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# Class Boundaries in Spain: Intergenerational and regional changes in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis

*Pierre Blavier – Pre-print version – February 2022*

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## Abstract

This chapter addresses social class boundaries in Spain. It presents various peculiarities of the country, such as its strong regional heterogeneity and the specific historical trajectory that it has followed since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s. Socioeconomic changes over the past two decades, including the property bubble, rapidly increasing female participation in the labour market, and substantial waves of migration have made it difficult to draw a simple picture in terms of social class analysis. The 2008 economic crisis disrupted the trends that were then under way, and raised awareness of both intergenerational and labour market inequalities. This contribution therefore focuses on the relations between these various dimensions, and in particular on regional and generational inequalities, which play a structuring role when Spanish society is analysed through the lens of social class. Finally, the chapter suggests that, in a way, the electoral changes witnessed in Spain since 2008 can be partly understood as reflecting these changes in social class boundaries. To this end, the chapter draws on several available sources of empirical data, from both the national statistical office and international surveys.

## Introduction

For several reasons, analysing Spanish society through the lens of social class boundaries is not an easy task. Firstly, the country is characterised by high regional (*comunidad*) heterogeneity in terms of economic sectors, inequalities, labour markets, and even welfare systems. This partly explains the presence of independence movements and separatist political parties in various Northern regions, most notably in Catalonia, but also in the Basque country, Galicia, and Valencia. Secondly, over the last few decades Spain has been repeatedly hit by economic crises, which have brought about high levels of unemployment and undermined the whole social structure. The last such crisis occurred in 2008, but shocks have also been felt in other domains: the decline of the agricultural sector triggered massive internal migratory flows as early as the 1970s, women have entered the labour market in large numbers since the middle of the 1990s, and immigration increased substantially in the 2000s. Thirdly, the concept of social class boundaries is not central to Spanish sociology: for example, it is striking that Bourdieu has influenced the production of theoretical works in Spanish (Guijarro Arribas & Moreno Pestaña, 2020), but has inspired only limited empirical research in the field of social inequalities.

Obviously, these features do not prevent us from taking a social class perspective on Spanish society, but they make it more difficult to draw a clear picture, since social changes

of considerable magnitude have developed rapidly over the last few decades. The country has had four legislative elections in four years (2015, 2016, and two in 2019). It can probably be interpreted as a far-reaching consequence of the 2008 economic crisis and a result of the weakening of the two-party system that had prevailed until then. And, it says a lot about the divided state of the country and the instability of the current situation with regard to relations between social classes. On the other hand, this context also makes an approach from a social class perspective all the more relevant.

Yet another difficulty, of a more practical nature, concerns the indicators that can be used to assess the divisions between social classes. Spain has used its own occupational classification since 1961 (Clasificación Nacional de Ocupaciones, CNO), but this is directly inspired by the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Revisions to the CNO have closely followed revisions to the ISCO from the 1960s to the 2010s. This reflects the historical absence of a strong statistical tradition in Spain, in contrast to France or the United Kingdom (Duriez et al., 1991). Historically, the Franco dictatorship was inclined to emphasise social cohesion rather than social hierarchies, and this can be seen as an easy explanation for this situation. However, even today Spain still conforms to the European nomenclature rather than elaborating its own, despite the existence of specificities in Spanish society that could require a more bespoke one, including high levels of unemployment and informal labour, a high proportion of independent workers, etc. (Maloutas, 2007). Further research would be necessary to elucidate this problem, but one explanatory factor may be that other classical indicators are used to describe social classes, in particular those relating to income and education.

The central part of this chapter examines how various aspects of Spanish society have been impacted by the 2008 economic crisis: how has a contemporary European country such as Spain managed to cope with such a shock? However, we will begin by addressing the importance of regional and generational divisions in Spain, since these are closely related to social class boundaries. Next we will discuss inequalities in living standards, in relation to the labour market, income, and housing inequalities. The evolutions in these aspects of society are not easy to grasp through a simple social class interpretation, as they depend on many different factors and are in continuity from historical trends already under way in the decades before the economic downturn and the dramatic rise of unemployment. However, all of these developments undoubtedly contributed to the major political changes that have taken place in Spain since the beginning of the 2010s, which will be analysed in the last part of this chapter.

