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Sociology in French High Schools: The Challenge of Teaching Social Issues

Abstract

The aim of the article is to answer the question of what kind of sociology teaching is provided in French lycées. It describes and characterises a state of affairs that has resulted from a process of evolution. The article engages with the wider question of curriculum change, using the tools of sociology to tackle the issue. It illustrates the power of 'school subjects' as institutional forms, just as it reveals their composite and socially constituted nature. It highlights the role of teachers in shaping the changes in the content of this subject, including at the level of the formal curriculum.

Résumé

Cet article cherche à caractériser la sociologie qui est enseignée dans les lycées français. Il décrit un état de choses en évolution. Ce faisant il aborde, avec les outils de la sociologie du curriculum, la vaste question des changements des curricula. Il montre la prégnance de la forme sociale « discipline scolaire » et le caractère à la fois socialement construit et composite des savoirs qu'elle peut contenir. Il éclaire le rôle, souvent méconnu, des professeurs dans la détermination des contenus enseignés y compris ceux qui sont prescrits.

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. A troubled history with a happy end: real sociological content being taught
 - 2.1 The scale of sociology teaching in French secondary schools
 - 2.2 A troubled history
 - 2.3 Curriculum content
 3. Teaching sociology: successes and difficulties in the classroom
 - 3.1 Success
 - 3.2 Difficulties and debate
 4. Concluding remarks
- Bibliography

Keywords

teaching sociology, curriculum change, french lycées, sociology of the school curriculum

1. Introduction

Sociology appeared relatively late in French secondary education. The subject was introduced in the 1960s, when secondary education in France underwent thorough change. This was a period of economic growth and the French economy was opening up to other countries; firms needed more highly qualified workers. The purpose of this educational reform was to extend access to upper secondary education and to modernize teaching and the curriculum, and in particular to put in place new coherent courses of study. As part of this process, a new school subject was introduced under the name of "Economic and social sciences", a discipline focused on the study of social realities; it included some elements of sociology. Perhaps unexpectedly, the sociological part of the subject has been expanding noticeably over the last ten years.

This article will give an insight into the way this subject matter is taught in French secondary schools. It synthesizes previous research by the present author (Chatel 1990; 2002; 2009) and others (Beitone, Decugis-Martini, Legardez 1995, Legardez 2001).

The aim of the article is to answer the question of what kind of sociology teaching is provided in French lycées. It describes and characterises a state of affairs that has resulted from a process of evolution. Nevertheless, in formulating the research question in this way, a certain point of view is being implied, one that involves investigating curriculum content in terms of academic disciplines. We will see that the teaching of sociology in French lycées does not strictly lie within the framework of academic sociology, and any attempt to give an account of it requires a shift of focus away from sociology to social problems, or a toing-and-froing between the two. In attempting to characterise the current situation in the context of the development of the economic and social sciences curriculum, the article engages with the wider question of curriculum change, using the tools of sociology to tackle the issue. The sociology of the curriculum, which was pioneered by Durkheim at the beginning of the 20th century, developed particularly in the UK in the 1970s. The new sociology of education (Forquin 2008) champions the notion that the curriculum is socially constructed. The account we give of the introduction of sociology into French lycées illustrates the way in which the policy of modernising curriculum content that got under way in France with the Fouchet reform of 1966 was to come up against the interests and values of various social groups, which were to attempt to shift the emphasis of the modernisation policy. The political issues associated with these subjects probably have to be taken into account. After all, the



