy, Statistics and Finance" section published a first highly critical report on SES, which some of its members do not hesitate to describe as "néfastes" (harmful). At the end of 2016, now chaired by Michel Pébereau, it asked eight international economists for an audit of SES manuals and invited the most critical to two conferences it organised in early 2017. And the final report recommends refocusing programs on the micro-economy and in particular the study of market and financial mechanisms in order to "develop a better understanding of economic concepts and issues by future business executives, and by the future citizen who will have to approve structural reforms"<sup>20</sup>.

### 3 A MOBILIZED AND RESOURCEFUL - BUT NOT ALMIGHTY - TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

On the other hand, the APSES, now emancipated from the inspectorate that had created it and against which it does not hesitate to oppose it head-on, maintains a continuous mobilization to defend what it considers to be the original spirit of the SES, namely the intersection of the various social sciences around "problem objects", respect for pluralism of points of view, and a pedagogical freedom leaving room for active methods and dialogue with students. The mobilization of 1980 already mentioned has become a founding myth in the discipline and has enabled the association to build a repertoire of collective action (Tilly, 1986) of its own, consisting of the organization of strikes and, above all, of events specific to the discipline. Such a phenomenon is quite rare in French education where unions favour interdisciplinary actions, except in physical and sports education. This repertoire is made of various distinctive symbols, including T-shirts and posters bearing the effigies of leading figures in the economic and social sciences, ranging from Friedrich von Hayek to Karl Marx, Milton Friedman and Pierre Bourdieu, each of them telling a different slogan in favour of the SES by using one of their most famous notion. This can be viewed as an implicit display of their pluralism as well as an answer to accusations of leftism addressed to them. Another element lies in a repertoire of songs promoting the SES on the tunes of popular hits. Their lyrics praising the SES are reproduced in booklets distributed to demonstrators and now available online<sup>21</sup>. SES teachers thus put into practice some of the knowledge they also transmit about social mobilization and know how to



play symbols to get noticed by the media. Thus, in November 2012, in order to demand relief from the new SES programs, which it considers too large in view of the time constraints, APSES decided to organise a rally on the Paris Stock Exchange square, also adjacent to the *Agence France Presse* building, rather than a traditional demonstration with a strike on a Wednesday afternoon. A major goose game is organized with activists disguised as ducks and sumo, to symbolize the force-feeding that students would undergo. And the rally ends up with a release of balloons to which each one is attached a notion from the new programs. Although it is not possible to attribute a direct effect to this event, it may be noted that SESs are then the only discipline to obtain cuts in their programs.

**Figure 4: (right) Rally organized by APSES to demand a reduction in SES programs on 29 November 2012 in Paris. (© APSES) (left) Posters produced by APSES using famous expressions of economic and social science personalities to promote SES (© APSES)**



In addition to this direct advocacy role, APSES is also developing service activities for its members (pooling of courses, discussion lists, information, conferences organisation, etc.), which help to attract them - and thus make it the most representative association of specialists with nearly 2300 members out of around 5500 teachers in 2019 -, but also ensures the socialisation of members by maintaining among them the feeling of being part of a separate and "besieged" discipline. Finally, APSES activists highlight their pedagogical expertise and mobilize that of the academics they have acquired, individually or collectively, by regularly organizing symposia where they are invited to express themselves alongside journalists and other "experts" (pollsters, etc.) to express all the good they think of SES. The association's leaders thus pay particular attention to the maintenance of this network of "constituent consciousness" (MacCarthy & Zald, 1976) which can also enable them to obtain a media resonance fund and act as a relay in the academic sphere. They can also be mobilized as scientific guarantors when APSES challenges certain aspects of the programs, not only during the public meetings mentioned above, but also in a more original way when the association decided to build what it called a "bypass program" for Year 12, in which case the aim was to reorganize the content of the new 2010 program around

objects that would allow the different social sciences to meet. To prove that this program was feasible and allow teachers to take ownership of it, the association also produced a freely accessible online manual significantly named "SESâme" - literally "Soul of the SES", also play on the name of the sesame seed<sup>22</sup>. Each sequence was written by a pair of anonymous teachers (to avoid reprisals) and reviewed by a specialized academic, while a cross-interview of two (sometimes the same) researchers with opposing views completes each sequence. Similarly, during the last reform of the programs, the APSES did not only criticize the projects presented by the working group in charge of writing them, but for the final year class, it anticipated the latter by proposing its own project respecting the main principles defended by the association.