### **Factors of class inequalities in Spain: The importance of regional and generational divisions**

The divided state of Spanish society is notably due to its strong regional heterogeneity. The regions have deep historical roots, which make them strongly linked with social class. Officially, Spain is composed of 17 regions (plus the autonomous cities Ceuta and Melilla). Its regional heterogeneity is hard to sum up briefly, but various groups of regions can be identified. Firstly, the regions in the Southern group (Extremadura, Andalusia, Murcia) and the Central group (Castilla-León, Castilla-la-Mancha, Aragon) are essentially rural, and have a strong agricultural tradition. It was primarily from such rural areas, far from the sea, that internal migratory waves emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. These migrants moved to cities and especially urban areas such as Madrid, Barcelona, or Valencia, in the hope of better incomes and thus better living standards. This internal migratory movement is fundamental as it still structures social class boundaries in Spain. Similar trends were experienced in other Southern European countries (e.g. in Greece) and even earlier in certain Western European

countries (e.g. in France). As this change came late in Spain, owing to the lateness of its industrialisation, many families still own a family home in their village of origin, and migrant families originating from internal parts of the country are less inclined to speak and support regional languages in their region of destination (Catalan, Basque, Valencian, or even Galician languages). The latter correspond to more urban, industrial, and wealthy regions, inhabited by an industrial and commercial bourgeoisie that tends to support liberalism and regionalism – although independence movements sometimes also draw support from left-wing parties, such as the CUP (Candidatura d'Unitat Popular) in Catalonia. All the Northern regions situated on the Atlantic coast (Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, the Basque country, Navarra) are mostly industrial (with harbours, shipyards, and fisheries). Finally, the Canary islands and the Balearic islands have a distinct character of their own, with a strong tourist economy. Thus regional differentiation plays a very important role in Spain, and all the more so as public policies may differ between regions.

In addition to its regional divisions, Spanish society is also characterised by strong generational inequalities, notably in terms of education, poverty, and the labour market. As in other European countries such as France, the level of educational attainment has increased in previous decades. The comparison of educational levels over these decades is complicated because of various educational reforms (1970, 1990, 2002, 2006) and forces to use very aggregate categories<sup>1</sup>. In 1992, about 75% of Spanish 25–64 years old citizens had completed only primary-level education<sup>2</sup> and only a little over 10% had graduated with a university-level qualification (Figure 1). In 2019, less than 40% of the population had completed only primary education, whereas nearly 40% had a university-level degree. This upsurge has at least two consequences.

The first consequence is the particular way in which educational inequality has evolved as higher education has expanded. Ballarino et al. (2009) investigated this issue for cohorts between 1920 and 1969 and showed that inequalities in educational outcomes (IEO) slightly diminished in Spain, but have remained high, as confirmed by various other studies (Pereda et al., 2013; Rio Ruiz, 2010). For example, it is striking that, in 2019, 80% of children of Professionals had tertiary education whereas the figure is only 25% for the children of Unqualified workers.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the 2008 economic crisis made the situation worse: an interesting study by Ruiz-Valenzuela (2020) has shown that job loss had an effect on educational performance, in particular for disadvantaged families. Inequality between schools can be very strong and leads middle class families to compete in this domain, resorting to the use of private schools, which are mostly religious and fee-paying. The desire to gain access to a good school forces many families to face dilemmas regarding transport, spousal employment, and financial constraints (Blavier, 2019).

A second consequence of the increase in access to higher education has been a sharp decline in the educational premium since the beginning of the 1990s: higher education is no longer a protection against unemployment and precarity. Bernardi (2012) provides various explanations for this phenomenon, which remains only partly understood, and he shows that employment trajectories remain strongly determined by social origins, even at similar levels

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<sup>1</sup> The main thrust of these reforms was twofold. Firstly, they consisted in making school attendance longer (the compulsory age of schooling was raised to 14 in 1970, and to 16 in 1990) and promoting higher education. Secondly, they concerned the bridges between academic-orientated educational tracks and vocational training, which are theoretically possible within the system, but difficult to manage in practice. Consequently, the names of the various qualifications are not consistent over the last few decades.

