

Elisabeth Chatel

Economics as a Social Science in French *lycées*: A Programme Shaped by the Evolution of a School Discipline

Since the end of the 1960s, courses in economics have become established in French *lycées* for pupils aged approximately 16 to 18 as part of both the general and technological (services) streams. There are no other specific programmes in economics at the other levels of the school system. In lower secondary schools (*collèges*), which cater for children aged between 11 and 15, economic phenomena are presented in a somewhat descriptive manner during history and geography lessons. These descriptions introduce children to an economic vocabulary that includes terms such as GDP, productivity, inflation, growth and development. However, the acquisition of this vocabulary does not lead on to the teaching of any real economic arguments, nor of economic concepts or theories in the strict sense. Economics as just defined is not taught in the vocational streams either.

The aim of this article is to characterise the teaching of economics that is provided in the general streams of French upper secondary schools as part of a subject called Economic and Social Sciences (ESS). It is here that economics teaching is most heavily concentrated; furthermore, it is the only one of the two economics programmes in French *lycées* for which curriculum studies exist. The article will show that, despite the considerable changes it has undergone, this programme has retained the critical and socially aware approach that has been present since it was first established. It was by no means evident that such an approach, inspired originally by the work of historians of the *Annales* school, would be adopted, even less retained, since it goes against the grain of developments in economics at university level, both in French universities and internationally, during the two decades between 1980 and the year 2000 (LeVan Lemesle 1983; Le Merrer 1990). During this period, the economics taught in universities became less descriptive and more formalised and moved away from the other social sciences. Economists have become increasingly adept at manipulating models and have ceased to view economic and social problems from an historical perspective (Hogdson et al. 2009). The teaching of economic and social sciences in French schools has not followed this course and has been challenged on numerous occasions, most notably by academic economists and employers' representatives. The fact that its original critical approach has been maintained is due in no small measure to action taken by teachers.

The article aims to characterise the economic knowledge transmitted in the course of this programme and, adopting a socio-historical perspective to the curriculum, to explain the reasons for its presence. After all, the school curriculum, even in general subjects and the final years of secondary school, is not a mere reflection of the corresponding fields of academic knowledge but rather a composite of various forms of knowledge. These reconstituted bodies of knowledge have to be characterised. We will show that, in this case, the subject being taught, namely economics, has been shaped by the evolution of what we call a 'school discipline'. The strength of this framework makes it possible to understand the initial choices that shaped the programme as well as the changes it has undergone subsequently, particularly as a result of the influence exerted by teachers. In a previous article, we demonstrated the importance of the notion of 'school discipline' in shaping the sociological content of economic and social science programmes in French *lycées* (Chatel 2009)¹. The present article adopts the same analytical approach, this time bringing it to bear on the economic dimension of the programme.

A 'school discipline' according to Chervel (1988), is an 'institutional form' that makes knowledge teachable. This does not mean that a 'discipline' is the only form that subjects take in school systems², but simply that the economic and social sciences that are the object of investigation here have the characteristics of what Chervel (1988) calls a 'school discipline'. Such a discipline has the following characteristics: a body of knowledge, established teaching and evaluation practices and a body of teachers dedicated to the subject. In introducing this notion of 'school discipline', Chervel was rebelling against the idea that school subjects are mere downward transpositions of the corresponding academic disciplines. He suggested that they should be seen rather as expressions of the cultural creativity of the school system and its ability to make various forms of knowledge teachable, thereby enabling that knowledge to be transmitted. This concept was developed as a means of taking account of the fact that the teaching of grammar was first introduced into schools in order to facilitate the teaching of French spelling (Chervel 1977) before it was con-

1 The factual aspects of this discipline's evolution will not be repeated here, since readers can refer to this previous publication.

2 J.L. Martinand proposes the term 'curriculum matrix' (Martinand 2001) to denote curricular arrangements that are not necessarily 'school disciplines' but do, nevertheless, have an impact on the actual curriculum.



stituted as a body of academic knowledge. These observations are akin to those of Goodson (1981) on geography. Goodson showed that geography was taught in schools for utilitarian and pedagogical reasons well before it became an academic discipline. It is the need to provide instruction that explains the composite nature of the various forms of knowledge included in school disciplines. For Chervel, school disciplines are instructional apparatuses established for educational purposes. In order to understand the changes they undergo, it is necessary not only to examine the documents that stipulate what it is to be taught but also to combine such an examination with an analysis of teaching practices. An approach of this kind better reflects the reality of a curriculum in which teachers' freedom is restricted by pupils' concerns. 'The teacher lies at the heart of the process whereby objectives are transformed into instruction' (Chervel 1988, 78). As a consequence, changes in the knowledge contained within school disciplines arise out of a social process that is not controlled solely by changes in academic knowledge nor solely by curriculum prescriptions. Any investigation of a school discipline has to take into account the activities of the teachers charged with delivering the corresponding curriculum. As Musgrove (1968) noted, teachers can constitute genuine 'social communities' that inspire a sense of belonging, develop their own values and customs and influence curriculum content and teaching practices.

Economic and social sciences as taught in French secondary schools illustrate this notion of the school discipline. We will demonstrate in this article the role played by the teaching body in shaping the economic knowledge taught in economic and social sciences, in particular the part they played in certain shifts in curriculum content. This is one effect of the logic of this institutional form, which encourages teachers to unite in defence of a professional cause. In accordance with the conceptual framework developed by Chervel, we will show how they influence the actual curriculum. We will also show, in line with other studies in the sociology of the curriculum, that they influence the formal curriculum as well.

