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Democratisation of Education and reduction in inequalities of opportunities : an obvious link?

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Democratisation of Education is currently presented as an obvious way to reduce social inequalities of opportunities in life. But this consensual view is seldom precisely assessed. In this presentation, we intend to put into perspective what we know concerning the evolution of both the inequalities concerning education and the inequalities in life chances, in France, since the 50's : Has society become more equitable while education was expanding ?

Let's look first at the evolution of social mobility, in France. During the twentieth century, the global trend is a high degree of stability. Some evolution does exist (towards slightly more social mobility), but most of this comes from changes in the social structure : decrease in the relative importance of the farmers and increasing room at the top (managerial professions, intellectual professions...); but despite wider access to professional-level occupations, the pattern and the strength of the association between class of origin and class of destination remains largely preserved. However, one may conclude to a slight but steady decrease in the net association between social background and the position achieved.

So there is **a contrast between the relative stability observed as far as mobility patterns are concerned and the dramatic expansion of education which occurred at the same time**. How can this gap be explained ? Here, we will explore three possible explanations.

1. While the diploma possessed plays a part in the mobility one achieves, diploma distribution remains unequal.

Let's look now at the evolution of social inequalities in access to education, that is the issue of democratisation, which is a controversial topic : the global trend is that while some levels of education are now achieved by everybody (and so "democratised"), inequalities have shifted.

In France, since the 50's, the percentage of a generation getting to the level of the Baccalaureat has increased dramatically : it was about 5% en 1950, it reaches 21% in 1970, 43% in 1990 and stagnates today at about 69%. Today, one pupil out of five leaves school with a diploma at least equal to « bac + 3 » (that is three years after obtaining the Bac), 40% with a "bac + 2".

But the access to the different diplomas remains stamped by strong social inequalities : **among pupils having entered the lower secondary school in 1989, 85% of the high SES children have got a Baccalauréat (a general or technological one), compared to 37% among the children of manual workers and even 23% among the children of unemployed or retired parents¹.**

Today, inequalities take a more qualitative form (not so much access to the “Baccalaureat” level, for instance, but which “Baccalaureat” you get, which track you enter at that level, not so much access to a tertiary degree but which one...). We are facing a stability, even an increasing trend, concerning what we can call the « social specialization » of the different tracks. Today, among youngsters attaining the last grade of upper secondary school, 50% of teachers’ children (45% for the children of the other top groups) attend a scientific stream, compared to about 20% among children of unskilled manual workers ; the latter are much more often in the various professional specialities of vocational tracks². And the development of the “bac professionnel » has been an important component of this « segregative democratization » (pupils from the lowest groups and unemployed parents account for about 70% of the whole number of pupils).

So, at the secondary level, we are presently facing a segregative democratisation. It is the same at the tertiary level : the weight of students from working class backgrounds is increasing all across the board, but in the meantime, the evolution is contrasted between the different and unequal tracks : stability or even reduction of their weight in the elite schools, increasing weight in the PHD studies of the universities. So, among youngsters born between 1959 and 1968, **about 21% of teachers or upper class’s children have entered an elite school, compared to less than 1% among unskilled manual workers’ children.**

So, a first explanation for the gap between the only slightly increasing social mobility and a strongly increasing access to education is that the latter has not been accompanied by a proportional democratisation. If we observe a general downward trend in origin-education association (because every pupil is going further), this is compatible with remarkably stable (or even increasing) effects in transitions at more advanced stages of the educational system.

2. A second manner of explaining that gap is that we are facing a process of devaluation of diplomas, along with their expansion.

¹ For a presentation and a global analysis of social inequalities in French school, see M.Duru-Bellat (2002). *Les inégalités sociales à l’école. Genèse et mythes*, Paris, PUF.

² About 53% of them, compared to only 14% for teachers’ children (and 21% in the other top groups).

While long schooling goes on protecting against unemployment, students with a tertiary diploma are facing important problems since the beginning of the 90's, and are entering a competition with students possessing only a secondary diploma. The latter are more often relegated to subordinate jobs, and have less access to high qualified ones.

Till the generation born in 1967, the possession of the Baccalaureate provided one chance out of two to get a first upper or intermediate job ; this is no longer the case and this frontier is now getting nearer “bac +2” : at that level, one will soon have one chance out of two of obtaining a manual or a clerical job.

Today, who gets what kind of job ?