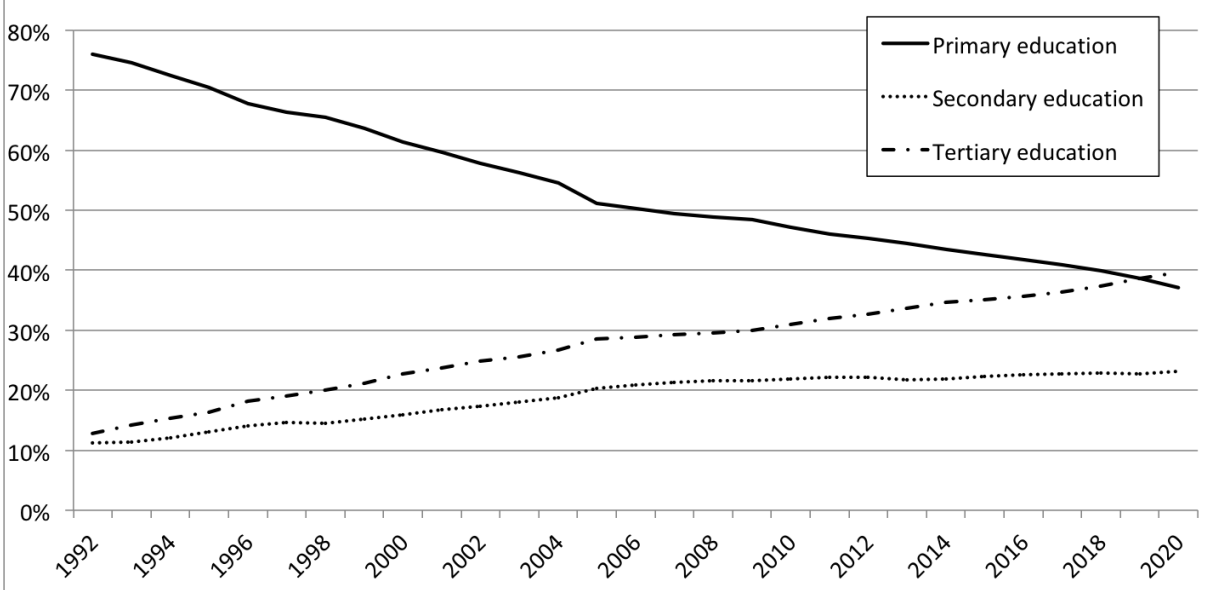
<sup>2</sup> In Spain, as established by the ley Orgánica de Educación (1970), primary education corresponds to schooling between the ages of 6 and 12. The minimum age for leaving full-time education was progressively raised to the age of 16.

<sup>3</sup> Source: *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*, 2019, author's own calculation.

of education attainment. This situation is not unusual, and Spain is obviously not the first country to experience such a transition with regard to education and employment. However, it is particularly important in this context since it contributed to fuelling the discontent associated with the *Indignados* Movement, and more broadly the political changes that Spain has been experiencing since the 2008 economic crisis, as we shall see below (part 3).

This generational division is also connected to the composition of households, as many young Spanish people keep living at the parental home after the age of 25. Spain has one of the highest cohabitation rates in Europe (with Italy), as Papuchon (2014) has shown using the SHARE survey. The trend was decreasing in the 2000s, but it increased again with the 2008 economic crisis: 58% of 20–35 year olds lived with their parents in 2008, and this increased to 65% in 2014.<sup>4</sup> Narotzky and Pusceddu (2021) have described how this “moral obligation” of solidarity has rested on the shoulders of older generations and created tensions within Spanish families (regarding household chores, pocket money, and sexuality). But it should also be noted that this phenomenon is very unequal in terms of social class: it affects working class young people much more than upper class young people, even though the latter tend to stay in full-time education for longer. In contrast, working class young people tend to have a lower level of educational qualifications, and are thus more heavily hit by unemployment, especially in times of recession.

Figure 1: Highest educational level in the Spanish population (25–64 years old), 1992–2020



Source: Labour force surveys, 1992–2020.  
Field: 25–64 years old.

**Labour market evolution: Polarisation or upgrading?**

With regard to its various economic sectors, in recent decades Spain has experienced similar trends to those observed in other European countries. The agricultural sector has continued to decline since the 1960s, contributing to strong internal migratory flows away from poor Southern agricultural regions (Andalusia, Extremadura) towards wealthier Northern industrial regions (Catalonia, the Basque country). Agrarian occupations accounted for 20% of employment in 1977 but only around 3% in 2019 (Bernardi & Garrido, 2008). Nowadays, work in the fields is largely performed by immigrants from South America or

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*, 2008 and 2014, author’s own calculation.