teaching of sociology did give rise to some fairly major controversies involving actors inside as well as outside the education system. Teachers themselves have been important actors in the conflicts that have surrounded the subject. André Chervel (Chervel 1988) approached academic disciplines as institutional forms which, in the case of the French system, form the basis of the education system's cultural creativity. A 'school subject' is not entirely congruent with the academic discipline that it may take as a point of reference. True, it is characterised by its knowledge content, but the development of certain modes of teaching and the existence of a specific body of teachers are also distinctive features of a school subject. As early as the late 1960s, Musgrove (Musgrove 1968) was already analysing a subject's teaching personnel as a social community influencing the content of the subject they taught. Our work on economic and social sciences, the broad subject area within which sociology is taught in French *lycées*, illustrates the power of 'school subjects' as institutional forms, just as it reveals their composite and socially constituted nature. It highlights the role of teachers in shaping the changes in the content of this subject, including at the level of the formal curriculum.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we outline the institutional position of this course and trace the contradictory history of its evolution. The role played by lycée teachers in the subject's development is also outlined here. In the second part, we focus on the teaching of sociology, and in particular on the successes and difficulties inside the classroom. Our concern here is with lesson content, teaching methods and student outcomes. The composite nature of the subject is also highlighted. In the third part, we endeavour to draw general conclusions from this experience of introducing a new subject into the secondary school curriculum with the ultimate aim of developing a theoretical perspective on curriculum change.

2. A troubled history with a happy end: real sociological content being taught

Let us begin with the happy end. Compared with other countries, sociology today occupies a fairly healthy institutional position in the French school system. We will first present some figures on the extent of teaching in this subject in French secondary schools, before going on to tell the story of the introduction of economic and social Sciences into the French secondary school curriculum. Finally, we will outline the content of sociological teaching in French secondary schools today.

2.1 The scale of sociology teaching in French secondary schools

French secondary education includes three differentiated types of studies: vocational, technological and general.

Economic and social studies (ESS) is part of the general education curriculum.

Table 1: Number of students passing each type of baccalaureate:

% of all those passing the baccalaureate in a given year	1995	2007
General baccalaureate	58	54
Technological baccalaureate	28	26
Vocational baccalaureate	14	20
Total number passing all types of baccalaureate	480,654	524,313

Source: French Ministry of Education, "Repères et références statistiques", 2009

General education in upper secondary school involves three different courses of study: literary, scientific, and economic and social studies. At the end of upper secondary education, students take an examination, the baccalaureate. For instance, in 2007, 524,313 young people passed this examination, about 63 % of the year group; Table 1 presents data on the share of the year group taking each type of baccalaureate. Apart from a 2½ hour option in what is known in France as '*la classe de seconde*', or just '*seconde*' (the first year of upper secondary education in France), sociology is taught only in the economics and social stream of the general course of study¹.

How many students are in the ESS course of study? Table 2 shows the relative shares of students taking each course of study in 2007. In national statistics, general and technological courses of study are bracketed together because they are often taught in the same schools and begin after the end of lower secondary education, at around age 16. *Seconde* is less differentiated than the following two years of upper secondary education, known as '*première*' and '*terminale*'.

Table 2: General and technological courses of study in 2007; percentage of students in *classe terminale* (final year)

	General		Technological	
	Literary	Economic and social	Services	Industrial specialities
Scientific	33.4	11.7	20.6	23.9
				9.9

Source: French Ministry of Education, "Repères et références statistiques", 2009

However, economics and social studies is taught during the final three years of secondary education, i.e. in *seconde*, *première* and *terminale*. It begins as an op-

1 Optional courses existed in the literary and scientific streams between 1982 and 1993, but they were abolished.



tion in *seconde*. In 2007, 42.8% of students chose this option, a total of 513,344 students in *seconde*, 98,470 in *première* and 98,035 in *terminale*.

Little time is devoted to the subject in *seconde*, just 8% of total teaching time, or 2½ hours a week. This is not much, considering that the course is offered to a large number of pupils and lasts just one year.

In *première* and *terminale*, students spend much more time studying ESS, as can be seen from Table 3. The actual time devoted to the subject varies depending on whether students restrict themselves to the core modules or whether they take further ESS options instead of advanced options in foreign languages or mathematics applied to social sciences.

