**Teaching Economics as a Social Science? The Struggles over the Economic and Social Sciences Curricula in the French High School since 1967.**

**- A comprehensive presentation of Economic and Social Sciences education in France, of the original intentions of its designers.**

- **A detailed examination of the different controversies raised by this interdisciplinary teaching.**

**- An analysis of the curricula evolutions and of their epistemological and political stakes.**

**- A case analysis suggesting that the issue of pluralism in economics implies the definition of its very nature.**

**Purpose:** This article aims at presenting the original design of the teaching of Economic and Social Sciences (SES) in the French High School,the different attacks it has suffered since its creation 50 years ago.

**Approach:** This article is based on the analyses of curricula and reports concerning the SES teaching, around 40 interviews with teachers and key personalities and a ten years participating observation among SES teachers.

**Findings:** This article highlights the different dimensions and actors behind these struggles, including teachers themselves, and strives to nuance a vision that would place the school as a fortress under siege by employer lobbies.

**Research implications:** Such statements may be deepen in two directions. The first consists in comparing the French situation to that in other countries as regards the teaching of economics and social sciences in high school . The second may imply to investigate deeper about teachers’ training and practices about such issues.

**Practical implications:** The other aim of this text is raising debates about the objectives of teaching economics and other social sciences in high school in a context where school is urge to strengthen citizenship as well as preparing for higher education and professional life..

**Keywords:** Economics, pluralism, France, high school, methods, social sciences, active pedagogy.

**1. Introduction**

In 1967 a new subject was introduced in the French high school: “introduction to economic and social facts”. This new teaching was created as part of a larger school reform conducted by the National Education Minister, Christian Fouchet. It was soon renamed “Economic and Social Sciences” (*Sciences économiques et sociales -* SES) and was animated by a “desire to modernise the school and open it up to the contemporary world” (Chatel, 1993, p. 7). To do so, the designers choose to emphasize two dimensions: the first is overcoming the existing disciplinary divisions in the academic sphere and favouring an entry by "objects". This means that each social phenomenon is studied in their different dimensions (economic social, political, historical, etc.) by mobilizing the tools and knowledge established by the various social sciences - including economics. The second specificity lies in the primacy of an active pedagogy that favours studying documents and dialogue course rather than lecture and dictation. The study of social sciences, economics, politics, etc. means to build an intellectual posture, allowing students to question their own representations and those conveyed in their environment using methods, tools and knowledge established by researchers in the corresponding disciplines, not forgetting that, although one paradigm usually dominates at a given moment, all knowledge is provisional (Kuhn, 1962). The first programs in 1967 were accompanied by the following official instructions: "the originality of this teaching is undoubtedly to lead to the knowledge of our current societies and their mechanisms, to establish an uncertain secondary relationship between culture and economic and social realities. But this knowledge can only be gradually introduced: to ensure the formation of an "experimental" mind, these are the most reasonable objectives of this new discipline" (MEN, 1967).

The openness to the socio-economic world, intellectual rigour and attention to pluralism combination clearly aims at strengthening citizenship among pupils. Nevertheless, the designers of this teaching specified that "the economic and social initiation is not the equivalent of a civic education common to all sections of the second degree" (*Ibid.*), but takes place among the "fundamental disciplines” and "defines one section" of the general high school, which reflects one of the lasting ambiguities of the SES: its opportunity to generalize the teaching to all the streams of the school, as it happens with history-geography or philosophy. The current objectives set out in the preamble of the programs are stated in significant order: "to enable students to progressively appropriate the concepts, methods and essential problems of three social sciences", "to prepare students for the pursuit post-baccalaureate" and finally "to contribute to their civic education" (MEN, 2013). Although these three goals can by no means be considered as exclusive, and may even appear complementary, a certain number of tensions emerge between them as shown by the almost uninterrupted controversies that SES teaching has raised since its creation.

Indeed, despite these apparently consensual and “reasonable objectives”, this new discipline has soon been under several attacks aiming at changing its curricula or removing it altogether. This article details the struggles for defining a “good” economics curriculum in high school, its main actors and their motivations. Its core thesis is that such struggles are actually inseparably epistemological, pedagogical and political and and have decisively fostered the development of a school discipline – not to say a specific “school culture” (Chevrel, 1998) – relatively autonomous from the academic fields it mobilizes. The specific culture, largely maintained by the SES teachers' association, rests on two important pillars: the crossing of disciplinary views on different problematic social phenomena and the use of active methods in the name of pluralism and the training of citizens. Such slogans are ambiguous enough to bring together the majority of teachers, but they do not extinguish debates and research into the best practices for addressing social inequalities in learning.

The materials supporting the following statements lie upon a ten years participatory observation among SES teachers – and especially inside the SES teachers association (APSES) - , including the regular reading of several mailing lists among this professional group; around forty semi-directive formal interviews with SES teachers from different backgrounds and generations in 3 french academic areas (Paris-Créteil-Versailles, Lyon and Lille)[[1]](#endnote-2) and with some of prominent figures of the history of the SES; completed by the study of different public and private archives concerning the discipline, including curricula and official reports.

**2. Introduction of SES: context, missions and first controversies.**

When SES was created, economy was already taught in high school since 1952 through a discipline then called Economic Techniques of Management (EMT), to which is dedicated a baccalaureate section[[2]](#endnote-3). But, while it is "implanted in technical education, taught by teachers of technical education, for students of technical education" (Chatel, 2015, p. 35), this initiation teaching to economic and social facts is it intended for students of the general streams. It was also assigned a specific section among the five created in the new high school organization carried by the than Minister of Education Christian Fouchet in 1965. This so-called “B” series comes directly between the A (letters) and C (exact sciences), conferring on the SES the status of a "third culture" alongside the literary and scientific ones[[3]](#endnote-4). This development did not come without some debate in the academic sphere as Elisabeth Chatel points out, but governmental decisions were ultimately taken by those against the status quo. We should say that, at the time, the school of the Annals founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre that pleaded for a “decompartmentalization” of the humanities and social sciences, enjoyed a considerable aura, starting with its leader Fernand Braudel.