North Africa (Burchianti, 2006; Hellio, 2008). Developments in the industrial sector are more mixed, since this sector emerged relatively recently in Spain, and its presence in the country is geographically very diverse (Jordi & Carreras, 1990). Overall, however, it has also followed a declining trend, in particular with regard to the house-building sector, which collapsed after 2008. It is commonly estimated that the construction sector accounted for about 13% of the Spanish labour force before the crisis, corresponding to about 25% of the male labour force (as employment in this sector is predominantly masculine), but then this figure dropped by half.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this decline is probably underestimated by official figures, as there may have been many more workers who did not have an employment contract. From a more long-term perspective, the closure of the shipyard in Asturias, and its aftermath, is often cited as an emblematic example of deindustrialisation in the country. In contrast, the service sector increased substantially over the same period, reaching nearly 80% of total employment (ILO estimates). This trend is partly due to the growth in tourism, and also that of homecare services for the elderly, for children whose parents are both employed, and for the rich. This has contributed to the growth in the numbers of subaltern and generally unqualified roles in the labour market (Peugny, 2018).

To a significant extent, the composition of the workforce reflects the overall size of these sectors as a proportion of the Spanish economy. Consequently, roles in services, sales, and elementary occupations are well developed in Spain, representing about 40% of the active population (source: ILO). These roles include, for example, homecare services, cleaners, and unqualified construction workers (*peones*). According to various comparative studies (Oesch & Piccitto, 2019; Oesch et al., 2011; Peugny, 2018), upgrading has also occurred, with a proportional increase in the numbers of professionals in these areas. However, an attempt to draw a simple picture in terms of polarisation is complicated by the fact that some categories are ill-represented through the ISCO nomenclature, including self-employment, which remains substantial in Spain (16% of the labour force), and workers in small firms. In addition, it is difficult to identify the professions of the unemployed, and this group increased substantially after the 2008 economic crisis. This is also true of other Southern European countries, and notably of Greece (Maloutas, 2007).

It is therefore important to keep in mind the spatial distribution of labour in Spain, both in terms of regional differences, and of divisions between urban and rural areas. Figure 2 shows the contrast between urban and rural areas, which can be observed in all regions: whereas workers in the former are more orientated towards services and professional occupations, workers in the latter are more orientated towards agricultural work, and are more likely to be blue collar workers. However, nowadays agriculture employs a shrinking minority of Spanish workers, with a peak of 12% in rural Castilla-León (Figure 2). Class differentiation within regions is striking in the case of Catalonia: Barcelona and its suburbs contain an unusually high proportion of qualified workers (professionals and technicians account for 33%), whereas this is much less the case in rural areas. Interregional differences are also significant: a large part of the overall Spanish upper class is concentrated the capital Madrid (nearly 40% of its workers are professionals or technicians).

Figure 2: Occupational structure across various regions

| <i>Region</i> | <i>Urban-rural</i> | Professional occupations (ISCO-2) | Technicians and associate (ISCO-3) | Sales workers (ISCO-5) | Agricultural workers (ISCO-6) | Elementary occupations (ISCO-9) |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|               |                    |                                   |                                    |                        |                               |                                 |

<sup>5</sup> Source: Encuesta de poblacion activa (EPA), Instituto nacional de estadística, 2007–2015.

|               |       |    |    |    |    |    |
|---------------|-------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Extremadura   | Urban | 14 | 17 | 25 | 2  | 11 |
|               | Rural | 6  | 5  | 20 | 7  | 34 |
| Castilla-León | Urban | 23 | 12 | 16 | 3  | 8  |
|               | Rural | 7  | 11 | 20 | 12 | 18 |
| Catalonia     | Urban | 19 | 14 | 18 | 0  | 10 |
|               | Rural | 14 | 10 | 18 | 5  | 12 |
| Madrid        | Urban | 23 | 16 | 18 | 1  | 10 |
| Whole country | Urban | 20 | 13 | 19 | 1  | 12 |
|               | Rural | 9  | 9  | 20 | 6  | 20 |

Source: Survey on Income and Living conditions (SILC), 2019. Field: All active persons.

What has been the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on this occupational structure? Surprisingly, men were hit harder than women because of the gender bias in the construction sector, which was severely hit by the crisis (Ravelli, 2017). Immigrants and young people suffered the most from the crisis (Dolado et al., 2013), as a result of soaring unemployment rates (e.g. more than 50% for 20–30 year olds in 2012).