Table 3: Time devoted to ESS as percentage of total teaching time in ES general course of study

<i>Première</i>		<i>Terminale</i>	
All students (ES)	If taking advanced options	All students (ES)	If taking advanced options
17	24	22	30

Source: French Ministry of education, calculation by the author. Total school time calculated excluding optional courses

In the ES course of study, economic and social studies (ESS) is a major subject in which sociology plays an important role. The increase in the time devoted to the subject has gone hand in hand with a restriction of teaching provision to pupils in the ES stream.

2.2 A troubled history

As noted above, the introduction of economics and sociology into the upper secondary school curriculum has a troubled history.

It began in 1966 with the creation of the ES course of study in which a new discipline was introduced, then called "Introduction to economic and social facts". Guy Palmade and Marcel Roncayollo, one a historian, the other a geographer, were put in charge of the development of this part of the new curriculum. Both had worked for a long time with Fernand Braudel, leader of the second generation of scholars associated with the *Annales* School (*Ecole des Annales*) of historiography. In designing the course, they adopted the approach developed by the *Annalistes*. They brought together the most famous social scientists of the time in France to discuss their proposals. Economists, sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon, political scientists such as Maurice Duverger and psychologists were asked for advice. Guy Palmade and Marcel Roncayollo wrote courses and notes for teachers. Teachers were then recruited from other disciplines such as history, philosophy and management to

take a special competitive examination that was used to select teachers for the new courses. To help these new teachers, Guy Palmade, who was chief inspector of schools, organized a sort of workshop every September from 1967 to 1980, at which participants shared their experiences of teaching the courses and worked together on the preparation of teaching resources. The new teachers were full of enthusiasm, they felt like pioneers. They tried new ways of teaching, opening up the class room in a climate of confidence and reform. Pupils were active participants in lessons and in debating the economic and social problems of the moment. It seems that students enjoyed this way of school learning, as those surveyed for their opinions declared.

When trouble started in 1973 to 1975, it had its origins in the upper echelons of the national education system. New reforms were proposed that would have abolished the new discipline; historians and geographers were to teach economic and social subjects rather than ESS specialists. ESS teachers organised themselves to fight the proposals. They established a professional association and they petitioned with pupils and their families. They won the battle and the proposed reforms were not implemented.

However, this was by no means the end of the matter. In 1980, a new reform was prepared; an official report commissioned from an economist, Joël Bourdin, criticised the teaching of economics with other social sciences in *lycées*. The author of the report was also critical of interdisciplinary and active teaching methods. He proposed that ESS should be abolished and replaced by a more academic way of teaching economics alone, without any sociological component. ESS teachers rallied themselves; they asked teachers' trade unions, students and families for their support. With these allies, they organised petitions, went on strike and held demonstrations in their fight against the loss of their course and of their pedagogic community. This battle too was successfully fought. The main issue at stake was to maintain the two major teacher recruitment examinations in economics and sociology, rather than reducing the entrance examination to economics alone, as had been proposed. This marked a major turning point in the evolution of the ESS curriculum; new courses were written with less historical and more economic content. They involved less interdisciplinary work and stronger distinctions between the individual academic disciplines that had been combined to create ESS. However, the social dimension of economic phenomena continued to form part of the curriculum. Some active teaching methods were retained and the habit of working with small groups of pupils reading texts, visiting factories, analysing statistics and other practical tasks was also retained.

Trouble resurfaced in 1984 and 1985, when new proposals for the abolition of the ESS course and the division of its content between economics and sociology



were discussed in the French Ministry of Education. ESS teachers manned the barricades once more, but opinion went against these reforms for other reasons. Once again, the proposals for reform were withdrawn.

