



Working Paper 28

Lionel Jospin and the Dismantling of French Education

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The left-wing French politician Lionel Jospin (1937-2026) died recently and major obituaries in French and English-language papers covered in great detail his long and eventful career, which included leadership of the French Socialist Party, membership in the Chamber of Deputies (parliament), national Minister of Education (1988-1993), Prime Minister (1997-2002), and twice being candidate for President of France. His shocking third-place defeat in 2002 marked the ascent of the far right in France, whose candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen defeated him in the first round, before being defeated himself by incumbent President Jacques Chirac in the second round.

But even the long, detailed obituary in the authoritative, center-left Paris “Le Monde” (24 March 2026) fails to dwell on what is probably Jospin’s most notable accomplishment, aside from the 35-hour work-week, and his most damaging one: his role in dismantling the once-outstanding French national primary and secondary-education system from 1989 on with legislation called ‘the Jospin law’. These low-egalitarian, content-empty, dumbing-down, euphemistic educational policies were passed by a temporary parliamentary majority of Socialists and Communists under the Presidency of Socialist François Mitterand (1916-1996; President 1981-1995).

The story of this wrecking enterprise has been told in many French books over the last twenty years, but in English with outstanding lucidity, insight, detail, and documentation---and relevance

to the USA as well as to France---in **E.D. Hirsch's 2016 book Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Educational Theories**¹ Hirsch's chapter echoes the famous French phrase used to describe the rapid, calamitous French defeat by Germany in 1940---"**The Educational Fall of France**"---and he includes graphs, statistics, and an appendix with a guide and translation of major French government reports documenting the decline, in measurable outcomes, in the French system. They make melancholy but revealing, antiseptic reading, and Hirsch does not fail to use what he calls "these astonishing data" to discuss parallel American K-12 educational components, dynamics, and developments.

In the 1980s, as Hirsch points out, France had the best large school system in Europe, probably in the world. The lamentably destructive role of prominent left-wing French intellectuals on it in the 1980s and '90s reminds the reader of Alexis de Tocqueville's mordant chapter in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856) on the destructive role of fashionable 18th-century French writers in preparing the way for the catastrophic revolutionary events from 1789 on: "How toward the middle of the eighteenth century men of letters took the lead in politics and the consequences of this new development."² In this case the destroyers were left-wing philosophers and sociologists, including prominent figures such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Bouveresse. The effects of the deconstructionists Derrida and Michel Foucault on the conception and teaching of the Humanities and social sciences at university level in the Anglophone world have been similarly catastrophic over the last seventy-five years³.

The career of Lionel Jospin himself presents a revealing intellectual moral trajectory. Born in 1937, he was the son of a domineering, idealistic Social-Gospel Protestant educator who taught in and then directed an institution for delinquent youths. The son rebelled against the father's religion---he later called himself a Protestant atheist-- but retained his left-wing politics, while surreptitiously moving even further left by becoming a secret Trotskyite operative over a thirty year period. A highly-educated economist and inheritor of France's high rationalist, Cartesian intellectual tradition and institutions, Jospin and his friends and allies on the left (including the louche libertine Dominique Strauss-Kahn) proved enthusiastically open to euphemistic, low-egalitarian policies that helped rapidly weaken and dismantle the educational system of which they were themselves beneficiaries.

Coming from a much more modest, southern-French agricultural background, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was the principal author of the crucial government-sponsored 1989 report that

critiqued existing French schooling as merely the social reproduction of elites through so-called liberal education (mocked as ‘encyclopédisme’). A joke that circulated in the decades of decline that followed the Jospin revolution was that Bourdieu’s ‘reforms’ made certain that the kind of upward academic mobility from which he benefitted to become famous and influential would no longer be possible: the Bourdieu reforms made sure there would be no more Bourdieus.

What Jospin and the other Socialists and Communists did was to succumb to the power of seductive words and slogans⁴. As the great French physicist and historian of science Pierre Duhem (1861-1916) noted mournfully over a century ago of many of his modernist French intellectual predecessors and colleagues: “Our vivacity of mind [esprit] gives way to the counsels of the seductive imagination....reality often appears less beautiful to us than fiction.”⁵ The French political thinker Raymond Aron (1905-1983) made the same argument more profoundly and devastatingly about French intellectuals from the 1930s through the 1950s in *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955)⁶. This intellectual promiscuity or incontinence was (and is) a chief weakness of American educational “progressives” too over the last century since the disciples of the mind-numbingly obscure lecturer and writer John Dewey gradually established themselves in the teachers’ colleges, schools of education, departments of education, and credentialing bodies.