Jobs (in March 2002) of youngsters having left school about 5 years before

	professional	Intermediate	Clerks, manual workers	Unemployed
Elite schools	76	13	4	7
Bac+3 or 4	27	39	21	13
Bac+2 (vocat.)	5	48	38	9
Bac	3	23	52	22
CAP-BEP	0	8	70	22
No dipl.	0	4	47	49

Source : enquête Emploi, INSEE

Today, only students from elite schools have good chances to get top level jobs. Concerning students from universities (at bac+ 3 or 4 level), they have roughly as much chance of getting a clerk level job as a professional one. The probability of getting a professional job is nearly zero among bachelors...

But it is very important to stress that a diploma always brings some relative advantage : it's better to get a « bac+3 » than a bac or a bac rather than no diploma...So going further in the educational system remains a good investment, even if this relative advantage has slightly weakened since the 70's. The problem is precisely that this devaluation of diplomas, as far as jobs or salaries obtained are concerned, goes along with the stability of relative advantages. So, it fosters a self-perpetuating trend... Individuals are caught in a trap compelling then to go further and further to get the same return; and in that “opportunity trap” (as Philip Brown called it), middle and upper class families possess advantages.

So a second way to explain the gap between educational expansion and the stability of opportunities in life is that the relative advantage afforded by credentials has been weakening : even if students from working classes get more diplomas, those diplomas have less value on the job market.

3. **The third explanation is that the job you get and the social mobility you achieve don't rely entirely upon the diploma you got. With the same credentials, youngsters have unequal chances according to their social background and this trend is quite stable or even increasing...**

Let's leave now the micro level (for individuals) for the macro level, the question being : what is the benefit for society as a whole, from this expansion of education...?

First, concerning economic benefits... The links between educational expansion and economic growth is a very controversial issue among economists. Education seems to boost economic growth, but mainly as far as underdeveloped countries are concerned (when primary education becomes universal). But because something is valuable (education), does it follow that more and more of it is always profitable ? **Today, there is no reliable demonstration that for rich countries like ours still more education is a policy leading to more prosperity.**

Moreover, **one can be at least sceptical concerning the joined expected effects of the expansion of education;** actually, nobody would say that the more educated youngsters are more public-spirited, manifest more cultural curiosity, seem more socially integrated and so on. **And the fact that education is considered more and more as a mere positional good may be considered as a perversion,** leading to that "diploma disease" that Ronald Dore exposed in 1976, in developing countries (he described an inflation of diploma, and a growth in their value as positional goods for employers, leading to an examination oriented schooling, with ill effects on the quality of learning as well as on subsequent attitudes towards the process of learning, such as ritualism, no intrinsic interest in knowledge...).

Conclusion :

So, we are led to ask whether a policy of schooling expansion may be an efficient way to reduce social inequalities. Instead, we are led to consider educational expansion as a counter-reform, authorizing both giving a bit more to the least advantaged and giving the possibility of remaining ahead to the most advantaged. And expanding education is precisely what allows social inequalities to be maintained.

We are following here some Collins' hints, concerning credentialism as a legitimating class strategy, or the thesis of sociologists such as Hout, Rafferty et Bell (1993) of "*maximally maintained inequality*", that is actors' strategies striving to preserve their advantage with the complicity of politicians since the educational system is financed by public resources.

While the French government goes on with the consensual political aim of expanding education (the latest objective is to lead 50% of a generation to a tertiary degree), this continuous growth which goes along with a persisting 8% leaving the system with no qualification at all is the best way to allow social inequalities to be pushed further on, with ill assessed and even taboo social, psychological and monetary costs.

Of course, one may argue that more education is good in itself ; but one may reply that if education is becoming only a means in the race, that is mostly a positional good, it first requires that a lot of pupils must fail to master it (since the winners must not be too numerous if they are to win something). Second, it spoils its meaning... We seem to have forgotten that education can have (and did had in the past) functions other than selection and sorting; expanding education as a means in itself is narrowing our conception of education. Not only does it lead to focusing on quantitative targets (in France, 80% or 50%...), but it leads to neglect of the question of not only how much but what kind of education we want, and for what.

These are not trivial issues, since they concern the role we give to education, in the allocation of unequal positions in life... Especially in France, education is at the core of a democratic dream of a society which is precisely all the more just and efficient as education plays an important part. The facts show that this is not all that simple...

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