The economic dimension is a major part of the economic and social sciences programme (ESS) and attracts interest from social groups outside the education system, particularly from spheres close to French business and industry. These groups have intervened repeatedly in the past and again very recently, between 2000 and 2009, with the aim of changing the programme's content, which in their view shows business and enterprise in an unfavourable light³. The

3 Positive entreprise, *L'entreprise dans les programmes scolaires, Les sciences économiques et sociales au programme de seconde, 2007*, URL : <http://www.ppositive-entreprise.org>

teachers responded by expressing their support for the approach they favour and attempting to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the programme conveys a pluralistic and empirically well-founded image of business (Beitone and Hemdame 2005; Martin 2008; Chuppin 2009). This episode, which is not yet concluded⁴, is evidence of the constant vitality of ESS teachers' influence on the prescribed curriculum, either when responding to criticisms or taking the initiative themselves.

We will attempt in this article to define the economic knowledge taught within this discipline. It is assumed that such knowledge is, by definition, composite in nature. In order to characterise this composite body of knowledge, we will make use of the categories that are used in economic thought. They will serve to characterise the economic content of the ESS curriculum.

We will begin by offering a general overview encompassing the two economics programmes taught in French *lycées* in order to compare the approaches adopted and the objectives pursued in each case. We will then outline the evolution over time of the prescribed curriculum for the economics and social sciences programme, highlighting the role played by teachers, initially, in this second part, on the political level. Then in the third part, we will examine the influence they have exerted through the actual implementation of the syllabuses, the assumption being that the actual content of their teaching may very possibly have led to changes in the prescribed curriculum.

The teaching of economics in upper secondary schools

Economics was first taught in French *lycées* during the 19th century. Introduced when Victor Duruy was minister of education under the Second Empire, it was abolished in 1887 with the establishment of the stream set up by Duruy in order to train businessmen or 'knights of industry' as they were called at the time. Some political economy was still being taught for a time thereafter in certain philosophy classes, as is evident from textbooks, but even that eventually disappeared altogether (Chatel 1989).

The establishment of new streams in *lycées* after the Second World War led to the re-emergence of economics teaching in 1952 in a stream that at that time had very few pupils⁵. It was not until 1966, when French *lycées* underwent significant reforms, that economics

4 On 2 December 2009, having organised a petition signed by 700 social science academics, ESS teachers demonstrated in the streets against the plan put forward by the Minister of Education, Luc Chatel, to reduce the teaching time devoted to economic and social sciences in the first year of upper secondary school (*classe de seconde*) in favour of the applied economics programme. APSES website.

5 BOEN (*bulletin officiel de l'éducation nationale*) dated 5/6/1953.



as such re-emerged as a subject taught in both of the newly established baccalaureate streams⁶, the technological (services) stream and the general economic and social sciences stream. Over the next 40 years, these two streams were to attract increasing numbers of pupils⁷. The content of the economics curriculum was also to change, although it was shaped to some extent by the specific streams in which the subject was being taught, leading to differences in the main focus of the economics teaching provided in the two streams.

The technological (services) stream⁸ was established primarily in order to prepare pupils for entry into the labour market. Gradually, particularly in the 1990s, this objective lost ground to that of preparing pupils for studying technological subjects at post-secondary level; by 2004, this had become the dominant objective. From the very outset, the aim of the general economic and social science stream was the acquisition of a humanist culture in the field of social sciences (Prost 1986). It was not until after 1982 that preparation for university courses in economics and social sciences was also listed as an objective. However, before entering these two streams, many pupils take an economics and social sciences option⁹ in *seconde*, to which 2½ hours a week are devoted. This is an introductory programme, the economics part¹⁰ of which seeks to familiarise pupils with the main actors in economic activity. The emphasis is on firms and the interdependencies between economic actors and between economic activities and on the coordination thereof through the market. At the macroeconomic level, these interdependencies are represented by a circuit diagram. The effects of this programme on pupils who do not continue their education in a stream in which economics is taught are not evaluated. Consequently, we will not pursue this subject any further; for pupils who continue into one of the streams named above, this programme constitutes an introduction. The following comparison between the two economics programmes aims to locate them relative to each other in terms of the prescribed cur-

riculum. It is based largely on an analysis of the prescribed curriculum, which is published in the official gazette of the national education service (BOEN). As far as economic and social sciences are concerned, other analyses have been carried out and published previously (Chatel 1990; 1995; 2001).

Economics in the technological (services) stream

The technological (services) stream comprises several areas of specialisation linked to various areas of economic activity (accounting, business, secretarial work, IT etc.). They constitute the various options in the technological (services) stream as well as the areas of specialisation for teachers. This stream has undergone radical change in recent years. The areas of economic activity have been regrouped under different headings; in 2004, they were entitled: 'communication and management', 'marketing', 'corporate accounting and finance' and 'management of computerised systems'. Above all, however, the general approach of the various programmes places less emphasis on competences than on more notional forms of knowledge. The objective of preparing pupils to study technological subjects at university level has led to changes in the prescribed curriculum. Economics is taught in all these areas of specialisation, in both *première* and *terminale*. As far as this economics programme is concerned, we shall refer to it here as a 'subject'¹¹, without prejudging whether or not it can in fact be regarded as a school discipline, since not all the defining characteristics appear to be present. In particular, the teachers of economics do not constitute a group with clearly defined and stable boundaries.