**Figure 5: Assises nationales des SES organised by APSES at Sciences Po Paris in 2005 (© APSES)**



However, it must be noted that despite this resistance and the militant resources that APSES knows how to mobilize, the founding project of the SES is increasingly called into question with each curricular reform. While the programs of the early 2000s still respect this spirit, with the option in Year 11 being the successive study of the family, employment, production and consumption after an introductory chapter leaving teachers the freedom to deal with the subject of their choice to show the "SES approach" and the complementarity of economic, sociological and political perspectives with a timetable of two and a half hours per week (including 30 minutes in half class). Year 12 is organized around the study of the economic link, sociological link and political link. In Year 13, a "speciality" teaching was added to the common program focused on "growth, social change and development", although the complementary indications have become increasingly voluminous. In this optional teaching, which is in addition to the five hours per week, the aim is to cover each of the main themes dealt with on the basis of the writings of a named author (Schumpeter, Smith, Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, Keynes or Ricardo), while showing their current relevance. A real deepening that is highly appreciated by both teachers and students.

In 2010, however, as part of a new reform of the high school, a division in the curricula between chapters of economics and social sciences was approved, while a few chapters entitled "crossed views" remain at the end of the program where the original spirit remains. Symptomatically, the objectives of the teaching are for the first time completely rewritten. The order of the objectives of this teaching is revealing, because before preparing students for higher education and contributing to their civic education, it is a question of "enabling them to appropriate the concepts, methods and problems of three social sciences", implied economy, sociology and political science, thus excluding anthropology, demography, history or law in particular<sup>23</sup>. But it is

above all the mark of an epistemological rupture characterized by the adoption of a clearly Popperian approach opposed to the inductive approach hitherto favoured (Lawruszneko, Martinache and Mas, 2015).

To put it simply, the results of the social sciences are now taught for themselves and are no longer seen primarily as intellectual methods for approaching the world. As a result, the curricula are becoming increasingly voluminous and the indications more precise, which curtail teachers' pedagogical freedom while forcing them to practice more and more lectures to prepare students for the baccalaureate. The defeat of the APSES is yet not total, taking into account the relief obtained since 1995<sup>24</sup>, but also for having avoided a merger with the economy and management, the threat of which appears regularly. This was particularly close to being achieved when the 2010 high school reform in Year 11 created a new status of "exploration education": each student must choose two of them from a list of about ten options (creation and artistic activities, literature and society, biotechnology languages,...) of one and a half hours per week where marking is optional. SES then received this status and following a new mobilization against this marginalization (including the indignation of economic actors), all students were forced to choose SES or a new teaching entitled "fundamental principles of economics and management". In addition to this competitive tendering which benefited SES (almost 80% of the students actually chose the latter, probably largely for the signal effect for subsequent orientation), in order to ensure a supply of education at the local level, SES teachers were asked to teach economics management and vice versa, blurring each other's specialities. Moreover, the Ministry of Education has considered creating a new course for the start of the 2012 academic year on an experimental basis entitled "Knowledge of the economic world", which would have replaced the two courses by merging them. Again, following the challenge and unanimous rejection by the High Council of Programmes, this project was finally abandoned<sup>25</sup>.