Who can be against ‘student-centered education’, ‘learning how to learn’, ‘competences’ instead of ‘subjects’, the ‘natural’ as against the ‘artificial’, ‘individualized instruction’ as opposed to ‘lockstep’ whole class instruction, student-initiated ‘orality’ and ‘critical-thinking skills’ against traditional literacy, writing and books, ‘discovery learning’ as against phonics and memorization, ‘social studies’ as against history, the promise of equality of outcome or result as opposed to ‘mere’ equality of opportunity (and thus real access to public and private goods by means of effective education)?⁷ To doubt any of these virtue-signalling, “progressive” preferences is assumed or alleged to be ignorant, self-interested, or reactionary.

It is to the immense credit of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., that over the last fifty years his body of scholarship and writing and his commitment to building and promoting the carefully-sequenced, knowledge-rich Core Knowledge elementary-school curriculum in the USA have had substantial effect not only there but elsewhere---e.g., in the UK (since the educational ministry of Michael Gove), Portugal (under Education Minister and mathematician Nuno Crato), and to some extent even in France.

The great school-master of English-speaking people Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) repeatedly warned his ebullient admirer and future biographer James Boswell against ‘modern cant’, or fashionable talk, famously advising him: “My dear friend, clear your mind of cant”; and [however you speak,] “don’t think foolishly” (15 May 1783). No better, more hygienic advice has ever been given when it comes to K-12 education: the dominant American, British, and French educational jargon consists of pretentious, simplistic, credulous clichés and bromides. Thus another of the inestimable services that E.D. Hirsch has rendered to his readers is “The Critical Guide to Educational Terms and Phrases” that he appended to his 1996 book **The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them**.⁸ Much of it is deftly satirical and thus reading it would be hilarious if it were not so sad and sobering.

Hirsch would be very much in sympathy with the veteran French teacher Jean-Paul Brighelli---46 years of teaching, most of it to poor and immigrant students---whose best-selling recent book on French schooling, **La fabrique du crétin** (The cretin factory) documents, deplores, and derides the vocabulary of “pédadémagogie institutionnalisée” (institutionalised pedagogy-demagogy), its policies, and the effects it has had throughout the French national elementary and secondary school world.⁹ Inevitably more of a practitioner than a theorist, from the trenches of teaching Brighelli nevertheless makes the same case that Hirsch has made against the glozing, anti-cultural ideas, sentiments, and forces that are rooted in the Romantic tradition deriving from Rousseau.

Himself an intellectual historian and literary theorist of great distinction, Hirsch appended to his 2016 *Why Knowledge Matters* a brilliant, brief essay on “The Origins of Natural-Development Theories of Education.” It deserves the very widest circulation and the closest attention. In one sense its pedigree goes back to the very first serious critics of Rousseau, such as Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and the Italian H.S. Gerdil (1718-1802), whose classic attack on Rousseau’s vast, vastly influential, and sophisticated didactic novel *Émile* (1762) has recently been translated into English¹⁰.¹⁰ More recent critics of Rousseau include early twentieth-century cultural conservatives such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and T.E. Hulme, and later figures such as T.S. Eliot and Jacques Maritain, but Hirsch’s summaries of the disastrous effects of educational naturalism and Romantic pantheism in the **Schools We Need and Why Knowledge Matters** are vital sources of contemporary prudence, wisdom, and guidance for our own times.

The Jospin legislation of 1989 made, Hirsch argues, its “most decisive change...in the curriculum and pedagogy of the elementary school.”¹¹ Yet the French *déba*cle since the 1990s was in fact preceded by the American *déba*cle largely brought about from the 1920s on by John Dewey, heavily indebted to the Romantic pantheism of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Hegel; the American decline reached statistically documentable depths from the 1960s on. Dewey’s Hegelian, immanentist faith in historical progress has become the established ideology of teacher training in the USA over the last century (despite its stunning disconfirmation by human history since 1914).