Even since the stream was established, economics has been paired with law, that is the two subjects have been taught by the same teacher. Between 1966 and 1992, it was also combined with business economics¹². After 1992, the subject known as business economics disappeared when it was incorporated into general economics. In 2004, however, a new subject relating to businesses was introduced under the title of 'Organisational Management'. Economics as such is still paired with law, although the link between the two subjects is not very evident, since care is taken to keep them separate. The baccalaureate examination, which has been in written form since 1989, still comprises two parts, one economic, the other legal. At one time, efforts were made to establish a form of interdisciplinarity by setting both papers on the same topic, such as the act of selling or supplying, un-

6 This concerned the last two years of secondary school, i.e. *première* and *terminale*, and young people aged between 17 and 18 on average.

7 In the general economic and social sciences programme, there were 98,470 pupils in *première* in 2007 and 98,035 in *terminale* (general stream); in the management sciences and technologies programme in the same year, there were 75,295 pupils in *première* and 85,527 in *terminale* (technological (services) stream). Source: Ministère de l'Éducation nationale (2009)

8 It was known first as the *technical* stream and then, from the 1980s onwards, as the *technological* stream.

9 An option that can be supplemented by a management option. There were 513,000 pupils in this stream in 2007 (Ministère de l'éducation nationale 2009).

10 The programme also has a 'social' dimension; pupils study, among other things, the family, social integration, the role of the education system and of associations, etc.

11 We define a 'subject' as a branch of learning that forms part of pupils' timetables and has a title and a formal programme, without prejudging its curricular form.

12 BOEN no. 42 of 28 November 1965; no. 44 of 20 November 1969; no. 6 of 10 February 1972; BO special issue of 24 September 1993.



employment, redundancy, etc. However, the resulting examination was judged to be too difficult for the pupils and the efforts were abandoned in 2004.

The economics programme itself has evolved as a result of changes in the divisions between the various branches of economics: general economics, business economics and then a partial regrouping into a single subject called simply economics. Further changes have resulted from the shift away, since the end of the 1990s, from the original objective of preparing pupils for entry into the labour market in favour of the newly declared objective of preparing pupils for study beyond the *baccalauréat*. As a result of this new emphasis, the economics syllabuses in the two streams have converged to a certain degree, as is evident from the preambles, in which their educational aims are set out. In the economics programmes offered in the technological stream in the 1980s, economic activity was presented as ‘the problem of fighting against scarcity’. This definition is in line with the dominant thinking within the discipline, in which economics is defined as the science of optimising scarce resources, albeit without any further clarification as to the specific (substantive) nature of the activities regarded as ‘economic’. In the 2004 syllabus for the technological stream, it is stated in the preamble¹³ that the aim is to enable pupils to ‘understand the contemporary world from the point of view of the relations between people engaged in production, exchange and consumption’. This definition of economic activity focuses on the ‘relations between people’; this merits closer attention, since it gives a social dimension to economic activity and is, moreover, ‘substantive’, since activities regarded as economic are specified (production, exchange and consumption). As far as these programmes are concerned, this constitutes a new approach. It marks a shift towards a view of economics that is less utilitarian and more political. This broader aim should be viewed in the context of the new objective of preparing pupils for higher education. According to the documents introducing the programmes, the aim is to ‘make pupils responsible economic actors and citizens’. To this end, they are to acquire knowledge of a number of basic economic concepts and mechanisms and to develop their critical thinking.

The purpose of economics teaching in the general and technological (services) streams

Ever since it was established in 1967, and continuing right up to the present, the declared aims of the economics programme in the general stream (within the economic and social sciences track) have been fairly similar to those for economics in the technological stream since 2004. The preamble to the programmes

currently being taught in economic and social sciences formulates their objective as follows: ‘To foster the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of contemporary economies and societies and thereby contribute to the education of citizens able to understand the issues at stake in economic and social choices¹⁴’. It is further stated that, in order to prepare pupils for higher education, the programme will seek to give pupils a broadly based education focusing on the ‘manipulation of knowledge and command of analytical tools and methods’. The two programmes have other points in common, notably their general organisation: in *première* the main focus of the economics teaching in both streams is national economic activity, coordination through the market and the regulatory role of the state, with the international dimension and globalisation being left until the final year (*terminale*).

Despite these signs of convergence, there are also considerable differences between the two programmes, which are revealed by examination of the most recent syllabuses. The economics programme in the general stream is more highly developed and detailed than that in the technological stream. In the general stream, money, credit and financial institutions are studied from the *classe de première* onwards. Here, economics is conceived from the outset as monetary and financial. In contrast to the curriculum in the *classe de première* in the technological stream, the fiction of an economy without money is not constructed for the purposes of simplification. Above all, the economic and social dynamic is the guiding theme of the programme in *terminale*. Difficult topics such as growth, crises and economic and social policies are included in the syllabus and are all investigated in some detail and in their various aspects (finance, commerce, production, investment, technical progress, employment etc.). The theoretical dimension is also much more evident than in the technological stream. Furthermore, pupils have the possibility of studying economic theory in greater depth by taking a 2-hour weekly option that does not exist in the other stream. In this optional course, pupils examine original writings by key figures in the history of economic thought, including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter¹⁵. Finally, in the economics programme in the general stream, there is a constant concern to point up the links between economics and the other social sciences. For example, alongside the writings of economists, pupils study the basic texts of other social science theoreticians, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. This is a point to which we will return later. Overall, 4 to 6 hours per week are given over to economics and social sciences in *première* and be-

13 BO special issue no. 1 of 12 February 2004 and BO special issue no. 2 of 24 February 2005.

14 BO no. 28 of 12 July 2001

15 BO special edition no. 7, 3 October 2002.



tween 5 and 7 hours¹⁶ in *terminale*; this equates to a share of the weekly timetable of between 17 and 24% in *première* and between 22 and 30% in *terminale*¹⁷, with more than half of this time being devoted to the programme's economic aspects.