Strengthened by these conflicts and by the political support ESS teachers had built up, the APSES professional association (Association des professeurs de sciences économiques et sociales) played an active role during the pedagogical reform of the *lycées* that took place in the early 1990s. The reforms introduced some advanced options and changes in curriculum content, and APSES members ensured that the influence of sociologist Henry Mendras was felt in the curriculum design commission as a counterbalance to the influence of economists alone. The year 1995 marked another important turning point in the evolution of the ESS curriculum. New courses were written that adopted a genuine sociological approach and teachers took advantage of a political opportunity to advance their ideas about social science education. They received support from Pierre Bourdieu, who had always been in favour of this teaching (Bourdieu 1997). It must be emphasised that, on this occasion, in contrast to others when they simply reacted to proposals that would have had what they saw as an adverse impact on their profession, teachers on the ground took the initiative. They seized a political opportunity to advance their own ideas on the social science curriculum.

Last but not least, at the beginning of 2000, a new wave of criticism emerged in economic journals. The criticism focused on the teaching of economic subjects and especially the firm; it came from business associations. They ignored sociology, which is why this wave of criticism will not be discussed further in the present paper.

2.3 Curriculum content

Before looking at curriculum content, some words about the various prescriptive programmes published by the National Ministry of Education would be appropriate.

These programmes specify what must be taught in each school subject and in each school year across the whole of France. Teachers are obliged to follow the programmes. The programmes also stipulate the knowledge required for the upper secondary school leaving examination, the baccalaureate, which qualifies successful candidates for entry to university. Nevertheless, the programmes do not set out exactly what must be taught and how every day or every hour during school time is to be used. Rather, they need interpretation. They are rather like prescriptions that need 'dispensing' or 'translating' in order for actual teaching to take place. Teachers are free to interpret them as they see fit and they have pedagogical responsibilities. As a guide for possible interpretations, an introductory text specifies the aims of each

programme. Since 1988, the ESS programmes have been contained in two or three columns. In the first column, the content of the programme is outlined item by item, while the second column lists the notions, concepts, vocabulary associated with each item that must be known at the end of the school year. The third contains less important supplementary vocabulary. For instance, in the programme for the *classe de seconde*, the family as an evolving social institution must be studied (first column), and the contents in the second column are: diversity of family forms, kin relations and the household as defined in national accounts. This example also shows how the interdisciplinary approach works in ESS. The first two notions (diversity of family forms and kin relations) belong to sociology, while the third (household as defined in national accounts) comes from economics. Thus in order to investigate one phenomenon, in this case the family, economic and sociological approaches have to be used sequentially in order to obtain a more rounded view of the institution of the family.

The sociological topics studied have not changed since 1966: the family in *seconde*, social groups, culture and society and socialisation in *première* and social change in *terminale*. The course begins with a topic close to young students' experience, such as the family; in subsequent years, the topics widen out in both space and time. Nevertheless, the aims of the course remain unchanged over the three years: it is designed to impart knowledge of economics and social realities, to foster a reflective attitude towards society, to educate citizens and to cultivate critical awareness about social problems. However, the way of achieving these aims has evolved. We will describe this change and characterize it as a controversial evolution towards more academic sociology and higher intellectual demands.

Three phases in this evolution can be identified.

In the first phase, from 1966 to around 1988, the main aim of curricula and teaching methods was to impart an understanding of social realities. There was considerable suspicion of dogma and ideologies and a mistrust of teaching theory to young people. The hope was that, by making students aware of differences in space and time, they could attain some sort of analytical insight. Teachers had to teach about societies in different times and in different places. For instance, the family in Arrapesh society as described by Margaret Mead was a standard topic in *seconde*. And students usually read extracts from Philippe Aries' writings about the family system in pre-revolutionary France.

The academic reference points for this part of the course were derived from history and anthropology.

As already noted, course content was changed after the initial proposals for reform brought forward in the early 1980s were defeated. Teachers of ESS, supported



by some economics experts such as J.C. Milleron², adopted a higher profile and began to exert more influence. They pushed for less historical perspective and more statistics. Most of them had studied economics and had acquired their knowledge of sociology only through teaching it. They thought that economic structures and the level of technology were decisive in social problems. They also wanted a clear distinction to be made between socialist and capitalist economic systems. In their view, economic structures were more important than any other variables for an understanding of social problems. This was the period that saw the end of strong economic growth, the beginning of mass unemployment and the growth of poverty in rich countries. Globalisation was often seen as the ultimate cause of many social problems.