The than ministry entrusts the task of setting up the new teaching to his closest collaborator, Charles Morazé. He recruited a geographer, Marcel Roncayolo, and an economy historian, Guy Palmade, to lead the work. The first coordinates the writing of the programs while the second is appointed dean of the general inspection of the discipline. Around them a commission, composed of researchers and “economic or political actors" representing the different academic disciplines covered by the SES is also gathered, with a certain concern for pluralism (but not for gender equality, or social diversity), as figures as different as the sociologist then close to the workers’ movement Alain Touraine the liberal economist Jean-Claude Casanova and the leader of the "second left" and future French Prime Minister, Michel Rocard can be found. However, they quickly agree on the primary objective beyond their differences: "to give a teaching of the modern world, of the world in which they found themselves - and not only of our industrialized world - to the young people who passed the *bac* [*calauréat*]; [...] to put them back in their time and not only in past historical epochs ", which was summed up by a slogan then in use in the group: "We must make them capable of reading *Le Monde*" (Marcel Roncayolo, interviewed on January 22, 2013). The SES thus represented quite the "opposite of a professional education", which was turned towards the acquisition of techniques and a profession for a short-term insertion in the "market" of work. The SES is then primarily addressed to a relatively small minority of students dedicated to long studies and therefore requiring above all a certain number of intellectual reflexes associated with a solid general culture[[4]](#endnote-5).

* 1. *Mobilizing academic disciplines: between multi- and transdisciplinarity*

In the changing society of the “Glorious Thirty” (Fourastié, 1979) – the three decades of strong economic growth and low unemployment rate in France as well as in other industrialized countries -, the social sciences became more and more seen as indispensable to the luggage of the “honest man” (and woman !). The SES thus adopt a "multi-transdisciplinarity"[[5]](#endnote-6) (Chatel, 1993) which aims to not only associate but truly integrate economics with the other social sciences thus allowing a “problem-object” to be studied in its multiple dimensions -economic, sociological, political, anthropological and historical- even though "economics dominates at all levels of class" (*Ibid.*, p. 22). These objects must echo as much as possible the problems of the time and the concerns of students, not without refining. “Family”, “population”, “human needs and consumption”, or “labour and economic activities” are some of the justifiable objects of such an integrative approach in the first programs. As the official instructions of 1967 accompanying these programs further specify: "Economic and social education presupposes the knowledge of a vocabulary, of a limited number of rigorously defined concepts, as is necessary for elementary manipulation, reading the encrypted data and their graphical expression; in short, a language that should be familiar to students ". But, they add immediately: "This language is difficult to define, because this teaching is different from other disciplines of second degree, as it corresponds to several academic disciplines with orders, concepts and methods of their own. But it would be dangerous to engage pupils in premature specialization, even though they do not possess the basic methods of working and thinking. The introduction to economic and social facts must, while responding to an obvious curiosity among students, facilitate the acquisition of these methods: critical observation, use of quantitative study, reading books and surveys ground "(MEN, 1967). It is therefore a clever mix between the description and analysis of current social phenomena on one hand and the transmission of knowledge and methods from the academic disciplines on the other. In any case, the hierarchy between these objectives is clearly affirmed by the same text: "It is therefore less a question of accumulating knowledge than of creating in pupils a certain intellectual attitude", further specifying that "the encyclopedism of facts is to banish. But it is necessary to establish a certain relativity of the phenomena, to take a certain measure of the distances, the differences, and, if necessary, of the permanences. Maybe to understand the mechanism of certain passages or mutations” (*Ibid.*).

* 1. *Teaching intellectual methods before knowledges.*

Methodology plays a major role in this teaching: its first goal is to transmit to the students rigorous methods of analysing and reasoning. But the teachers themselves are required to deploy strong educational know-how insofar as they have to work on social representations. Both of them, students and teachers, are actually asked to adopt the same posture: experimentation. Students are thus invited to confront their direct observations, drawn from their own experience or aroused by the teacher, with indirect observations drawn from statistical or textual documents, which enables them, according to the official text, "to pass of the immediate environment, - point of useful but not exclusive application of this teaching- to a less close world". For their part, the teachers are summoned to enrol in a "continuous pedagogical research", and to be attentive to their pedagogical progression while caring to respect a "gradation" from one class to another: "Gradation according to the themes but even more according to the more or less complex levels of description and analysis ". It is up to them, above all, to establish a quasi-permanent dialogue, with and between the pupils, but also between them and the documents: "The very definition of this teaching does not make it possible to distinguish between a theoretical lecture and application exercises. On the contrary, it is desirable that in most cases the study of a theme should be based on a concrete analysis, a set of observations, a comparison of statistics or texts. The interest of this teaching is, indeed, to gradually clear rules of reasoning and analysis”. It is nevertheless pointed out to the teachers that they must be attentive to giving the "grids" of analysis, that is to say the tools of description and analysis that they do not necessarily have[[6]](#endnote-7), and that "the proposed themes do not lend themselves to this method as well". Still, "under these reservations", the Initiation to the economic and social facts demands "a constant exchange between teachers and students, between concrete data and notions, the teacher intervening at the" strategic points "to guide the students, to make up for their information or reasoning failures, to push them to go beyond superficial analyses, and to provide them with definitions, critical and indispensable schemas ". In sum, summarizes Marcel Roncayolo: for the students, "it is not a question of receiving a teaching, but of participating in it" (quoted interview). This original project does not, of course, presume actual practices of teachers at that time or today, the diversity of which too few field studies have shown (Deauviau, 2009). However, to this day it continues to crystallize representations and debates around the teaching of the SES, which partly conceal certain issues.