In the technology (services) stream, less time is allocated to the teaching of economics than to economic and social sciences in the general stream. The main focus of the curriculum offered to pupils is different in the two streams. As we have seen, economics in the technology stream is paired with law, with the two taking up a total of 4 hours of the weekly timetable in both *première* and *terminale*; economics itself is allocated 2 hours per week, or 7.25% of the weekly timetable¹⁸. Moreover, although the curriculum retains an explanatory dimension, it is limited by the lack of timetable hours. Pupils have many other technological subjects to study, which are allocated a much greater share of the available time. In *première* they also study organisational management (2 hours), information and management (3 to 5 hours¹⁹) and information and communication (3 to 5 hours). In *terminale* the subjects in their specialist areas (marketing, accounting and finance – see above) take up 8 hours per week. In these specialist subjects, they learn specific technologies. Economics and law are also classed as technological subjects and have therefore to be placed in context with all the other subjects dealing with service-sector technologies²⁰. Consequently, the objective of the economics and law courses is to help pupils understand the wider context in which firms or organisations in the areas of activity corresponding to their chosen areas of specialisation (accounting, commerce, etc.) operate. The study of economics as a sphere of knowledge and approach to understanding the world in its own right is not the primary objective in this stream. On the other hand, this is precisely the goal of the economic and social sciences programme in the general stream, in combination of course with other subjects²¹.

The purpose of these observations on the syllabuses for the two streams was to locate the two economics programmes that are taught in French *lycées* relative to each other and to show that, despite some degree of convergence in course contents and objectives, the main focus of the two programmes differs.

Whereas the aim of the economic and social sciences programme is to provide students with the knowledge and analytical tools to understand the economic and social world and the changes it undergoes, the economics programme in the technology stream is just one of many technological subjects whose overall objective, as the title of the stream suggests, is to familiarise pupils with management technologies.

The evolution of the economics programmes in the economic and social sciences track: increasing theoretical requirements

Economic and social sciences has evolved into a school discipline in the course of a fairly turbulent history in which one of the major bones of contention has been the nature of the economics teaching to be provided.

This programme was established as a social sciences programme with an economics element that was taught alongside courses in history, demography, anthropology, sociology and, to a lesser extent, political science. The programme was designed by historians and geographers close to Fernand Braudel and the *Annals* School. Their aim was to set up an economic and social sciences programme based on a critical standpoint and legitimated by their academic work. They were able to recruit a body of young teachers to implement the programme, most of whom had studied economics only at university. These young teachers were enthusiastic about the programme, despite their lack of training in the other social science disciplines. These initial objectives were subsequently modified and clarified, having encountered difficulties resulting from the fairly savage criticism to which the original plan was subjected. Two major changes to the programmes occurred in 1982 and in 1995, with occasional minor changes being made, amounting to nothing more than tidying-up or clarifications of topics (in 1988 in the case of the syllabus for the *classe de première*, in 2002 in the case of *terminale*). Our presentation highlights the major changes in order to show how they have affected the general organisation of these programmes²². It reveals changes that have maintained the programme's original multi-disciplinary approach to the social sciences while making it more analytical.

The 1982 syllabuses compared with those of 1967

Between 1960 and 1970, there was concern in certain circles outside the education system about French people's perceived ignorance of economic matters. In 1970, the journal *Patronat* published an article advocating the introduction of a secondary school course in economics, although it also expressed fears that

16 Depending on whether or not pupils choose the advanced option.

17 Author's calculations based on BOEN no. 33 of 14 September 1995, Organisation et horaires des classes de Premières et Terminales des lycées généraux. The timetables have not changed since this date.

18 BO no. 7 of 12 February 2004 and no. 2 of 13 January 2005.

19 More time is allocated to the main subject in pupils' chosen specialities.

20 These technological subjects are supplemented by general classes such as history/geography, languages, philosophy etc.

21 Such as history, geography, philosophy etc.

22 A comprehensive analysis was published in Chatel 1990 for the period 1967-1988 and in Chatel 2001; 2009 for the period 1988-2002.



such a course could become politicised. The Economic and Social Council also expressed concern at the time about this perceived ignorance, although it appeared to be unaware, as was the employers' association, that an economic and social sciences programme already existed in French *lycées*. In the 1980s, groups outside the education system were to criticise very strongly the teaching of economic and social sciences in *lycées*. The criticism focused in particular on the multi-disciplinary approach adopted in ESS and the 'active' teaching methods employed. *Perspective et réalités*, an economic and social affairs think-tank close to the right wing of French politics, was also concerned about the content of the ESS curriculum. This criticism was to be taken up by academic economists and eventually gave rise to a plan to abolish the newly established (in 1977) *agrégation*²³ in economic and social sciences (ESS). The economics programme in the technological (services) stream was put forward as the model to be followed and a ministerial commission chaired by an academic, Professor Joël Bourdin, proposed that this subject should replace the economic and social sciences programme. At the time, the general economics that was taught in the technological stream conformed to the criteria of the dominant approach more closely than it does today, as we have already seen. Furthermore, it did not have the distinctive characteristic of being combined with other social sciences, such as sociology or economic history. Nor did it have any interdisciplinary pretensions; as now, it formed part of a set of subjects given over to the 'technologies of management'.