The history of migration in Spain is not a straightforward one. It can be divided into three main periods, although in this domain reliable data is not easy to find (González-Ferrer, 2013). Firstly, there remains a strong collective memory of the period after the Second World War, when migratory flows of poor rural Spanish workers left for other European countries (González-Ferrer & Moreno-Fuentes, 2017, p. 452). At that time, Spain was principally a country of emigration, with very low immigration. Conversely, the period between the 1990s and the 2008 economic crisis witnessed a “rapid increase” in immigration (Bernardi et al., 2010): nearly six million people in less than a decade, representing an increase from less than 1% of the national population in 1996 to 12% in 2009 (source: Spanish National Statistical Office). They came mainly from Morocco (Cottureau & Marzok, 2013) and the European Union (e.g. English or German pensioners moving to the Mediterranean coast), and then from Latin America, most notably Ecuador and Colombia, owing to the troubles experienced by these countries at the time. It is estimated, by comparing the records of residence permits and administrative municipal registers, that about one in four of these immigrants lacked the officially required documentation (Bernardi et al., 2010, p. 150) and thus had to work in the “underground economy” with low wages and limited social rights. Finally, the 2008 economic crisis reversed this trend: on the one hand, it put an end to immigration, and on the other hand it caused a renewal of emigration, mainly to Northern European countries (González-Ferrer & Moreno-Fuentes, 2017). The discourse of newspapers and public debate focused on highly educated Spanish-born young people who were now confronted with a lack of opportunity in their home country. This representation often emphasises the difficulties associated with living abroad: recent fieldwork research (Collectif Arosa Sun, 2020) has reported on the alarming working conditions and social rights (health insurance, short-term part-time contracts, difficulties in finding suitable housing, etc.) faced by Spanish immigrants, in the case of the logistics sector in the Netherlands. In this context it is almost impossible for Spanish immigrants to sustain a long career working abroad: most return to Spain after a while, and it is also difficult to integrate in their migratory destinations owing to language discrimination (in the study cited above, other jobs required a perfect mastery of the Dutch language), even though these young immigrants are educated. This is, however, only one part of the picture, since from a quantitative point of view the largest proportion of those emigrating after the economic crisis were those who had immigrated to Spain in the 2000s (Izquierdo et al., 2016), and then either moved to other countries in Europe or returned to their home country. These former immigrants were first hit by the increase in unemployment and,

since many were heavily indebted, they also joined the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca, PAH), a movement aiming to prevent evictions and campaign for housing rights. Drawing on a first-hand questionnaire survey conducted among members of this social movement (n=568 interviewees, from 12 cities), Quentin Ravelli (2019) shows how former construction workers and migrant women played a central role in this activism. It has been partly successful, in that it prevented or delayed numerous evictions. It also led to the advancement of new political leaders, such as the activist Ada Colau, who was elected mayor of Barcelona in 2015.

### **The economic crisis and the repercussions of high income and inequalities in living conditions**

In terms of income distribution, Spain is among the most unequal countries in Europe. This is commonly explained by the relative underdevelopment of the welfare system due to the dictatorship, and by an increase in the level of the highest incomes since the 1980s (Alvaredo & Saez, 2009). Here the effect of the economic crisis is more ambiguous than it might appear at first sight. It is clear that it has put an end to a slightly decreasing trend that had prevailed since the 1980s, when microdata became available (Ferrer-i Carbonnel et al., 2013; Pijoan-Mas & Sanchez-Marcos, 2010; Bonhomme & Hospido, 2012). According to Goerlich (2016), the Gini coefficient even went up, but this index depends on a large number of parameters (household or individual level data, weightings, the use of different deflators, etc.), so it should be treated with caution. The property bubble limited the increase in the share of the top income bracket, as it mostly benefited the middle class, as suggested by the recent study of Martínez-Toledano (2015).

With regard to living standards, standard hardship indicators suggest that the economic crisis marked a clear turning point, as can be seen in the first chart in Figure 3. When viewed over a longer period the curves are U-shaped: this reflects a decrease in hardships after the recession at the beginning of the 1990s, a period of relative stagnation, and then a worsening since 2008. For example, inability to face unexpected expenses rose from 30% in 2008 to more than 40% after 2011. Smoother trends can be observed relating to other items, such as access to high-protein foods, a car, or a computer. This is also due to the decrease in the prices of such items over the past decades.