* 1. *The first attacks from within the State apparatus.*

Despite all the efforts of its architects, this founding project never allures unanimity in favour of it. Oppositions have actually never stopped expressing since its very conception. The commission set up to develop this new teaching is indeed already divided by sharp disagreements between its members. Some professors of the faculty of economics or law as well as the representatives of the general inspection of Economic Techniques and Management write proposals for programs making it a propaedeutic to university teaching focused on the transmission of tools and techniques –mathematical in particular –, then eliminating any other discipline but economics as it is taught in the University (Chatel, 2015, pp. 43-44 and 46). Nevertheless, these alternative projects are finally dismissed for the benefit of the "integrative social sciences" line defended by Charles Morazé himself The first attacks against the SES thus actually came from within the national education system and the State apparatus as soon as this new school discipline was born. Teachers’ unions were for instance reluctant to such an innovation, given all the uncertainties that surrounded its implementation, as well as teachers disciplinary associations, defending their own threatened borders, such as the Association of Philosophy Teachers who launched an appeal to the government entitled "For the safeguarding of the philosophy class" asking for the burial of the project while asserting that their teaching already addressed the issues claimed by the SES. It wassigned by several thousand people, including major intellectual personalities of the time such as Louis Althusser, Françoise Dolto or Raymond Aron, but eventually failed after a close governmential arbitration (Chatel, 2016). Opponents even could be found among the teachers recruited to teach the new subject and coming from EMT or History-Geography, who also considered that the new teaching threatened to take the noblest part of their teaching (Henri Lanta, former teacher and inspector of EMT who became one of the first teacher and general inspector of SES, interviewed on December 20, 2012).

1. **The never ending struggles for defining the SES curricula.**

The first attacks occurred in 1979 and, significantly, came from the heart of the state itself, from its very summit to be precise. The then Prime Minister, Raymond Barre, also a university professor in economics, then confided to Joel Bourdin, professor of economics and management at the University of Dakar[[7]](#endnote-8) drafting an audit of SES for a new reform of the high school system. In his report, Bourdin sharply criticized both the multidisciplinarity and the active pedagogy of the SES and advocated their outright disappearance as well as that of the B series, which he qualified as "channel of reception of the rejections of the other series ". These conclusions elicited considerable mobilization from SES teachers, coordinated in particular by their professional association, the APSES, created in 1971. It launched a two-day strike for all SES teachers and organized a national demonstration under the catchphrase of the “fight for an adjective" (the "social" in SES) in Paris on June 2, 1980, which ended at the Labour Exchange with a series of speeches by famous “constituent members” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) who brought their "symbolic capital", as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Attali, Francoise Héritier or Edmond Malinvaud, Professor in economics at the College de France.

* 1. *The building of a specific “repertoire of collective action”.*

The then president of the APSES emphasizes the importance of the social capital shared by his colleagues, that is to say the resources related to the personal relations of ones and others knotted during their studies or their professional practice in particular- counting the son of the Prime Minister among his students, as well as an intensive solicitation of personalities with an important academic aura to sign their various petitions for the defence of the SES . [[8]](#endnote-9)They particularly take care to sollicit academics from different schools of thought by trying to convince them that the defence of SES also serves their own interest (Robert Jammes, interviewed on December 9, 2011). This advocacy of pluralism at all scales can also be found in a series of about fifteen posters produced by APSES that teachers are invited to post in the classrooms and printed on tee-shirts that APSES constituents wear until today during their gatherings. There are represented different guardianship figures from the SES ranging from Pierre Bourdieu (exclaiming "SES, it's my habitus") and Karl Marx ("SES, it's capital") to Friedrich Von Hayek ("My freedom to think this is the SES") and Gary Becker ("SES for a better human capital"). Thus we can notice that this peculiar group has invented its own “protest action repertoire” (Tilly, 1986), and

the 1980 demonstration still work as a “founding myth” that keeps the group of the SES teachers together alongside with the feeling of being under permanent attacks, much more than sharing a professional ideology about what to teach and how to teach it, exactly as other researchers have shown about local policy actors in France (Desage & Godard, 2005). Although most of the practising teachers are too young to have participated, I have often heard about the 1980 events in interviews or during the APSES meetings observed. One of the APSES leader exclaimed significantly during a meeting of the association's director committee[[9]](#endnote-10): "we are a social movement", what aroused the enthusiasm of many presents (Field notes, October 15, 2017).

* 1. *A progressive compartmentalisation of the economy in relation to other social sciences in curricula.*

This mobilization gets enough echo for the Ministry of Education to set up a new commission including the president of the APSES but also Joel Bourdin himself. This one sees his previous report totally disavowed and the place of the SES is even strengthened, entering the common core of the 2nd class while an option is proposed to the pupils of the series A and C. The commission also prepares the first programs revision that intervene in 1982. It also increases the place of the economy while emphasizing the macroeconomic scale and the "measurement of economic and social facts" on the theoretical analyses. From this date, the separation between the economic and sociological dimensions continues to grow while the historical dimension shrinks, even though the founders of the discipline held up to it (Chatel & Grosse, 2015, p. 37). Six years later, in 1988, the programs are again changed and for the first time make explicit reference to academic disciplines while the requirement to prepare students for higher studies is formulated (Chatel & Grosse, 2002, p. 132). It must be said that, at the same time, attacks against the discipline have not stopped and have even increased still from inside the State apparatus. At this time, some academic economists attack the "scientific" quality of SES in line with the Bourdin report (Chatel & Grosse, 2015, p. 37), but a new commission convened on the occasion of the creation by the National Council of programs in 1989. Lead by Edmond Malinvaud, its final report which reinforces the SES by distinguishing its "cultural aim" from the "academic aim" of the superior (*Ibid.*). Henri Lanta, then member of the commission, says that Malinvaud "repeated that in the programs of SES he had spotted at least 10 ‘big questions’ which he said he was unable to answer. It was obviously not difficult to point out that advancing students' understanding of economic and social facts and mechanisms did not require College de France level answers" (Quoted interview). The new programs adopted from 1993 as part of the Jospin reform that change the name of the B series to ES (social and economic) seem to reinforce the initial project, by adopting an organization around "integrating concepts", leaving more space for the sociological dimension as well as interdisciplinarity and the study of current events. But at the same time they also reinforce in practice the partition between these disciplines and the concern accorded to "scholarly knowledge" (Chatel & Grosse, 2015, p. 38).