Things changed again with the programmes written between 1993 and 1995. The economic and sociological components of the curricula were more clearly separated for the final two years of the course. The distinction between socialist and capitalist economic systems disappeared as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The focus of courses shifted away from growth and development or the differences between capitalism and socialism towards globalisation, economic crisis and new social questions such as migration and integration. The introductory texts to the new programmes explained the overall purpose of this subject matter in new terms. How is society possible? How can conflict be avoided? How can social cohesion be maintained in a changing society? The new conceptual framework marked a move away from structuralism in favour of a dynamic approach and an increase in the intellectual demands the new curriculum content made on students.

This reform also introduced two advanced options (see Table 3): one in *première* ES offers political sciences and civic education, while the other in *terminale* ES is based on the reading of texts by eminent economists and sociologists with the aim of giving students a better understanding of certain items in the curriculum. The sociologists studied are Tocqueville, Weber, Marx and Durkheim.

Clearly sociologists were influential in determining the content of these options. However, the ESS course as a whole remains mixed. Teachers are recommended to use economic and sociological approaches in turn as often as possible in studying, for instance, enterprise, unemployment, consumption, poverty and so on. Sometimes, however, lessons remain strictly within the field of either economics or of sociology. For example, in the most recent courses for pupils in *terminale*³, the topic of social change is approached almost

exclusively from a sociological perspective under the heading of: 'Inequalities, conflicts and social cohesion: the social dynamic'. It is clearly separate from the economic part of the course and it has grown in size compared with the 1982 programme⁴ since it now accounts for about 40% of teaching time over the year.

In this first part, we have offered an overview of the state of sociology teaching in French upper secondary schools since the 1960s from an institutional point of view. In the next part, we will see how sociology is actually taught in the classroom.

3. Teaching sociology: successes and difficulties in the classroom

To teach something requires close attention from students, it needs their collaboration. The objective, in other words, is to set them to work. In order to understand how teaching takes place investigation is necessary.

Our data on the teaching and learning of sociology come from two sources: an actual survey on the study of sociology in upper secondary schools carried out in 1998 (see box below) and detailed study of professional journal publications from 1966 to 2007⁵. In these publications we found teachers' accounts of everyday experiences and of their success and failures written in order to be shared with colleagues. They also provide teaching resources and comment on them. These journals also contain observations by sociologists on high school programmes and examinations.

"Learning sociology in high school" survey 1998⁶

The data relate to a sample of 700 students in *première* enrolled in 27 lycées located in all parts of France. The aim of the research was to investigate the differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers. Half of the sample was taught by teachers with less than five years' experience. We tried to analyse student outcomes two weeks after having lessons on the subject of socialisation.

We knew the age, sex, social origin, educational level and status of the 27 teachers. We also knew the age, sex and social origin of the 700 students, as well as their marks at school. They answered a questionnaire about studying sociology and were tested on their knowledge of socialisation. To this end, they were asked to write 50 lines explaining what socialisation is to a young person with no knowledge of sociology. Other questions assessed their vocabulary and ability to understand documents (texts, pictures or statistics). These tasks are

2 He was the head of INSEE, the French national statistical organisation.

3 Bulletin Officiel de l'Éducation nationale, Hors série n°7, 3 October 2002

4 Bulletin officiel n°4 spécial, 29 April 1982.

5 There are two major publications, one from the French education ministry (DEES then IDEES) and the other from the teachers' professional association (APSEInfo).

6 Chatel et alii, « Apprendre la sociologie au lycée », INRP, 2002.



standard exercises in this course. With the aid of the research team, which was made up of experienced teachers, we converted the students' texts into answers to a closed questionnaire. It was analysed by means of statistical methodologies (inference).

The data thus obtained were supplemented by semi-directed interviews with teachers and some students.

