



Report on the auditing of social and economic science textbooks and syllabuses for French high schools

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REPORT ON THE AUDITING OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE TEXTBOOKS AND SYLLABUSES FOR FRENCH HIGH SCHOOLS

The Commission set up to audit social and economic science textbooks and syllabuses for French high schools was chaired by Prof Roger Guesnerie, holder of the Chair of Economic Theory and Social Organization.



▼ Education Minister Xavier Darcos entrusted the Commission with the task of “examining the content of social and economic science textbooks for high schools, to ensure that they were consistent with the objectives and content of syllabuses and with the plurality of currents of thinking constituting the field of social and economic science, and to verify the quality of the educational tools used”. The Minister’s letter requested that “particular attention” be paid to “the approach to the study of the market and enterprises”.

The Commission, composed of fourteen members⁽¹⁾ – individuals involved in the teaching of social and economic sciences; outside observers; academic representatives of the disciplines concerned; economists, sociologists and historians; and representatives of the economic world and government administration – undertook an in-depth examination of all aspects of the teaching of social and economic sciences likely to inform its reflection and enhance its audit⁽²⁾. ▲

The report is in two parts: the first is an overview while the second consists of recommendations. The following is simply a brief summary; the interested reader is referred to the full report⁽³⁾.

The Commission highlighted the positive aspects of the teaching of social and economic sciences in high school. Two excerpts of the report set out the reasons for a globally favourable judgement: “students’

appetence for understanding the social world, a world that is both close and mysterious, is at the source of the motivation produced by this teaching and from which it draws its strength”. Therefore,

1. Academics: Antoine d’Autume, Professor at the University of Paris I, Maison des Sciences Economiques, Jérôme Gautié, Professor at the University of Paris I, Centre for Economics, Sorbonne, Jean-Yves Grenier, “Directeur d’études” at the EHESS, Centre for Historical Research, Jacques Lautman, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Provence, Catherine Paradeise, Professor at the University of Marne-la-Vallée, Department of Sociology, Sandrine Spaeter-Loehrer, Professor at the University of Nancy II, BETA.

Professors of CPGE: Isabelle Waquet, Senior teacher at the Janson-de-Sailly high school, Vice-President of the AP-HEC, Gilles Martin, Senior teacher at the Lakanal high school, Editor-in-chief of the journal IDEE.

Qualified personalities: Michel Charpin, General Inspector of Finance
Sylvain David, Chairperson of the Association des Professeurs de Sciences Economiques et Sociales (APSES), Jean Etienne, General Inspector of National Education, senior member of the Social and Economic Science Group, Michel Pébereau, member of the Haut Conseil de l’Education.

The Commission also benefited from the efficient and diligent assistance of Michelle Huart.

2. The Commission met 8 half-days, from February to June. It interviewed 14 outside personalities, who provided information and enriched the reflection on a large number of issues: history of the branch and its performance, future of the students, genealogy and content of the syllabuses, discussion of the educational objectives, analysis of the textbooks, international comparisons, etc. The examination of the textbooks was based on a systematic reading plan which also benefited from discussions on the syllabuses.

3. Available on the site <http://ses.ens-lsh.fr/>.

“both the subsequent success of students who took these options, and honourable academic success rates in the basic disciplines⁽⁴⁾ argue for this branch”. This conclusion is largely grounded and supported in the report, which emphasizes the merits of the work of those teachers who keep it alive.

Criticism has however not been avoided. Even though, as the report points out, “the fiercest outside criticism, especially of the textbooks, reflects a feeling among the authors of a break in ‘symbolic neutrality’ (for instance through caricatures that stigmatize actors and institutions)”, the Commission’s focus was broader, on “the quality of the presentation of the intellectual debate, ... the balance between arguments concerning questions of social and economic policy, in particular “. Its conclusions are based on a significant investment by its members in a systematic comparative reading of the textbooks. “The textbooks are designed to be tools for active educational methods, ... most often consistent with the syllabus and rich in information.” But “while some are good, overall, other are not; the information that they provide is sometimes remarkable but is not always of the same quality”. The Commission also noted that compliance with the “demand for intellectual secularity” is “most often present” although “exceptionally but unacceptably absent”, and “somewhat awkwardly implemented”. For instance, it is regrettable that a “presentation of major intellectual debates in the past does not fit them adequately into the dynamics of accumulation of knowledge”, and that there is “a tone which can systematically be negative and

peremptory”. In fact, criticism of the textbooks is often linked to the syllabus design: “it is partly the extent of the field covered, and the complexity of the questions under discussion compared to the time devoted to them, that explains the inequality of content and the difficulty of attaining objectivity”. This first strong and unanimous conclusion of the Commission proved to be a subject of broad consensus among teachers and other participants in this debate.