* 1. *A new injunction: to transmit a “positive” vision of market and firms.*

The following attacks will mainly emanate from outside the Ministry of Education, and more particularly from the employers and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. In 2006, the latter set up a Council for the dissemination of economic culture (Codice), bringing together journalists, company managers, senior officials and economists. Together they control several opinion polls that build a new public problem: the supposed "economic inculture of the French". "Obviously, it is not about the ‘economy’ that statisticians and senior officials like, the large aggregates used as tools for steering public action, and even less the ‘economy’ of everyday life, as it could be apprehended by employees looking at their payroll, worried about the level of reimbursement of their medical expenses or imagining the purchase of a home. It is rather about the economy apprehended through the glasses of the dominant economic actors of the moment (big companies, professionals of the financial sector, state agencies of regulation of the markets) which enjoy a privileged access" (Rozier, 2009, p. 67). The SES, which actually affect only a minority of high school students, are at the forefront of the designated accused of this lack of knowledge coupled with hostility to the market economy and entrepreneurship. In fact, for nearly three decades several employers' organizations, most prominently the Institute of Enterprise (IDE) created in 1975, take a close interest in the teaching of SES in an attempt to influence it in a direction that it considers more favourable to the market economy.

Through its "Teachers-Companies" program, the IDE aims to "bring together" each other by offering them educational materials to the first, via a dedicated website, but also training courses, especially the ”*Entretiens Enseignants-Entreprises*” (Teachers-Companies Meetings)[[10]](#endnote-11), and even internships in companies. Other associations close to the French Companies Movement (MEDEF), the major employers Union in France, such as the so-called "Positive Enterprise" or "Institute for Economic and Fiscal Research", periodically publish "studies" based on SES manuals rather than programs. They denounce the "reductive" and "pessimistic" vision of "business" and "market”. The section "Political Economy, Statistics and Finance" of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (ASMP), part of the prestigious Institute de France (Delmas, 2006), is another hotbed of attacks against SES. It released a very critical report against the ES series in 2008 led by Yvon Gattaz, former president of the major employers’organization and founding president of an association called "Youth and Enterprise", who also firmly criticizes SES. At the end of 2016, this institution commissioned eight "international" economists (that is to say actually not working in France) an audit of the SES manuals from a given publisher each. Their reports are generally quite measured in their conclusions, even laudatory for some, but the ASMP invites the two most critical rapporteurs at two symposia it organizes in January and February 2017. Amongst them, Yann Coatelem, an economist at the bank Citygroup that said that “nowadays no one speaks of social classes" and then advocated to refocus on the micro-economy and in particular the study of market by future company executives, and by the future citizen who will have to validate structural reforms" (observation during the conference “Teaching economics in high school”, ASMP, Paris, January 30, 2017).

The current president of this section of the ASMP, Michel Pébereau alone embodies the permeability of the public and private spheres where the content of the ESS is called into question. Former member of the cabinets of right-wing ministers of Finance, he taught economics at Sciences-Po while chairing the Foundation ruling this elite school, and led the privatization of the BNP-Paribas Group in 1993 before chairing its board of directorsfor 20 years, also serving on the boards of several huge french companies. President of the Institute of Enterprise between 2005 and 2010, this multipositional agent (Boltanski, 1973) was appointed to the High Council of Education at its creation in 2005 and shortly afterwards participated in the work of the commission chaired by the Professor in Economics at the College de France Roger Guesnerie, charged to audit the manuals and programs of SES. The report that it gives at the beginning of July 2008 recognizes the "solidity of the rooting" of the teaching of SES in high school, its "attractiveness" and the good student and professional integration of ES graduates. But its authors also affirm the need to bring it towards "excellence" and accumulate a series of criticisms joining the employers' diagnoses. They write that the programs "put more emphasis on the problems of our society and little on its successes", criticize the fact that programs are too busy, but at the same time note a number of shortcomings. The company and the market would suffer in particular from insufficient treatment in their eyes while sociology would often be "too abstract, too deterministic and too compassionate". Following this report, a group of "experts" chaired by the academic economist Jacques Le Cacheux, has been set up to rewrite the programs.

These new programs, which came into effect from the 2010, have ratified the partitioning between economics and other social sciences, , with a limited portion nevertheless left to "crossed views" . To each discipline its objects, as if the sociologists had nothing to bring on the understanding of the concrete markets, the currency or the firms, whereas social classes or conflicts would have no relevance in the economic analyses. . It is then a question of privileging the transmission of "scholarly" knowledge upon student experience, be that direct or indirect. The APSES, whose president resigned from the commission like some other members in reaction to the "employer influences" within it (David, 2012), finally denounces "the encyclopedism" of the programs, that is to say the inflation of the number of notions imposed by this new program, as well as the new tests of the baccalaureate who favour the restitution of knowledge on the confrontation of ideas, and thus strongly frame learning. The APSES also criticizes the lack of pluralism of these programs. By separating economics from other social sciences and by reproducing the division between micro and macroeconomics, they would in fact have given pride of place to mainstream theory to the detriment of heterodox approaches[[11]](#endnote-12). Such a position has also been translated in recent years with associations of researchers and students in economics demanding more pluralism in recruitment and economics courses In University, such as the *Association française d’économie politique* (AFEP) and PEPS-économie. Both have in common to take care to specify that they are not "against" neo-classical theory but asks that it take its rightful place alongside the other schools of thought, but also to ask that the SES be taken as models for a "necessary" reorganisation of the first years of the faculties of economics[[12]](#endnote-13), reversing in a way the requirements of those who want on the contrary to align the SES with the university.