Jean-Paul Brighelli also relates “the educational fall of France” to the inappropriate transference of speculative ideological concepts of linguistics and mathematics from their proper argumentative precincts in French universities to the world of elementary education, thus creating a pedagogic smoke-screen impossible for parents to see through clearly in any way that would enable them to help their children. This new measure of “equalization”---disinheriting the unfairly privileged---re-defines and re-directs all instruction downward into banalities and novelties having in common their obscurity and their scorn for the traditional didactic modes and academic contents of elementary education that were so strong in France for over a hundred years that they brought it by the 1980s the highest and fairest educational outcomes of any major public system in the world.

For an American reader one of the most revealing and poignant recommendations of the teacher Brighelli to reverse or mitigate the French educational ‘apocalypse’ he documents is decentralization and regionalization of the top-down (‘dirigiste’) French system. In effect, this is what has been secured to a large extent in the USA in the reservation of the control of education to the separate states¹².

The historic role of French enthusiasts and enragés of the 1968 revolution (‘soixante-huitards’) was to bring about the educational decline following the Jospin legislation of 1989, two hundred years after the onset of the original French Revolution. Along with the global subversion of university humanities teaching (e.g., the Anglo American humanist tradition of Matthew Arnold) by the ascendancy of the ‘deconstructionists’ Derrida and Foucault, their neo-Marxist allies Pierre Bourdieu and Lionel Jospin delivered a lethal blow to the world’s most effective and equitable large, public elementary and secondary school system, the fruit not only of a century of institutionalization but of hundreds of years of literacy, rationality, culture, and civilization.

The sophisticated Romantic primitivism---true ‘childishness’--- of Rousseau and his descendants triumphed over the modesty, urbanity, and brilliance of many generations of French sages and savants who knew, with the great moderate Michel de Montaigne, that “these two things I have always seen together---super-celestial talk and subterranean morals.”¹³ The ‘Protestant atheist’ and secret Trotskyite Lionel Jospin did his work well; and France and the world are the poorer for it.

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¹ Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016, pp.131-150. See my review of it, “**The Heroism of E.D. Hirsch**,” *National Review* (NY), 18 February 2017.

² **The Old Regime and the French Revolution**, tr. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), Part III, Ch.1, pp.138-148. On Tocqueville, see also my “Virtue’s Aristocrat,” *National Review*, 2 April 2007, reprinted in French in my *La restauration de l’homme* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 2020), pp.239-245.

³ See the French savant René Girard’s critique of them as described in Cynthia L. Haven’s **Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard** (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), ch.8, “The French Invasion.”

⁴ For effective, revealing satires on the “progressive” laundering of political and educational language, see the titles E.D. Hirsch refers to in his notes to his chapter on “The Educational Fall of France” and S. Kovacs and É. De Montety, “Parlez-vous la novlangue socialiste?” *Le Figaro* (Paris), 22 janvier 2014, p.2.

⁵ See Duhem, *German Science* (1915), tr. John Lyon (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1991), pp.68-9. On the great Duhem’s significance, see my “Dispelling the Grand Illusion,” *National Review Online*, 21 December 2013, reprinted in French in my *La restauration de l’homme*, op.cit., pp.215-222.

⁶ See a new edition of Aron’s important *Mémoires* (1983), edited with introduction and notes by Perrine Simon-Nahum (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2025). For further analysis of twentieth-century French intellectual and cultural life see my own “One Hundred Years of Surrealism,” *Modern Age*, 14 November 2024.

⁷ For more recent detail on the French educational scene, see the heart-rending account of a veteran French teacher (46 years, most in poor areas with large immigrant populations : sometimes 90%), Jean-Paul Brighelli, *La fabrique du crétin: Vers l’apocalypse scolaire* (2nd ed., Paris: Archipoche, 2022; the first edition (2005) sold 175,000 copies)

⁸ NY Doubleday 1996, pp.239-271. Compare the 2014 *Le Figaro* satire: note 4.

⁹ Brighelli, op.cit. (note 7), pp.41, 49, 55-6, et passim.

¹⁰ **The Anti-Emile: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Education against the Principles of Rousseau** (1763), tr. W.A. Frank (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011).

¹¹ Hirsch, **Why Knowledge Matters**, p.4.

¹² See my “**Parents vs. the State**,” *Crisis Magazine*, 23 November 2012.

¹³ Quoted in slightly different form by Denis de Rougemont, **The Devil’s Share** (Eng.tr., NY: Pantheon, 1945), pp.176-7.