## 5 SOME DIVISIONS AMONG SES TEACHERS THEMSELVES

All in all despite - or because of - the fact that the - of the small number of staff in the discipline<sup>26</sup>, APSES has been able to build its own disciplinary identity, distinguishing it from higher education and mobilizing not far from half of the SES teachers for its defence, which gives it a much greater representativeness than its counterparts in other disciplines, but also a remarkable visibility. At the same time, it would be an illusion to believe that SES teachers would forge a monolithic block: not only is APSES subject to numerous debates, revealed at each of its general assemblies or even daily on its electronic discussion list, but there are also teachers opposed to its line who welcome successive reforms and tried to create a competing association in the late 1990s, called "Action SES". Concentrated around a training centre in the south of France, most of them from which come, although they were unable to attract people around them, some of them met in 2016 in a new group called the "Collectif de Défense et de Promotion des SES" (Group for the Defense and Promotion of the SES - CDP-SES) which claims that SES teaching should be aligned with university curricula in order to ensure the legitimacy of the discipline. The press release published to announce its creation, written either through an APSES member, states that:

"APSES considers that we must defend a politicized conception of the SES based on criticism of economic liberalism. We think it is dangerous for our discipline to be equated with an ideological orientation. This weakens us, as shown by the recurrent attacks by employers against the SES, assimilated to the positions of the APSES. On the contrary, we consider that what reinforces the legitimacy of our teaching is the fact that it mobilizes rigorous academic knowledge"<sup>27</sup>

Unlike APSES, these teachers consider that political, pedagogical and scientific issues can and should be distinguished in curriculum writing and thus tend to deny the lack of pluralism of the programs (Buisson-Fenêt, 2018), with which some have been associated, and also claim a pedagogical approach based on didactic transposition (Chevallard, 1985), that is to say starting from academically established knowledge and transmitting it in adapted pedagogical materials, rather than an inductive approach based on students' experience. They also criticize APSES and the founding project of the SES for maintaining an "implicit pedagogy" that would be unfavourable to the most disadvantaged pupils and would therefore reinforce social inequalities in learning (Beitone, 2015; Mas, 2016).

While these debates are certainly crucial, and are often caricatured by the invective that each side sends to the other<sup>28</sup>, it is important to note that although having no formal existence and therefore representing only its ten self-proclaimed "spokespersons", the CDP-SES is regularly received in the Ministry and treated on the same level as the APSES, despite its almost 2300 members. A lack of representativeness that the latter vehemently denounces, considering that the CDP-SES is thus playing into the hands of an inspection that can thus rely on support from the "base". This was particularly the case with the latest high school reform that began to take effect last September.

## 6 A NEW HIGH SCHOOL "À LA CARTE": THE PLACE AND ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN QUESTION

Although he announced on his appointment that there would be no law bearing his name, President Macron's Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, has implemented an in-depth reform of the French lycée, more precisely of its general education system. The three existing series (Literary, Economic and Social, Scientific) in which students specialized during the Years 12 and 13 are thus abolished in favour of the individual choice of "specialities" (3 for 4 hours per week each in Year 12, 2 of 6 hours each in year 13). The baccalaureate exams will be modified accordingly, with the introduction of a part of continuous control and a "grand oral" at the end of Year 13, the outlines of which remain to be defined. Although the implicit hierarchy of the series had long been criticized, as had the cumbersome examination of the baccalaureate, the teachers' unions unanimously rejected the reform, rather rarely to stress this, citing the resulting increase in inequalities, both in terms of the local supply of specialities, as only very few schools will in practice be able to offer the 11 specialities announced and the lack of visibility for pupils and their families, as only the best-endowed will know which combinations of specialities will give them access to the most valued studies.

The competition between disciplines is also denounced, not only to attract students to its speciality or to keep them between Year 12 and Year 13, but also because several new courses are created without being assigned to a particular disciplinary body. This is particularly the case for a specialization entitled "History-geography, geopolitics, political science" which has led to strong tensions between history-geography teachers and SES teachers over how teaching hours would be distributed. As no rules have been set by the Ministry of Education, arrangements must be made on a local basis and while their inspection refused to sit on the curriculum drafting group, SES teachers themselves have divided themselves between the outright boycott of this teaching, whose curricula effectively have a strong historical and geographical focus, and the need to demand intervention to avoid job losses.