1. **The issue of pluralism among the SES teachers.**
   1. *A split among the discipline itself.*

If the correlation between the curricular evolution of the SES and the growing lobbying of certain employer groups appears quite obvious, its precise channels deserve to be studied more precisely (Rozier, 2018). We can nevertheless hypothesize that the influence of the latter is exerted less by direct lobbying than by the vector of shared moments of sociability where the compatibility of the habitus of one and the other plays a full role, such as during the *Entretiens-Enseignants-Entreprises* where the General Inspection is well represented. It would, however, be far too simplistic to present the SES as a fortress under siege against attacks by liberal lobbies. There are also divisions among teachers themselves about the relevance of the founding project and particularly the object-based approach. Its main opponent is a former active member of the APSES, Alain Beitone, for whom SES must be more modelled on the knowledge taught at university under the theory of didactic transposition (Chevallard, 1991). Its very designer blames more or less implicitly the APSES to defend an “solipsiste” and “endogenous knowledge” deaf to academic evolutions (Chevallard, 1997). Alain Beitone and his supporters, who formed an association competing with the APSES named *Action SES* in 1998[[13]](#endnote-14), consider that:

“There are three conceptions of what the school of tomorrow should be: a conservative, even reactionary position, which formulates a discourse of restoration of an idealized past and which does not resign itself to the opening of middle school, high school and university to a growing proportion of an age group; a falsely modernist position which proposes to respond to the massification of secondary schools by a downward revision of educational content and by emphasising a socio-educational dimension; a position which considers that access to knowledge for all is a requirement of democracy and that for this it is necessary to renew the forms of school organisation, transform teaching methods and deepen didactic reflection” (Orientation Report of *Action SES*, 1999).

This group naturally claims the latter while implicitly attributing the second to the APSES. This split occured during another educational reform threatening the ES series with extinction, and can then be seen as an attempt to legitimize the school discipline. It seems nonetheless to sacrifice the issue of pluralism, or more precisely the question of the hegemony of neoclassicism, in passing:”The conception of the ‘normal science’ of Kuhn (a dominant paradigm between two ‘scientific revolutions’), on the other hand, seems to be particularly unsuited to economics” (Beitone & Legardez, p. 35), even though these authors claim a “multi-paradigmatic” approach. More recently, a former leader of *Actiion SES* wrote in defense of the latter SES programs in the drafting of which Alain Beitone played a key role, that a ”characteristic feature of the ‘spirit of SES’ is its penchant for heterodoxy, or more precisely for a reading of theoretical oppositions within the economy that gives the opposition between the ‘dominant economy’ and the ‘heterodoxies’ a central place” (Buisson-Fenêt, 2012). But according to this author, “In economics as in sociology, the ‘war of the great paradigms’ has considerably weakened. It is rather difficult to specify what a Keynesian or a neoclassical is today”. He thus invites to a renewal of pedagogical practices inspired for instance by the textbooks in microeconomics where can be found “playful sessions by mobilizing ‘economic games’ or enigma solving with students born from the observation of empirical data”. Such proposals are in line with those put forward by employers' lobbies, such as the animation of mini-enterprises in classrooms, the effects of which on pupils nevertheless deserve further investigation (Rozier, 2014).

*4.2. A majority of teachers committed to pluralism and critical of an overly academic approach.*

This opposition among SES teachers actually does not refer to political stances. Alain Beitone defines himself as a “far-left-winger” (Interview by Cloé Gobert[[14]](#endnote-15), July 8, 2013), while some of his supporters militate to the Socialist Party of the alterglobalist association ATTAC. On the other hand, APSES members are found throughout the union and political spectrum, which complicates relations between the association and the teachers' unions (Llobet & Martinache, 2014). Be that as it may, one may wonder why the APSES continues to gather so many SES teachers (2100 out of around 5500 SES teachers) when the Beitone supporters barely exceeds a hundred, essentially former students of the latter. Beyond the interpersonal dimension, we can hypothesize that APSES has succeeded in creating and maintaining a professional culture around its discipline that is both sufficiently vague and distinctive to be cohesive and moreover resonates with the professional socialization of its members.

Whatever their position regarding the “APSES-Beitone debate”, all the teachers interviewed declare themselves very attached both to social sciences, they describe however more like a “way of looking at the world”, and pedagogy, and are convinced that one cannot teach in high school the same way one teach in University. Some explain that they literally “fell in love” with SES during their own schooling, but meanwhile often reproach their own teachers for having lacked of pedagogy. Contrary to what one might think, the trigger for teaching did not always occur in high school, but often at University, through the meeting of one or several particularly "open" teacher who made them discover alternative visions of economics:

““At the University, I took Jean-Claude Delaunay's [a marxist economist] classes, and for me it was a revelation, compared to my SES teaching in high school. We had a teacher who without saying it taught us [economic] liberalism during the two years we had it. We didn't even know it was called the liberal economy, it was the natural functioning of the economy” (Man, 55, certifié[[15]](#endnote-16), teacher for 34 years, non-member of APSES, interviewed on July 17, 2013).

For some, the "vocation" came even later, after having begun (or achieved) a Phd thesis. They explain that they had turned to SES teaching because they did not feel comfortable with the excessive specialisation required by research, but also with the need to affiliate to a theoretic paradigm:

“It's my ecumenical side, which makes me uncomfortable in research, because I can't find a chapel, I kind of like everybody. And so, I can't position myself. When I was doing my introductory sociology classes, I was really trying to defend all the authors. I think that's really the beauty of the thing. I'm not here to impose something on the students” (Woman, 33, agrégée, abandoned a PhD in sociology, SES teacher for 1 year in a deprived area, non-member of APSES but “symathisant”, interviewed on April 29, 2011).