We will seek to identify in what follows which teaching methods are successful, what content is easy to learn and what does not work or gives rise to debate among teachers.

3.1 Success

Two sorts of success must be underlined, namely student motivation and outcomes.

The majority of pupils who answered our questions said they were interested in sociological questions, with a higher share of girls than boys declaring such an interest. They enjoy these lessons because they make them aware of new phenomena in their own lives. One girl said that she had become aware of the educational advantages she enjoyed after reading Pierre Bourdieu's writings on social *habitus*. Their favourite topics for study were the family, cultural differences, gender differences and social mobility. They disliked theory and abstract lessons, which they found too difficult.

These results were consistent with the statements teachers made during the interviews.

In short, we can say that about 90% of students were familiar with the notions listed in the second columns of the programme: norms, roles, values, socialization, nature vs. nurture etc. They were able to define them, use the terms appropriately and understand their meaning. In addition they were able to read texts and statistical tables, understand information contained in documents linked to the topics studied and digest these elements. They had a mastery of the intellectual skills ordinarily used in this school discipline at this level.

In their writing, they often adopted a deterministic understanding of "socialisation" in which individuals have to comply with social rules and society's commands and everyone is subject to social constraints. Individual freedom is restricted. Education is regarded as conditioning. They focused primarily on socialisation and social reproduction. They were scarcely capable of dialectic reasoning and most of them had not reached the stage of being able to put forward a balanced and dialectical argument.

Just one third had a reflective attitude towards social phenomena and 9% were able to develop a sociological argument; they were also the best pupils, as was reflected in their marks. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 8% of the sample were unable to complete the test, leaving exercises unfinished, misunderstanding documents and so on.

The best students were able to fulfil the objectives of this curriculum; however, the majority just mastered a new vocabulary without acquiring the ability to think critically about social issues. They might have been on the way to achieving it, but it is difficult to know for certain.

To summarise, we can say that these students enjoyed studying sociology or social problems in high school and that some of them succeeded in achieving critical awareness of social problems and acquired the ability to engage in sociological reasoning. The programme objectives had been partially attained.

3.2 Difficulties and debates

The purpose of the teaching of ESS is to encourage pupils to develop a reflective attitude towards social phenomena. The method adopted in the ESS curriculum is to observe these social phenomena, to achieve some degree of distance by studying other societies and other periods in history and to seek greater through measurement. But doing so is only half of the task. How can young students be introduced to social concepts and theories?

Some teachers take the view that high school students are too young to understand theory and that it is sufficient to make them aware of the diversity of social phenomena. Ideologies must be avoided; models are risky because they can inhibit flexibility of thought. Other teachers take the opposite view. They want to introduce theories and research methodologies at the beginning of the course. They argue that objects of study are defined by researchers and that there is no social reality *per se*. In their view, teachers must explain the methodological foundations of their assertions.

The debate has turned into a dispute between experienced teachers about pedagogical methods. The first stream favours active and inductive methods, while the second criticises any form of inductive reasoning. In any event, the dispute is confined to a small number of professionals.

Most teachers seemed to be uninterested in this debate, which they regard as largely irrelevant to their pedagogical issues. Few of them have degrees in sociology. In our sample, 70% have degrees in economics and only 8% in sociology. Nevertheless, they acquired some knowledge of sociology in the IUFM⁷ in order to take the competitive examination they have to pass before becoming ESS teachers. It is a selective exam that requires at least one year's preparation. They demand more training in sociology for themselves.

7 IUFM = Institut universitaire de formation des maîtres, a special institute established in 1990 to prepare prospective teachers for the competitive examination and to provide teacher training after the examination.



Our observations and analysis of textbooks⁸ reveal that teachers tend to approach a new topic by first examining a concrete example (case study, newspaper extracts focusing on current social problems etc.). They then seek to initiate discussion of the topic by drawing on students' own experiences. Afterwards, statistics are presented and questioned; then concepts or theories are propounded in order to explain the social problem or to render it understandable. Teachers are very fond of this pedagogical approach. They see it as a way to make sociology accessible by investigating social problems that are significant to students.