In addition, SESs are reintegrated into the core curriculum in Year 11, but with a timetable of one and a half hours per week, they become a specialty in Years 12 and 13, losing hours in the first grade. The APSES thus criticised what it considers to be marginalisation, claiming in particular an increase in the number of hours in 2nd grade, and emphasising the "success" of the Economic and Social series, both in terms of social recruitment and opportunities for pupils. In addition, the programs were rewritten by a working group bringing together academics in



economics, sociology and political science, SES inspectors, teachers, but also two members of the section of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences who were very critical of the SES. This group was chaired by Harvard professor Philippe Aghion, an economist, who summarized his philosophy with the somewhat contradictory desire to "democratize access to the social sciences with the highest standards of quality". In this way, he thinks that:

"The French students will be the best in economics and sociology, even if they then work in other fields, in the same way as today our students are the best in math. This is democracy: the student who lives in the most remote corner of France or the most deprived will have access to the best possible education and the greatest chances of emancipation"<sup>30</sup>

The programs drafted by this group were finally unanimously rejected by the High Council of Education<sup>31</sup>, what did not prevent the Ministry of Education from publishing them practically as they stood in January 2019 for Years 11 and 12 and July 2019 for Year 13 respectively<sup>32</sup>. In addition to the disciplinary compartmentalization that is maintained - even if the place of social sciences other than economics is rather strengthened and the "crossed views" preserved -, the APSES still denounces a too large volume that reduces the pedagogical freedom of teachers, which is nevertheless mentioned in the objectives of the programs. Moreover, we can find there the mark of a certain scientism with the emphasis on modelling, and this warning which seems to be addressed to teachers:

"The professors insist on the need for axiological neutrality. The social sciences are based on established facts, rigorous arguments, validated theories and not on values. The purpose of economic and social science education is the result of scientific work, transposed to school learning. It should help students to distinguish scientific approaches and knowledge from what is a matter of belief or dogma, and thus participate in public debate in an informed way; it contributes to their civic formation".

While the remark seems to address the rise of a certain relativism in the face of the spread of "fake news", it nevertheless denotes a problematic conception of democracy in which citizens should erase themselves before experts who know and established truths, forgetting that all knowledge in the social sciences is a critical construct. The APSES thus criticizes teaching objectives formulated in a non-problematic way and thus eliminating controversies, as evidenced by the systematic use of verbs such as "understand" or "know" or the adverb "how". Similarly, the baccalaureate examination projects, which strongly restrict teaching, give an important place to the recitation of knowledge and the resolution of numerical exercises to the detriment of reasoned reflection, which is nevertheless valued in the teaching objectives. Finally, from the point of view of the content itself, while criticising the excessive size of the programs, APSES deplors the disappearance of certain themes or the inadequacy of others that are nevertheless part of the "major challenges of the contemporary world", starting with the ecological question, but also migration or consumption. It also denounces the excessive importance given to the presentation of the market from the sole perspective of neoclassical microeconomics in the program for Year 12 (3 of the 5 economic chapters alongside financing and currency)<sup>33</sup>.

## 7 BEYOND THE SES: A PARADOXICAL DIFFUSION OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULA

The example of the trajectory of SES in France shows how much the structure of teaching and writing programs are highly conflictual issues, in other words, political issues. It thus appears that these challenges are not limited to the definition of content, knowledge and know-how, but also