Such justification may naturally be interpreted as “necessity made virtuous”, as the great reverence, not to say fascination, we could observe from SES teachers every time they face researchers. In the words of one interviewee, to some extent SES teachers are to academics what general practitioners are to medical specialists. They have a less in-depth but more general vision of economic and social sciences. And even if they do not always realize it, they are also researchers in their own way when they select documents and information to feed their courses, but also when they experiment with pedagogical devices to adapt to their public. Like in the previous extract, as if they had internalized accusations of influencing students, the first professional virtue all the SES teachers put forward is their "axiological neutrality", often quoting Max Weber. They therefore put their honour in presenting all the arguments in the debate on the phenomenon under study, and often boast that their students cannot guess their political opinions. Others prefer conversely make them explicit as if not to mislead the pupils:

"I always present the discussions between liberals and keynesians etc., the pupils quickly understand which side I am on, I think. but I always explain to them, I prefer to be honest than pseudo-neutral, because I don't see how I could be neutral. I do the whole Liberal theory well, and then I always end up with a little ironical remark. And then the others theories or approaches. But it is true that I have a conception of the profession where my goal is not so much to learn a list of knowledge, but to provoke them so that they can think by themselves. I like to come to class and tell them things like 'Unemployed people are lazy' and see how they react. Unfortunately, some often agree... At the beginning, I was very rigorous during my lessons. Now, I'm still, I'm attached to that: at the end of the year, students normally have two well filled notebooks. But I like when classes are animated, when they put the pen down and follow, that they think at the same time what. I'm not trying to convince them. If I make a remark that is not politically neutral, I tell them 'that is not neutral, but your point of view isn’t either’. Now Im’ sure they can differentiate a left-wing speech from a right-wing one” (Man, 34, agrégé, teacher in a deprived area, interviewed on June 27, 2008).

This taste for presenting and even provoking controversies in classes actually appears as a way to adapt to teenagers teachers consider unable to reach too high a degree of abstraction. Even this teacher who works in a privileged private-school and defines herself as “pro-business” and “favourable to change” as regards curricula explains some months after the last programs reform:

"There are some notions that were studied on in the final year, which will now be worked on in Year 12. Honestly, I'm going to have a hard time, and I'm still wondering today: how am I going to bring a Year 12 student, given how little they're interested in current affairs, to explain comparative advantages for example. Already a senior student has a little trouble mastering these notions. It's gonna be pretty tough on some things. I don't always find it suitable for a 15-year-old pupil who is more interested in video games, his mobile phone and Facebook than in the world around him" (Woman, 32, agrégée, teacher for 8 years, non-member of APSES, interviewed on June 14, 2011)

Beyond that, such a pragmatism nonetheless also corresponds more deeply to the way these teachers see their role: not simply to transmit established knowledge, but to help shape citizens by cultivating their curiosity for the world around them and equipping them with corresponding intellectual methods. From this point of view, scientific knowledge is considered as a tool, not as the purpose, As explained an interviewee: “This year, I really wanted to follow [the official program], but rapidly, it pissed them off, it pissed me off, and I’m sure they won't remember anything. While they are full of questions about how the economy works and what’s happening in the world !”.

In the same time, many SES teachers consider their knowledge gives them a particular social mission, consisting in “denaturalizing certai categories of thought”, be those economic or social. But they don’t consider this as a political action. This mission often goes beyond the classroom: some have created blogs where they post and comment on scientific articles, others accompany their students as jurors for the best SES book or comic book of the year award and certain even organize with their pupils conferences involving economic researchers or actors. In all of these initiatives, they shall endeavour to respect as far as possible the pluralism of ideas. One of the most prominent of these “SES entrepreneurs” who created some years ago an economics festival during a whole week where the students of his high school are involved until the presentation of the lectures explains:

“I really try to have a wide variety of speakers. A wide variety of schools of thought […] One of the very first was Michel Pébereau. It was right after the financial crisis and the pupils had a lot of questions. In addition, it was interesting to see him deliver his speech, because he was the one who criticized the SES handbooks. I was even detered to invite him, because I was bringing the wolf into the sheepfold I just answer it would be very interesting to put him the position of teaching teenagers” (Man, 55, teacher for 34 years, non-member of APSES but “sympathisant”).

To a certain extent, even though SES teachers may sometimes feel an “inferiority complex” as regards academic researchers as regards “scholarly knowledge” (what can besides be discussed), they are nevertheless aware they master a “knowledge about teaching” and a “curricular knowledge” (Deauviau, 2009, pp. 202-203), they are thus eager to promote. Attention to pluralism and debates belong to these ones, what may contribute to explain they don’t adhere in majority to the positions defended by Alain Beitone, which may be perceived as placing an exclusive emphasis on scholarly knowledge”.

Nevertheless, as useful it is may be considered, this intern controversies among SES teachers actually appear a little be artificial and contribute to conceal other no less crucial issues.

*4.3. Some quite artificial divisions hiding other issues ?*

Even more than the employer lobbies, Alain Beitone and his supporters seem to personalize the main enemy of the SES, at least among the most acculturated of its members. Both camps are aggressively, even insultingly, invective on the professional mailing lists, without succeeding in establishing a real debate about curricula and pedagogical practices. A close scrutiny on their respective writings and discussions nevertheless suggest most of their antagonisms lay more on charicatures and misunderstandings than real bones of contentions. On the one hand, Alain Beitone himself does not totally reject a kind of inductive pedagogy based on problem-questions that pupils ask themselves, even if it has to be framed by scientific concepts

“Favour an investigation-structuring approach: […] It is not a question of sinking into the discussion of coffee trade or ideological debates, but of showing students that all scientific knowledge is an answer to a question. Nor is it a question of believing that students invent knowledge in the classroom. There is a body of knowledge in which students need to be trained. But the pedagogical approach, if we want students to engage in learning, must consist of starting from these questions (investigation) to appropriate the knowledge, including conceptual and theoretical, that are necessary to interpret reality (structuring)” (Beitone, 2010 quoted by Gobert, 2009, p. 147).