Certain social issues can be easily accommodated within this pedagogical framework, others not, as Nicole Pinet⁹, assistant professor at the University de Lille, has demonstrated in respect to social mobility. Social mobility is always present in political and social debates; it is regarded as equal in importance to social justice and for that reason remains an interesting question for young people. Moreover, it is associated with theoretical issues and debates in the academic community, more particularly about the role of the school system in social reproduction. The relevant statistics are always being updated (intergenerational mobility tables) because of the issue's political significance and they can therefore be used as topical resources in the classroom. As a result, it is possible to undertake a significant amount of meaningful methodological work with students.

Other sociological questions that are easy to teach using these pedagogical methods include: the role of education, the working class and its decline and the middle class and its new social influence. They have some features in common which make them relatively easy to teach: they are social problems that have both political implications and a theoretical dimension and there is plenty of relevant available data.

Michaël DeCesare (2002, 2005a, 2005b) describes the state of sociology teaching in US high schools. The subject matter has been taught for the past century as part of a discipline called "social studies". He reports criticisms of this teaching made by members of the American Sociologist Association (ASA), who believe there is too much emphasis on social problems and not enough on concepts and theories; these remarks echo the French debate among ESS teachers; DeCesare also notes that the ASA has been ineffective in helping secondary teachers because ASA-members are not close enough to teachers and do not collaborate with them.

8 In Chatel 2002, p. 64-71.

9 Nicole Pinet, "De la sociologie aux sciences économiques et sociales", intervention at the round table debate organised by the Société française de Sociologie, DEES, n°115, mars 1999. She was for many years one of the co-authors of the standard ESS textbooks.

These remarks point to a similarity in pedagogical methods on both sides of the Atlantic: introducing sociology by examining social problems that have significance for young people. This method seems to work. However, the question of how to go further in the teaching of concepts and theory remains.

French sociologists, when consulted (Chapoulie 2002; Merle, Dubet, Pinet 2000), do not disagree with the strategy of introducing students to sociology through the investigation of topical social problems; above all they fear that formal lessons will discourage students from thinking for themselves and are concerned that certain discourses convey false distinctions between sociological theorists. These concerns parallel Michel Verret's argument about the teaching of sociology at university level. Verret (1974) demonstrated the difficulty of using any formal discourse in subjects characterised by vigorous debates and contradictory approaches linked to political issues. The proposals for countering these dangers put forward by academic sociologists are different from those favoured by teachers; they include genuine inquiries, investigation, collection of social data and so on (Baudelot 1999). It is an interesting mode of teaching that must be experienced. The question is whether it is feasible to adopt genuine scientific methods with young pupils, during school time, in school context? As we have seen, teachers would rather simulate scientific methods, not having to collect true data.

4. Concluding remarks

As has been shown, there is effective teaching of sociology in French lycées. In these concluding remarks, we will summarise the main features of this teaching and offer some thoughts on its difficult introduction into the French upper secondary school curriculum.

It must be noted that the success of this teaching is due in part to students' support. In 1998, the Ministry of Education launched a major survey among pupils; some subjects found unconditional favour among students and ESS was one of them. As our own inquiry shows, they are interested in social issues and they enjoy studying ESS because it makes their own world more understandable and provides ideas for making it fairer and easier to live in.

However, there is real intellectual content in the course – it is not merely descriptive. Students are trained to read texts and statistics, they learn the academic vocabulary of social sciences and they acquire an analytical perspective on social problems. These results characterize a social science education that aims to develop citizenship rather than preparing students for academic study. Such a programme can, nevertheless, serve as a first step in that direction. Civic and academic goals are not necessarily in conflict.