include the definition of teaching methods and the place given to pupils. Ultimately, it is the objectives of social science education that are set, and the way they are understood: ends in themselves or instruments serving other purposes, such as citizenship education. While many questions are raised by the struggles for the definition of "good" social science education in high school, some remain hidden. Why, for example, deprive the most socially disadvantaged vocational high school students of it? And why not start this education in high school and not earlier, in primary school, as some recommend (Lahire, 2012)? There is also the question of teacher training, which is being reformed in France. Currently, it begins at the Master's level, with one year dedicated to the preparation of the recruitment competition and the second year to the training in situation. Since the last academic year, a pre-professionalization system has been put in place since the 2nd year of the Licence, allowing students to work in an institution, while the competition should be postponed until the end of the Master's degree. Trade unions and many observers denounce a concern for budgetary savings and a deterioration in the conditions of study for students behind the good intentions displayed (Merle, 2019). Anyhow, in French secondary education, teachers are above all recruited on their mastering disciplinary knowledge than on pedagogical reflection, which in turn influences the definition of their professional identity, where the former is logically valued. However, while SES' programs now compartmentalize economics and sociology, it is on the contrary transdisciplinarity that is encouraged in the new courses created in recent years. The social sciences thus occupy an increasingly important place in different curricula, such as in the "Moral and Civic Education" created following the 2015 attacks in France and which concerns all pupils at all levels from primary school onwards. or in "Digital sciences and technology", in the common core of Year 11 where a large part is given to the impacts of new technologies on human behaviour; "Law and major issues of the contemporary world" optional in Year 13 or the already mentioned speciality of "history-geography, geopolitics, political science". This raises nevertheless the question of the ability of the concerned teachers to transmit the social sciences' approach through them and therefore their training. But the multiplication of such courses suggests in any case that the familiarization of high school students with the social sciences paradoxically appears more necessary than ever.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In France, as in many countries, secondary education is divided into two levels: the "college", which normally takes four years and is common to all students, and the 3 years of "lycée" leading to the baccalaureate, which is divided in three sectors: general, technological and vocational. However, the years are counted backwards, so the French high school consists of the second, first and final years, which correspond respectively to Years 11, 12 and 13 in the British terminology. We have chosen to keep this last terminology, probably more familiar to readers, in the rest of the text.
- <sup>2</sup> In France, the baccalaureate has the double status of a diploma crowning the success of secondary education, but also of the first diploma of higher education, thus opening up a guaranteed access, until now, to it.
- <sup>3</sup> It is therefore wrong, as we sometimes hear, to say that the SES would be a creation of the May-June 1968 movement.
- <sup>4</sup> The leading French daily newspaper among the social elites, located at the centre of the political spectrum.
- <sup>5</sup> All quotations in this text are translated from French by the authors.
- <sup>6</sup> Particularly socially unequal competence and readiness to conceal socially biased academic judgments, as Pierre Bourdieu (1989) demonstrated.
- <sup>7</sup> Most of the curricula, as well as much information about the SES and the APSES, are available on the websites of the latter: [www.apses.org](http://www.apses.org) and [www.formation.apses.org](http://www.formation.apses.org). In the rest of this article, to simplify reading, we will not refer to the official texts that can be found at these links.
- <sup>8</sup> However, given the price of textbooks, the number of pupils enrolled and the renewal rate, this is a strategic segment of the publishing market representing 400 million euros and in which there is strong competition. See Nicolas Vulser, «Edition : les manuels scolaires à la rescousse du secteur en 2016», *Le Monde*, 29 June 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Like all permanent civil servants, teachers are recruited in France following a national competition organized once a year and consisting of written tests aimed at selecting "admissible" candidates, who then take oral tests in the hope of being declared admitted. There are two separate competitions, the CAPES - and the agrégation: the second is more difficult, but its holders receive higher salary and career opportunities (university teaching, inspection missions, etc.) for a lower teaching time (15 hours per week compared to 18). SES professors were themselves quite divided about the opportunity to create an aggregation, as this elitist distinction could create a fracture in the body, but at the same time allowed the discipline to be "ennobled".
- <sup>10</sup> In addition to the university system, there is in France a "grandes écoles" system intended mainly to train engineers, managers and researchers, endowed with a particularly high prestige and in which students are integrated through a competitive examination after two years of study in preparatory classes located in certain prestigious high schools themselves. They have an elitist social recruitment and are endowed with financial resources per student three times higher than at the University
- <sup>11</sup> Replacing the dual system in place until then.
- <sup>12</sup> It should be noted that not all economy- management teachers are against it: given their numerical superiority (approximately 28,000 economy- management teachers against 5200 in SES, public and private combined in 2014 according to the Ministry of Education), it would indeed be an absorption of SES, and it would also allow them to access the more "noble" general stream. On the other hand, they do not like the competition with SES professors on economics courses in the short higher education courses in which they have a monopoly (Superior Technicians Patent - BTS).
- <sup>13</sup> He was later elected mayor and parliamentarian under the colours of the main right-wing party.