On the other hand, APSES leaders are far from being the “anti-scientific relativists” or “leftist activists” their opponents often describe. Protesting against the disconnect between economics and sociology in the latter programs, they indeed decide to build a so-called “bypass program” for Year 12 reorganizing the elements of the official program by objects crossing sociological and economic points of view. They accompanied this programme with a free online textbook built by the teachers themselves, requesting validation of each chapter by university researchers from various schools of thought and also matching each with a cross-interview between an economist and a sociologist. More anecdotally, APSES members APSES members systematically correct their interlocutors when they are designated as professors of economics, insisting on "sciences" as much as "social". We could even hear one of the former APSES national president recently telling that she had attended a meeting organized by her head teacher for science teachers[implicitly exact sciences] to defend the seriousness of her own discipline, triggering the approving laughter of her colleagues.

The core of the divergence may actually lie less in the opportunity to cross disciplinary points of view upon given objects than in the evolutionary vision of science that animates Alain Beitone:

“All disciplines borrow things from other disciplines. There are political scientists who work with the neoclassical conceptual apparatus, to lead economic analyses of democracy for example. In the same way that economists borrow from sociologists, sociologists from economists, physicists from chemists, etc. [But] to be validated, a knowledge must be subjected to the test of scientific debates, which can only be conducted by people who are competent in the field, i.e. a physicist cannot participate in the evaluation of a political science thesis, and so on. Or even biology for that matter. So specialization is a condition for the existence of scientific debates between people who are experts in their respective fields” (Alain Beitone, quoted interview)

Strongly questioned by some sociology of science works, starting with those of Bruno Latour (De Vries, 2016), this approach clearly excludes discussions of science by lay persons, especially students. It has the merit of avoiding the frequent confusion between “prescribed knowledge” and “experiential knowledge” (Deauviau, 2009, pp. 71-73), which are at the root of many cognitive misunderstandings on the part of students, and therefore of academic difficulties, particularly for disadvantaged students (Bautier & Rochex, 1998). It risks however leaving students in a position of passive reverence towards knowledge and prevent them from really appropriating it. Moreover, even though that is not the purpose of its defenders, who like to introduce themselves as Economic and Sociology instead of SES teachers, this stance does no more justify why economics should be taught alongside with other social sciences. It can thus open the way to a separation of both disciplines desired by employers' lobbies.

It can also be discussed from an epistemological point of view, inasmuch as it refers to the haunting debate concerning the unity of the social sciences (Myrdal, 1975 ; Nachane, 2015 ; Cat, 2017). In his latest book, Bernard Lahire proposes an alternative vision of scientific progress that puts the growing specialisation of research fields under tension in an inspiriing way:

“The history of scientific progress is made up of periods of specialization during which researchers work on specific points in a dispersed and uncoordinated manner (in different disciplines and in different sectors of each of these disciplines), and periods of synthesis in which researchers gather and articulate what was scattered, translate into a common language all the significant results written in a multitude of disciplinary dialects, and develop integrating theories or synthetic models” (Lahire, 2018, p.16).

Be that as it may, there is certainly a way to maintain together scientific rigour, interdisciplinarity, pluralism, student interest and education for citizenship, while striving to contain social inequalities in learning. Curriculum developers could, for example, draw more inspiration from research programmes on *Socially Vivid Issues*, which refer to “complex and interdisciplinary issues that do not have a single, universal solution because they are based on distributed and situated knowledge” (Simmoneaux & Calmettes, 2013). Three levels of “vividness” (Legardez & Simmoneaux, 2006): in society (it is the subject of controversy in public debate); in the reference knowledge it concerns (often opposing experts and paradigms) and finally in school knowledge (insofar as teachers may feel helpless to deal with them). There is no need to explain that socio-economic life is full of such issues, which also imply an enhanced dialogue with other sciences.. In this respect, in addition to curricula and educational devices, teacher training also certainly deserves to be rethought in France. As Jérôme Deauviau clearly shown, the use of dialogue during classes has particularly ambiguous effects depending on teachers' practices. However, these appear to be closely linked both to the seniority and diversity of their scientific training in the different fields involved, which itself appears to be positively correlated with the ability to make the distinction between scholarly knowledge, curricular knowledge and knowledge about teaching (Deauviau, 2009, pp. 222-225). For teachers too, a more explicit pedagogy during their training appears essential to enable them to avoid socio-cognitive misunderstandings” (Bonnéry, 2007), especially when conflicts arise in class.

1. **Conclusion**

Regardless of the real motivations and intentions of the different actors, the controversies among SES teachers have the interest of highlighting crucial questions brought by the teaching of economics, mirroring those found in neighbouring countries, such as Germany (Szukala, 2015). In a way, it is the eminently Polanyian question of the embedding of economic activities in the other social orders (Polanyi, 2001), which finds here an echo in the educational sphere. The main question raised by SES since their introduction to high school in France lies in the opportunity to articulate or not the economy to other social sciences. In other words, whether to take into account the multiple dimensions of social phenomena, or to focus what is commonly referred to as the only "economic" one. This very debate is raging in the academic sphere where the dominant neoclassical theory tends to oust any other approach. In France, it has been launched by the provocatively entitled essay by Pierre Cahuc and André Zylberberg (2016) where they intend to fight for what they call the "economic denialism". It can also be noted that these hardly evoke the teachers of SES as they actually appear to them as victims of the mystifications of those who dare to question the scientific nature of the standard economy, and in particular the so-called "experimental" methods, namely journalists and especially "heterodox" economists. The latter did not fail to reply in a book refuting with application the different assertions of their "counterparts" (Coriat & al., 2017). From this point of view, it seems more than ever necessary to teach the social sciences, including economics, to enable students to grasp where the scientific character of their approach lies despite an irreducible empiricism. From this point of view, it is thus important in the spirit of the founders of the SES not to be like the idiot of the fable that, when the wise man shows him the moon, look at his finger, and not to focus on the results, but above all on the methods of the social scientists, without concealing the differences which separate them in this matter. In short, to recall that every object is built by the researcher according to his hypotheses and his methods, but that so far "all is not worth".