At this point, secondary school teachers of ESS joined battle with their critics in defence of the discipline. They argued in favour of an interdisciplinary approach, and in particular the programme's 'social' component', and of their active teaching methods. It was the eve of the 1981 presidential elections in France, and they found allies on the left of the political landscape among economists in the upper reaches of the civil service and academics in all the social sciences. However, their main support came from pupils and their families. The teachers won this battle and their victory led to a significant change in the syllabuses which, paradoxically, saw a decline in the influence of historians linked to the Annales School and a rise in that of left-wing economists and also of sociologists. The historical and geographical elements faded away while economic and social analysis gained in strength in a new approach influenced partly by the work of INSEE, the French government statistical service; the new programme relied to a very large extent on the statistical data produced by this state

organisation. This change of direction is reflected in the subject titles:

Titles of subjects taught in economic and social sciences

1967:

Seconde: Introduction to economic and social phenomena

Première: Economic and social life of the nation

Terminale: Growth and development

1982:

Seconde: Economy and society: an introduction

Première: Economy and society in France (structures, organisations, social and political institutions; economic structures and mechanisms; economic and social role of the state)

Terminale: Economic development and social change (economic and social changes in capitalist countries; economic and social changes in industrialised socialist countries; developing countries and their place in the global economy)

The first thing to note is the absence of any reference to 'phenomena' in the 1982 title of the course for the *classe de seconde*. This reference had been a subject of debate among teachers, who concluded that it was not admissible on the grounds that any analysis of society required the phenomena to be investigated to be constructed in such a way as to render them teachable, a process that was a form of conceptualism. Similarly, the syllabus for the *classe de première* has a different title, with the term 'economic and social life', which does not correspond to any economic or sociological conceptualisation, giving way to 'economy and society in France', which denotes an entity more in keeping with academic terminology. It should also be noted that the adjectives 'economic' and 'social' are still associated with each other; the subject had been challenged over this decision to qualify economic issues as 'social' and the retention of this dual qualifier indicates the deliberately multidisciplinary approach adopted for this programme.

The final point to be made is that the 1982 syllabus for the *classe de première* is organised around the notion of 'structure', while that for the *classe de terminale* is organised around the notion of 'system' (through the expedient of highlighting the differences between the economic and social organisation of capitalist, socialist and developing countries). The terms 'structure' and 'system' denote a way of integrating the economic and social dimensions. The word 'structure' is not specifically explained in the accompanying documentation and no reference is made to 'structuralism'. It should be noted that, following the 1980-81 dispute, the syllabuses were amended to produce the ones for 1982. They were drafted in collaboration with senior officials at INSEE, acting as academic guarantors, and the teachers who had won the political battle. How-

23 This is the most selective competitive examination for recruiting teachers for this subject.



ever, these teachers generally had studied economics only and had little or no background in sociology²⁴. In French economic thinking of the early 1970s, economic systems were characterised by specific structures. Thus, in these redrafted programmes there are echoes of the studies carried out at INSEE in the late 1970s on the 'structures of the productive system' and also of the terminology used in the university economics courses²⁵ that the teachers and young inspectors of schools of the time had taken.

The 1995 programmes compared with those of 1982
The changes in Eastern Europe following the disintegration of the socialist bloc, as well as the diversity of modes of development observed in the Southern countries, made it necessary to review the organisation of the programme in the *classe de terminale* at the end of the 1980s. An opportunity arose in 1995, when a plan for a general reform of French *lycées* was announced. The Professional Association of Teachers of Economic and Social Sciences (APSES) seized this opportunity to raise the profile of sociology and political science in the syllabuses. They were supported in this by a number of prominent sociologists, such as Henry Mendras and Christian Baudelot (Chatel 2009). Nevertheless, the tendency towards greater precision in the drafting of the syllabuses and increased theoretical content was still present at this time. It was particularly evident in the introduction of advanced options into ESS in 1995.

Titles of the subjects taught in economics and social sciences

1995:

Seconde: Economic and social life (life in society, consumption and production)

Première: Economic mechanisms and social organisation (Economic activities and their social framework; regulation of economic and social activities)

Advanced option in *première*: Political science

Terminale: Economic and social change: growth, development, disequilibria (The economic factors in growth and development; processes of social change; crises, modes of regulation and dynamics of development);

Advanced options in *terminale*: original writings to be studied in conjunction with certain topics. For example, Smith, Marx and Keynes are associated with the 'Work and employment' topic, Schumpeter with the 'Investment, capital and technological progress' topic,

and so on. Some economists (Marx and Keynes) are associated with several topics.

These programmes maintained and strengthened the multidisciplinary approach by introducing an advanced option in political science. The aim of embedding the teaching of economics within a more broadly-based social sciences programme was confirmed. Thus, in the *classe de première*, 'economic activities' are studied 'in their social context', the implication being that social contexts shape economic activities. The incorporation of the institutionalist approach to economics is evident in the introduction of a new topic entitled 'The institutionalisation of the market'. The market is conceptualised not simply as a 'mechanism' or concept developed by economists but also, in accordance with Karl Polanyi's²⁶ insights, as a social and historical reality. The adoption of this approach to the market marked a turning point and demonstrated that those responsible for drafting the programme were in tune with the institutionalist and neo-institutionalist schools in economics that were changing heterodox thinking in economics.