Finally, housing indicators increased more than any others. For example, arrears on housing increased from 8% to more than 14% in 2010. There is a particularly striking increase in the number of households that consider their housing costs as a “heavy burden”: this was already high before 2008 (about 45% in 2004), but increased almost continuously until it was over 55%, whereas this had decreased a great deal in the 1990s. This evolution shows how important the housing component is in household budgets.

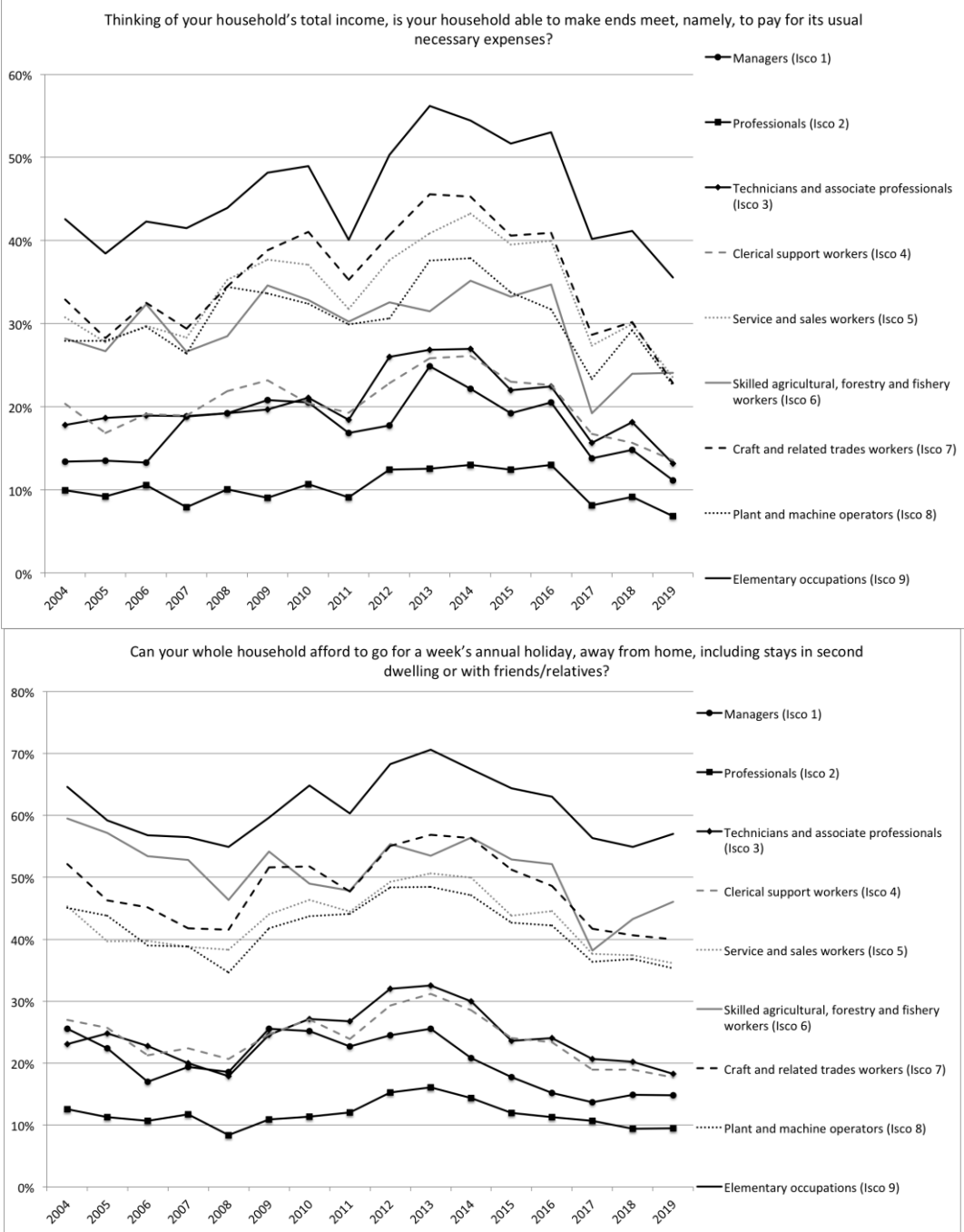
However, this general trend over previous decades obscures large inequalities in terms of social class and regions, as can be seen in the second chart in Figure 3. This shows a clear division between managers and those in elementary occupations, and the widening of this division in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. Indeed, in 2008, 50% of unqualified workers were unable to afford one week of holiday once a year outside their home, but in 2013 this rate had increased to 70%. In contrast, the same indicator also increased for managers but to a much lesser degree (from 10% in 2008 to 17% in the middle of the 2000s). The same result is obtained with most living standards indicators.