However, beyond this program, a number of questions remain to be examined as regards SES teaching. What issues need to be studied first, and which ones to leave aside, knowing that the teaching time is necessarily limited and that, as the saying goes, one should not bite more than one can chew? What place should be left to the presentation of theories and their respective hypotheses? Which pedagogy is most likely to stimulate students' interest while reducing the educational inequalities linked to social origin? Should we give priority to the training of citizens on the preparation of higher education and professional activity? What room should students have for critical thinking and how to give the students rigorous enough intellectual tools to avoid falling into a relativism whose current success of "conspiracy theories" and “fake news” in the Internet age shows all the dangers? These are some of those questions which undoubtedly deserve real democratic deliberations, enlightened by the state of research. Be that as it may, one thing seems already certain, the objective of SES teaching cannot be to make students “love” companies or the market – nor any other social realities. But it can at least contribute to raise awareness of the interdependencies inherent in life in society and the dilemmas that confront them. That is to say to pay attention to pluralism between the disciplines of knowledge as well as inside each of them.

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1. These interviews lasted between 1h30 and 3h30 and were structured around several major themes: the educational and professional trajectory the vision of the various disciplines composing the economic and social sciences the way of building one's courses and one's relationship with pupils and colleagues the cultural practices and sociability. Here, it is mainly the passages concerning studies and the relationship to economics and social sciences that will be used. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. In France, high school is traditionally divided between different sectors, where students orientate after Year 10. Some subjects, such as mathematics, literature or history-geography are taught in every sectors, but their content is adapted. Since 1994, Year 11 is common to all students following a general and technological cursus, and then they must orientate themselves towards a given sector (Scientific (S), Literary (L) or Economic and Social (ES) – the only one where they will continue to study SES - as regards the general ones). These must nevertheless disappear in September 2019 in favour of a common core curriculum accompanied by a choice of “specialties”, among which the SES. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. As one of his principal artisans explains, "the idea was to create a section for people who were no longer literary, who were not interested enough in ancient languages, but who were not dedicated to Polytechnique "(Marcel Roncayolo, quoted interview). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. It should be remembered that in 1967 only 15.4% of an age group obtained a high school degree (“baccalauréat”) in France. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. This epistemological ambiguity is important to notice: do the SES mobilize different tools from several social sciences or do they pretend to invent their owns, overcoming the academic borders? It will be then be written “multidisciplinarity” but one must keep this ambiguity in mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. The text of the instructions does not mention it and perhaps its editors are not yet aware of it, but there is also a major stake of social inequalities, between the "heirs" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970) and have a "cultural capital" that is adequate to develop the necessary intellectual tools and students of more popular origin on their own, instead of making "implicit pedagogy" (Berrnstein, 1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. He will later be elected senator from 1989 to 2014 under the major right-wing party label (RPR renamed Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* – UMP – under President Chirac). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. What has been confirmed by several different interviewees. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. The APSES is organised into regional associations corresponding to the official french academic deistricts, Each sends a number of representatives proportional to the number of its members to the national APSES Steering Committee. In a way, this represents the "parliament" of the association. It meets three times a year in addition to the national general assembly and elects from among its members the 11 members of the national bureau, which constitutes the executive body of the association. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. RWhere academic economists, company leaders, journalists and high-level public servants come to speak with (or to be more accurate) in front of an audience of severall hundreds of SES as well as management and economics teachers during two days with the official support of the National Education Ministry, despite its proximity with the MEDEF. Many inspectors not only attend to the event, but help organize it. ,Among the participants of the 2017 edition were for instance the Minister of Education himself, a deputy of the presidential majority who was also a high-level mathematician, the Governor of the Banque de France, as well as several business leaders (Danone, IBM, Engie, etc.), alongside several researchers, all of neoclassical obedience. Such a blurring of the lines between the origin of the speeches made contributes to a more general confusion as to the economic nature and thus contributes to naturalizing a certain approach to the desocialized economy despite the formal existence of discussion between the "experts" and the public. On this point, our own observations of this event join those made elsewhere on other meetings of this type (Angeletti, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. The opposition between a standard economy and a heterodoxy deserves discussion, as does the heterogeneity of the approaches under this label, coined by Allan Gruchy in 1987. Nevertheless, the latter is a banner that brings together many researchers and students who have in common to criticize the unrealistic assumptions of the former that do not sufficiently take into account the social and institutional anchoring of agents. Their shared research agenda may lie upon a definition of economics as the “science of the *social* provisioning process”, whose « explanation involves human agency in a cultural context and social processes in historical time affecting resources, consumption patterns, production and reproduction, and the meaning (or ideology) of market, state, and non-market/state activities engaged in social provisioning” (Lee, 2008). . .. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Comments heard on several occasions, notably during the Etats généraux de l'enseignement de l'économie à l'université organised by PEPS-économie (Field notes, Paris, April 6, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. However, it did not manage to exceed a hundred members, essentially teachers trained by Alain Beitone, and was dissolved after a few years of existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. I waarmly thank Cloé Gobert for having sent me the transcript of some of the interviews conducted for her master (Gobert, 2014), as well as for our rich exchanges. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. There are in France two recruitment competitions to become secondary school teacher: the CAPES (whose holders are qualified as "certified") and the aggregation, more selective, both academically and socially. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)