The relationship between the economic and the social dynamic, which is studied in *classe de terminale*, is a question not addressed in mainstream economics, whereas it lies at the heart of this final-year syllabus. In the 1982 syllabus, social change was seen as a consequence of economic change. In accordance with Marxist thinking, social change was explained in essence by the dynamic of infrastructures, with the structures that make up systems constituting entities characterised by a certain degree of coherence. The designers of the 1995 syllabus did not specify a preferred theoretical approach to the question of the relations between economic and social change; rather, they added the study of economic and social change to the syllabus without presupposing any particular order of causality between these two orders of phenomena. In so doing, they were explicitly taking account of the plurality of theoretical approaches available to social scientists seeking to address the difficult question of the links between economic and social change. They make this theoretical plurality one of the syllabus's main principles. The advanced option in *terminale* adopts a similar approach, with the plurality in this case resting on the study of a number of original writings by key figures in economic thought.

The difference between the wording of the syllabus for the *classe de seconde* and the more analytical wording of those for *première* and *terminale* is also worth noting. In *seconde*, the term 'economic life' reappears, even though it does not correspond to any concept in the social sciences. This probably reflects a concern to take pupils' preconceptions as a starting point for teaching, in contrast with the much more obviously

24 Interviews in 1988 with Henry Lanta, acting as General Inspector and co-editor of these new syllabuses, and Lanta (1989).

25 Before 1970, the final-year economics course at university was entitled 'Systems and structures', which was also the title of a university textbook by André Marchal (*Systèmes et structures économiques*, PUF, 1959).

26 Let us cite in particular *La grande transformation* (1944).



intellectual aspirations of the syllabuses in *première* and *terminale*.

The tendency to make the syllabuses in *première* and, especially, *terminale* more conceptual and theoretical is evident from these developments. This has remained true in more recent years (2001; 2003) under the influence of a small working group, operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and chaired by a university professor of economics, J.L. Gaffard, and of the members of this group who are mainly teachers in the *classes préparatoires*. The *classes préparatoires* are highly selective post-*baccalauréat* classes that prepare students for the competitive entrance examinations for the elite *grandes écoles*. This has been the subject of a debate that has found an echo in the journals associated with the discipline. Some ESS teachers fear the changes will make the programme inaccessible to pupils, while others see it as a guarantee of its academic credentials²⁷. However, the issue has not given rise to any real protest movement among ESS teachers, who are quick enough to raise objections when they feel that the fundamental principles of their discipline are being called into question. Indeed, as we have seen, they are able in such situations to mobilise themselves very effectively to take the necessary political action. Thus, this change in the intellectual requirements has been accepted; at most, it is a subject for debate among ESS teachers, another important question that is not tackled in this paper. It is true that it does not conflict with the multidisciplinary approach and the concept of economics as a social and political science that are the teachers' rallying cries. In any case, teachers enjoy a good deal of latitude when it comes to deciding how to translate the syllabuses into lessons, so that they are not necessarily very constrained by them, provided that the principles to which they subscribe are protected and they still have opportunities to deploy the active teaching methods to which they remain attached.

The actual curriculum: the twofold influence exerted by teachers

Our aim in this final section is to characterise the teaching of economics that actually takes place in French *lycées*. To this end, we investigated what happens when the topic entitled 'Markets and prices' is taught in the *classe de première*.

All the analyses presented below are based on two successive research exercises that looked at the teaching of the 'markets and prices' topic in the syllabus for

the *classe de première*²⁸. These two notions were selected because they are fundamental to any attempt to acquire the rudiments of economics. The aim of the first exercise was to characterise the contents of different lessons devoted to this topic. A dozen classes were observed, covering the whole of the prescribed course for this topic²⁹. We gathered together copies of the teachers' lesson notes, the exercise books of a number of pupils, the transcripts of the lessons dealing with this topic (including pupils' contributions) and the documents used as teaching aids. These materials were supplemented by an interview with the teacher, focusing on his way of teaching this part of the programme (his choices, difficulties, successes, etc.). In the second exercise, the investigation was continued by observing 24 teachers at a time when the programme was undergoing change. This time, the investigation centred not on lesson content but on the active teaching methods deployed. The same types of materials were collected the following year. Our characterisation of the knowledge dispensed during the lessons draws primarily on the first research exercise. However, the interpretations of the teachers' behaviour as they translated the programmes into actual teaching practices are based on all the material gathered.

From the formal to the actual curriculum: in search of coherence and meaning for the pupils

French teachers have national syllabuses for each subject, which they have to follow. Nevertheless, these syllabuses are not documents to be applied without further intervention or reflection. There are explanatory notes, textbooks available to pupils and teaching practices specific to each discipline. The standard exercises are based on the form taken by the *baccalauréat* examinations, which in this case involve analysis by candidates of a set of documents that always include statistical data. Thus, the teachers' task is to translate the syllabuses, within a context defined by government regulations, the availability of material and human resources and the practices of a professional community. This is the day-to-day aspect of their professional lives as teachers. In exercising their profession, they are driven by the principle of pedagogic freedom and responsibility. Finally, they are constrained by their pupils, in whom they have to instil knowledge and understanding of the prescribed syllabus.

The 1988 syllabus, which was still in force during the first research exercise, gave rather contradictory

27 As multiple public interventions in internal debate among teachers of some of them shows. See for instance the website www.eloge-des-ses.fr.

28 The research exercises were carried out at the INRP between 1992 and 1994 and between 1995 and 1996 (Chatel et al. 1995; Chatel et al. 2000).

29 The time devoted to the topic varies considerably from class to class. The average is around 10 hours of lesson time.



indications as to what should be taught. The topic entitled ‘Exchanges: markets, price formation, role of foreign countries’ was included in the second part of the syllabus, which was entitled ‘Economic structures and mechanisms’ (see above). This wording suggests a fairly general examination of exchanges within the French economy, a fairly descriptive approach to price formation and exchanges. However, the supplementary notes to the syllabus referred to the presentation of ‘theoretical mechanisms’ and stipulated that a connection be established with firms’ strategies. This opened up a vast area of enquiry. Examination of the textbooks and the lessons shows that virtually everything that could be taught was taught in one class or another.