The first finding – “grasp all lose all” – is worth considering in more detail and putting back into a more general perspective, i.e. that of the objectives assigned to the teaching of social and economic sciences (SES) in high school, and of the means deployed to meet them.

The report states that the teaching of SES “is designed to contribute to educating students and to preparing them for higher education and, in some cases – but this is not an immediate function – for professional life. These two objectives are so to speak common to all high-school education. The specific nature of the SES section is that it involves not only one but several academic disciplines and primarily economics and sociology, as well as political science. It starts with the study of ‘objects’ of the social and economic world, which the disciplines view from different angles”.

The report therefore questions the existing tension between the objectives of general education and intellectual training. “The former suggests a broad coverage and tends towards a sort of rapid journey though the main issues of the contemporary world, but one that is

as exhaustive as possible”. The latter objective calls for “the learning of intellectual approaches, of which some are common to the social sciences (the status of evidence, the probabilistic interpretation of facts) while others are peculiar to the disciplines”. Learning to know the world and learning to think the world are not contradictory injunctions, says the report; on the contrary, they are complementary. They can and must be reconciled.

The second strong conclusion by the Commission, on which there was broad consensus within the Commission but less so outside of it, is that this reconciliation is not properly achieved: the encyclopaedism of syllabuses goes hand in hand with an insufficient assimilation of the basics and the cultures of the disciplines. General knowledge and intellectual training suffer as a result: “by studying all the major problems of society, and by being unable to use more than a very small number of the available tools⁽⁵⁾ [...], one takes the risk of teaching and concluding on them very superficially, and of not making the distinction – often difficult but necessary – between differences on the understanding of mechanisms, and differences of objectives”. I cannot go into the details of the other points of the Commission’s argument, which emphasizes the reality of disciplinary knowledge as well as its equally real intellectual autonomy, currently far from the ideal of a “reunified social science”. The social and economic sciences are no different from other scientific knowledge. Their study is based on the knowledge of conceptual and analytical tools, of methods, and must eventually lead to the assimilation of disciplinary

4. Especially, says the report, “if one assesses it unconditionally, that is, assuming a successful pass-rate at the end of the second year of university.

5. The report stresses empirical studies here.

reasoning, here sociological, there economic. “The legitimacy of the mobilization of knowledge in social and economic science and *a fortiori* the fecundity of the disciplines’ different views of the same subject, is related to the scientific relevance of each of these disciplines.”

Based on this analysis, the Commission proposes to revise the syllabuses which, while emphasizing the purpose of education to provide an opening onto the contemporary social and economic world, must make the acquisition of “fundamental⁽⁶⁾” knowledge and competencies their core function. The idea is not to organize education around a corpus of abstract knowledge, but to combine description – non-exhaustive but in-depth and educationally attractive – with access to explanations. In other words, it is necessary to combine knowledge on “objects” and acquisition of tools, both rigorously and effectively, that is, modestly and without encyclopaedism. To obtain this combination of objects and competencies with the best that each discipline has to offer, the report proposes a sort of reform algorithm. It recommends putting out a vast appeal for contributions from teachers of SES and academics, which exploits as fully as possible the abundance and richness of reflection on this issue in many countries. The Commission believes that a reform of the syllabuses made in this spirit would provide additional arguments for the introduction of compulsory teaching of SES in high school.

Two points to conclude, which are, I suppose, simply the amazement of a layperson when it comes to communication.

First, this report, which many attentive readers have deemed moderate and fair, has sometimes been presented in the press under provoking titles that reflected neither the content of the report nor even – and no less surprisingly – the articles that the titles announced. The mysteries of information! Second, it is true that the report proposes an *aggiornamento* of education that has not faulted, far from it, but which almost every member of the Commission felt can be modernized and substantially improved. It is perfectly understandable that these proposals triggered many debates with considerable disagreement. Some of the ulterior motives that the Audit Commission was accused of having are, however, surprising. For instance, to take only one example relating to my discipline, albeit not the most astonishing one: the Commission was accused by some of being anti-Keynesian. A very strange affirmation indeed for anyone familiar with the intellectual work of the economists who sat on the Commission! The mysteries of reading and interpretation! ■

Professor Roger Guesnerie

6. For example, for economics, elementary concepts and knowledge on markets, types of goods, rents, formation of income, risks, determination of global level of activity, and innovation.