Thus the criticisms of ESS that have in the past served as a basis for attempts by the Ministry of Edu-



cation to abolish the subject do not suggest that there has been pedagogic or didactic failure. They fail to take account of the successes that have been achieved with students. Rather, they are politically motivated and reflect management concerns to reduce the number of categories of teachers and of specialities, to introduce greater flexibility into services and to simplify organisation. As a consequence, disputes have developed among the various professional interest groups involved. In this case, the conflict has been between the various groups of teachers of social studies (historians and geographers against economists and sociologists). The proposals for abolition have also been supported by business lobbies concerned by young people's growing social awareness. They are afraid that the teaching of ESS encourages criticism of society and its problems and may increase awareness of the social responsibilities of entrepreneurs or politicians. These arguments relate much more to the economic dimension of the ESS programme than to sociological themes.

In the difficult process that has led to the establishment of ESS in the upper secondary curriculum and the incorporation of a sociological dimension into the subject, teachers' action has had a significant influence. Teachers have been helped by their professional association, by trade unions and by some academic sociologists and economists. It may be considered rather surprising that they were motivated to take such action, since they are trained more in economics than in sociology. They supported sociology not so much for its own sake but because in doing so they were helping to give social science teaching a certain political and pedagogic slant. Teachers enjoy teaching ESS because its political orientation matches their own; it is a progressive ideology, critical of neo-liberalism and in favour of state intervention and public policies. They were also strongly motivated by the support they obtained from their students; this achievement gave them the energy and the reason to defend a mode of teaching and a type of content. Now pupil interest has a bearing on current problems; they want to understand and they are encouraged to put some effort into their school work. This is why teachers promote this way of teaching, which begins with concrete examples of social problems. As a consequence they agree with introducing new themes into their teaching programmes. However, in doing so, they are pursuing a particular pedagogical purpose and, at the same time, adopting an academic and political stance. A way of successfully teaching students about social issues with political implications has been found.

As we have seen, the courses have changed as economy and society have evolved. Even if political intentions are decisive, they can be frustrated. Social studies courses are subject to many influences, including

political intentions, expert advice and teachers' action. It is not uncommon for teachers themselves to influence the curriculum. This has been demonstrated, for instance, by Barry Cooper in respect to mathematics teaching in English secondary schools in the 1950s (Cooper 1983). And secondary school teachers and academics also played a part in the development of geography as an academic subject (Goodson 1981). However, the history of ESS in French high schools does not lead down the same path that Goodson describes. Sociology is taught as part of ESS, as is economics. The two subjects have not been wholly separated and the principle of the unity of the social sciences is still applied in this course. Each component is not solely an academic discipline but incorporates descriptive elements as well as explanatory components. The course remains a compromise, as Chervel has also shown. Its development is unconnected with the notion of 'competences', which has played no part in the debates on this subject. Nor can it be said, as Vergnolle has of geography (VergnolleMainar 2008), that the share of non-academic knowledge has tended to increase. Many authors explain the curriculum debate as a conflict between two different views: discipline-centred versus student-centred (Franklin and Johnson 2008). Supporters of discipline-centred reforms would be on the side of maintaining high standards of knowledge, while supporters of student-centred reforms would be more concerned by students' self-improvement. Sometimes this divide coincides with the political distinction between conservatism and progressive ideas, sometimes it does not. As we have shown above, the conflicts surrounding the introduction of sociology into French high schools cannot be understood in terms of the acceptance or rejection of academic disciplines. Rather, it reflects a controversial stance in an internal debate within the social sciences: unity of social sciences as historical sciences against boundaries. This stance is in agreement with an efficient pedagogical strategy and has an ideological dimension.

Does this teaching strategy, which has been characterized as a compromise – sociology combined with economics, descriptive combined with explanatory approaches – constitute an original approach? To answer the question would require systematic international comparisons.

What elements of this history of the teaching of ESS in French lycées can be attributed to the fact that it is a subject concerned with society, with all the consequent political implications? It would be interesting to launch international comparative research projects specifically devoted to subjects with political implications because of their controversial contents. International comparisons could help to identify the common features of these specific curricula and their successes and failures.



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