It was no easy task to interpret the vast amount of material gathered because during the lessons, which were described as ‘dialogues’, the pupils were encouraged to speak and their voices became intermingled with the teacher’s. Moreover, these exchanges are mixed up with references to documents the pupils had been working on prior to the lessons. We approached the task in two complementary ways. First, we identified the vocabulary that was being systematically explained and which the pupils were required to learn. Second, we read the lesson transcripts in the order in which they had been gathered. In analysing them in this way, we were seeking to answer a number of questions. What was the main focus of the teaching time devoted to the topic? What issues were tackled successively during that time? Were connections made between these issues? If they were, what was the purpose of so doing? Our analysis of the transcripts, including the pupils’ interventions, showed that the lessons sometimes diverged from the main focus or guiding thread the teacher had planned and which was mentioned in both the preparatory lesson notes and the interview. It also appeared in the notes taken by the pupils, which turned out to be very similar from one pupil to another. Thus the divergences from the guiding thread that had been revealed by our analysis of the lesson transcripts were not evident in what the pupils wrote in their exercise books.

The vocabulary taught provides an initial indication of the range of interpretations offered in the teaching of this topic. In the analysis of the lesson transcripts, we noted that an extensive vocabulary of some 30 to 35 notions was used. This vocabulary is dominated by terms linked to the firm, i.e. to the supply side and to costs rather than to the demand side. Price emerged as a key variable in corporate strategies. Within this extensive vocabulary, there was a central core of key notions that were taught. Seventeen common notions were defined in 10 classes out of 12, while 25 common notions were defined in 5 classes or fewer. Examination of these notions confirms the importance attached to words relating to costs, supply and

competition, both perfect and imperfect. They reflect a concern on the part of teachers to respond to the stipulation in the syllabus that a link should be made with corporate strategies. However, these strategies were not the main focus of most of the lessons dealing with this topic.

Drawing on the categories used by academic economists, we attempted to discern the guiding thread of such and such a chapter or sequence of lessons on the topic.

The categories used to identify differences are academic categories, which lent an a priori structure to our analysis while at the same time also being categories formed by examining textbooks and observing lessons. The teachers, like the textbook authors, who are also teachers, approached this topic with conceptual frameworks in mind forged by the academic categories. An initial distinction concerns the level at which the principal object of investigation was to be located. Three different levels can be identified: the firm, the product market and the economy as a whole. For each of these three levels, a second distinction can be made depending on the extent to which the approach adopted was contextualised. For example, the firm can be studied in generic, abstract terms or, alternatively, from a very situated point of view. How does a firm react to competition? How does it form the price of its product? In the first case, the teaching would draw on the tools and line of argument used in microeconomics: marginal and average cost, construction of the supply curve. In the second case, it would draw on real or simulated case studies. The lesson content would amount almost to a textbook chapter on the firm. If the question is tackled in a more standard way, at the level of the product market, here too the approach may be generic and abstract or situated; the objects of investigation in this case would be the equilibrium between the supply of and demand for a product and the competition that determines a product’s price. Finally, the question of markets and prices can be approached in terms of the regulation of economic systems; in such an approach, market failures would become evident. Once again, this question can be tackled in an abstract way, as one of the three most frequently used textbooks does, or in a more contextualised way.

The content of the 12 lessons by principal topic and context adopted

	Firm	Product market	Market economy	Total
Generic	1	1	2	4
Situated	3	/	5	8
Total	4	1	7	12

Source: *Marchés et prix*, INRP, 1995, p.104



As the table above shows, most of the lessons (7 out of 12) focused mainly on the quality of the overall regulation of the economy through the market. This reflects the dominant approach adopted in the textbooks. However, it was not strictly in line with the syllabus, which stipulated that pupils should study the way in which markets function and the way in which prices are formed in product markets. However, only 1 lesson of the 12 reflected this interpretation of the syllabus. In line with the explanatory notes on the syllabus, the approach based on corporate strategy in the market place accounted for a reasonable share of the teaching time, being the focus of 4 out of 12 lessons. It was probably fairly accessible for pupils. Nevertheless, the lessons based on this approach were still in the minority.

Moreover, the lessons were dominated by a 'situated', i.e. contextualised interpretation of the economic questions (8 lessons out of 12). This choice is consistent with what the teachers said about favouring 'active' teaching methods that take account of pupils' knowledge about the economic and social world. They were trying to focus their teaching on cases of 'real' markets that were already a part of their pupils' everyday experience: the market for toys, for oil etc. There were many examples in the textbooks and documents studied in class.

Finally, it should be noted that most of the teachers chose to adopt a macroeconomic approach in their lessons on the 'market', which they conceptualised as a general mode of economic regulation. In adopting such an approach, they were ensuring that their teaching on this point was in line with the guiding thread running through the syllabus for the year or two years (*première* and *terminale*, see above). The syllabus for the *classe de première* focuses essentially on macrosocial questions (social structures up to national level, economic structures, the economic and social role of the state), while that for the *classe terminale* focuses exclusively on that level in order to investigate change over the medium and long term. Consequently, teachers and textbook writers constructed an overall guiding thread located at this level, which the prescribed syllabus did not have. They found a theoretical underpinning for this interpretation in regulation theory³⁰. This school of economic thought was well suited to this macrosocial approach to the market and to the critical approach to economics that most ESS teachers support. In particular, it enabled them to highlight the market failures that justify state intervention.