- <sup>14</sup> In France, the Inspectorate General in the administration is composed of senior officials responsible for monitoring the work of its members. In the national education system, each subject has its own inspectorate-general, initially responsible for drawing up school curricula, and now responsible in particular for representing the subject within the latter's bodies, organizing competitive examinations for teacher recruitment and supervising the inspections carried out in each region among existing teachers.
- <sup>15</sup> In France, the Inspectorate of Finance is the most prestigious body of the senior civil service, whose members tend to help each other. President Macron, for example, is one of them.
- <sup>16</sup> Attacks that intensified in the mid-2010s, including by then Prime Minister Manuel Valls. See Lahire (2016).
- <sup>17</sup> Finally abandoned, this bill provided for the possibility of hiring young people under conditions below the legal minimums.
- <sup>18</sup> François Jarraud. L'éducation nationale au service du Medef? [National education at the service of the Medef?] *Le Café pédagogique*, 2 September 2015.
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- <sup>21</sup> See in particular the opinion issued by this section in April 2017 and the reports of the commissioned economists: <https://academiesciencesmoralesetpolitiques.fr/tag/ses/> (last accessed on July, 24, 2019).
- <sup>22</sup> See the April 2018 version: <https://www.apses.org/livret-des-chansons-de-manifestation/> (last accessed on July, 24, 2019).
- <sup>23</sup> Available at this adress: <http://sesame.apses.org> (last accessed on July, 24, 2019).
- <sup>24</sup> Although most of the professors at SES have an economic background, they highly appreciate anthropology, which they use in particular to denaturalize certain phenomena, such as the market or currency. In 2010, the deletion of the chapter on the family in year 11 was particularly bad for the profession. Particularly attractive to students, it made it possible to show the diversity of family structures and gender roles, which many teachers considered a crucial support point for further studies.
- <sup>25</sup> Cuts that give teachers a certain pedagogical freedom but create dilemmas because at the same time, teachers themselves are reluctant to see themes removed from the curriculum.
- <sup>26</sup> However, the order creating it was drafted and signed by the Director General of School Education, who has since become the Minister of Education at the origin of the last reform: [http://www.apses.org/IMG/pdf/Arrete\\_CME\\_2\\_pages\\_-1.pdf](http://www.apses.org/IMG/pdf/Arrete_CME_2_pages_-1.pdf) (last accessed on July, 25, 2019).
- <sup>27</sup> SES teachers are fewer in number than, for example, music education or the visual arts - see Ministry of Education data for 2014: <https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/datasets/les-enseignants-du-second-degre-public-par-discipline-00000000/> (last accessed on July, 25, 2019).
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted by François Jarraud. Les anti-APSES lancent leur collectif [APSES opponents launch their group] *Cafepedagogique.net*, September, 16, 2016 (last accessed on July, 25, 2019). Most of CDP-SES press releases and articles are available at this URL: <http://eloge-des-ses.com/debats-autour-des-ses/> (last accessed on July, 25, 2019).
- <sup>29</sup> For more information on the latter, see in particular Harlé, Lanéelle (2015) and Martinache (2018b).
- <sup>30</sup> Philippe Aghion: "pour les SES, je n'ai suivi aucune démarche idéologique" [Philippe Aghion: "for the SES, I didn't follow any ideological approach"], *Alternativeséconomiques.fr*, November, 16, 2018: <https://www.alternatives-economiques.fr/philippe-aghion-nai-suivi-aucune-demarche-ideologique/00086995> (last accessed on July, 26, 2019).
- <sup>31</sup> An advisory body created in 1989 and composed of 98 members representing the staff, users and partners of the National Education Department: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/cid56490/les-organismes-consultatifs.html> ((last accessed on July, 26, 2019).
- <sup>32</sup> They can be consulted in French at these links: [Year 11](#), [Year 12](#) and [Year 13](#).
- <sup>33</sup> In sociology and political science, the themes addressed are: socialization, social groups and bonds, deviance, public opinion and voting, and the "cross-views" are entitled "How do insurance and social protection contribute to risk management in developed societies?" and "How are companies organized and governed?"