30 The regulation school is a heterodox approach to economics that draws on Keynesian and Marxist thinking and is best exemplified by the work of Robert Boyer and Michel Aglietta in France in the 1970s (Aglietta 1978; Boyer 1987).

Evolution of the programme: from the real curriculum to the formal curriculum

Thus, the certain degree of diversity in interpretations of this topic can be explained by a certain vagueness in the drafting of the syllabus in force at the time of our first research exercise and by the fact that there are a number of academically valid ways of approaching the question. The authors of the textbooks and the teachers preparing and delivering their lessons constructed a variety of guiding threads for this series of lessons. In some cases, the lessons lacked overall coherence, since it is likely that not all the teachers involved had the same capacity to interpret the syllabus. The interviews we conducted with around 30 of them in the mid-1990s showed that the teachers varied somewhat in their desire to construct their own guiding threads by freeing themselves from the textbooks. Some said they found it difficult to incorporate such and such a topic into their teaching, while expressing a desire to give their lessons an overarching theme. For example, on the question of 'market mechanisms', some of them told us that these theoretical aspects, which belong to the sphere of microeconomics, seemed to them difficult to teach, as Paul D. said³¹: 'I don't feel comfortable giving this course. (...) What I would like is to develop something more coherent, more integrated that would fit better with the programme as a whole'.

The macro-social approach that is dominant in the textbooks and in the actual teaching has been taken up in the syllabuses drafted after 1993. The 'exchanges, market and prices' topic, for example, is specified in greater detail than previously in the section of the syllabus entitled 'Market economy and society'. This same macro-social perspective is also dominant in the 2001 syllabus, which reformulates the 1993 syllabus. The question of markets is tackled under the heading 'Coordination through the market' in a section entitled 'Economic and social regulation'. In this iteration of the syllabus, it is the term 'regulation' that links the economic and social dimensions. The authors of the 2001 syllabus add a supplementary note, in which they say that the fundamental question addressed in this section of the syllabus is: 'How is society possible?'. The syllabus offers some starting points for discussion structured around three different bonds or ties: the social bond, the economic bond and the political bond, study of which constitutes the three major sections of the syllabus. It is clearly assumed in the syllabus that the economy is socially embedded.

In the case under analysis here, the relationship between the real and prescribed curriculums is partially reversed, since the actual teaching came first in most of the courses observed, the content of which was to be prescribed subsequently. It is true that the

31 Lesson analysed in Chatel 2001, p.217-224.



teachers were represented on the committees that rewrote the syllabuses. They brought their experience of devising lesson content to the work of these committees. Their professional association, APSES, had played a very active role with regard to the syllabuses (Jean and Rallet 2009) and their collective and political action had ensured that their teaching experience was taken into account. In this case, and perhaps to a greater extent than is generally thought, the teachers as a professional group had a certain degree of influence over the development of the syllabuses.

Conclusion

The teaching of economics in French *lycées* takes two forms. In the technological stream, it is paired with law within a group of technological subjects; in the general education stream, it is paired with the other social sciences. In this latter case, economics is taught within a discipline that combines the various academic social science subjects to form the basis for examining topics such as the firm, work and employment, consumption, etc. The result is a radically different approach to the teaching of economics both from that of university economics courses and the other economics programme in French *lycées*. The combination of economics with the other social sciences gives this programme a perspective that brings it close to political economy. This gives a distinctive kind of unity to the various forms of knowledge that make up the school discipline, which was conceived from the outset as a critical and socially aware programme. This so-called 'cultural' purpose (Malinvaud 1989) is in keeping with the objective of a general education; the acquisition by pupils of a set of conceptual tools that will prepare them to undertake economic analyses in the strict sense is not the principle or sole objective of the programme. The aim of providing pupils with a critical education has given rise to a programme that draws on heterodox schools of economic thought and affirms the principle of theoretical pluralism. The multidisciplinary and integrative approach has led to a focus on the most current

economic and social problems, which seems to give the course meaning from the pupils' standpoint. This has enabled them to investigate the recent financial crisis, for example, in some depth and to give them the beginnings of an understanding of its economic effects.

The discipline's body of teachers has proved to be an essential link in the defence and maintenance of this approach, which has often been challenged. It has been able to exert its influence both through its usual teaching activities and by taking real political action out of a concern to defend certain values and concepts of what they teach. The strong attachment to a subject, teaching of which is shared within the entity described as a 'school discipline', has provided the basis for the teacher's involvement in defining the syllabus content, which has been spearheaded by the professional association, and has helped to establish the principle of teacher involvement. This involvement appears to be beneficial in the sense that it has facilitated implementation of the prescribed syllabus. In the course of our research, we observed, for example, the teachers' constant concern to keep the topics they were teaching accessible for their pupils by rooting them in their social experience. Nevertheless, this teacher involvement is not the only quality standard to be applied to a curriculum, because the teachers are not the only interested parties who have to contribute to the debate on the curriculum. Moreover, they do not have a complete overview of the effects of their teaching. It has been observed, for example, that ESS teachers have tended to introduce an excess of theory into their teaching as a result of their constant search for academic legitimacy. This tendency has also been observed in curriculum studies by British sociologists, including those by Goodson (1981) on geography and rural studies or by Cooper (1983) on mathematics. We need to be able to establish whether the increased theoretical requirements that appear in the prescribed syllabuses prove to be truly accessible and to what extent they are actually fulfilled by pupils.

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