The relationship between inequalities in living standards and regional inequalities is striking (Albertos Puebla et al., 2014): in 2012, more than 80% of Andalusian unqualified workers were unable to afford holidays, whereas in the Basque country this rate was “only” 40%. This rate increased a great deal in Andalusia following the economic crisis, whereas it



remained fairly constant in the Basque country. These are the most striking examples, but they give an idea of the socioeconomic spatial inequalities that exist over the Spanish territory.

Figure 3: Inequalities in living standards across occupation categories in Spain, 2004–2019



Source: Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), 2004–2019. Field: All persons above the age of 17 and having already been active.

**Housing inequalities: Homeownership with mortgages and the growth of the property bubble**

A distinctive feature of the Spanish context is its high rate of homeownership: 80% of inhabitants own their home, which is far above the EU-27 average (around 70%, according to

EU-SILC data). This fact is often presented as resulting from a supposed “homeownership culture” in the country. However, this explanation does not hold up to scrutiny, since it is a relatively recent phenomenon: in the 1950s, less than half of Spanish citizens were homeowners, whereas after 1991 and up to the present it remains around 80%.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that this was true even before the property bubble of the 2000s, as early as the 1990s. In fact, homeownership has been supported by public policy since the time of the Franco regime. This can be conceived, as Bourdieu (2005) put it, as a meeting of the market and social dispositions, which is manifested in housing policies. These policies have three main aspects (Palomera, 2014a). Firstly, they have consisted in making renting unattractive, by reducing both tenants’ rights and the rewards of letting. Secondly, social housing was kept at a very low level (under 10% of total housing), which stands in stark contrast with other European countries (Alberdi, 2014). Although the state subsidised the construction of housing (by paying a part of the price or by applying tax deductions), this supported the purchase of privately owned properties (thanks to banking development). These large residential developments were designed for working class residents who had migrated from rural parts of the country. Thirdly, since the 1990s, these policies have involved the deregulation of the credit market (extension of the duration and of the maximum legal loan-to-value percentage), the effects of which were reinforced by low interest rates due to Spain’s membership of the Eurozone (Spain joined the EU in 1986). This financialisation of the property market left “the Spanish working class with no alternative other than the private property market in order to solve their housing needs” (Palomera, 2014b), and had severe consequences for social relations. This general prevalence of home ownership contributed to complicating social class boundaries before the emergence of the property bubble: middle class individuals (typically teachers) were surprised to find that unqualified construction workers (sometimes immigrants) were able to have such easy access to mortgages. The consumption of this working class at the time of the economic boom was perceived as immoral by the middle and upper classes.

It was in this context that the 2008 economic crisis arrived and hit the working class which had until then believed that they would continue to be able access prosperity through massive indebtedness. From the 1990s to the mid 2000s the rate of homeownership (either as outright owner or as an owner paying a mortgage),<sup>7</sup> increased for all social groups, although differences subsisted: in 2006 it was highest for professionals, at 90%, and lowest for unqualified workers, at 78%. This property bubble fuelled considerable price increases and led to a growing debt burden for all groups, and especially the working class. Therefore, as Figure 4 shows, precarious households faced with unemployment were more strongly and directly affected by the inability to finance their debt compared with other groups facing unemployment: arrears on mortgages mostly hit workers in services and sales, craft and related trade workers, and, above all, workers in elementary occupations. For the latter, the rate of failure to pay their remittance on time increased from 17% in 2011 to 23% in 2013, whereas it remained fairly constant, at around 2%, for categories such as professional occupations (Figure 4). The rate of change over just two years (2011–2013) is thus very striking, and reveals great discrepancies in financial security and ability to cope with indebtedness in times of recession. This situation was contested by social movements such as the PAH (see above), and was frequently discussed by political parties such as *Podemos*, but has still not found an avenue for clear political representation. The politicisation of this issue

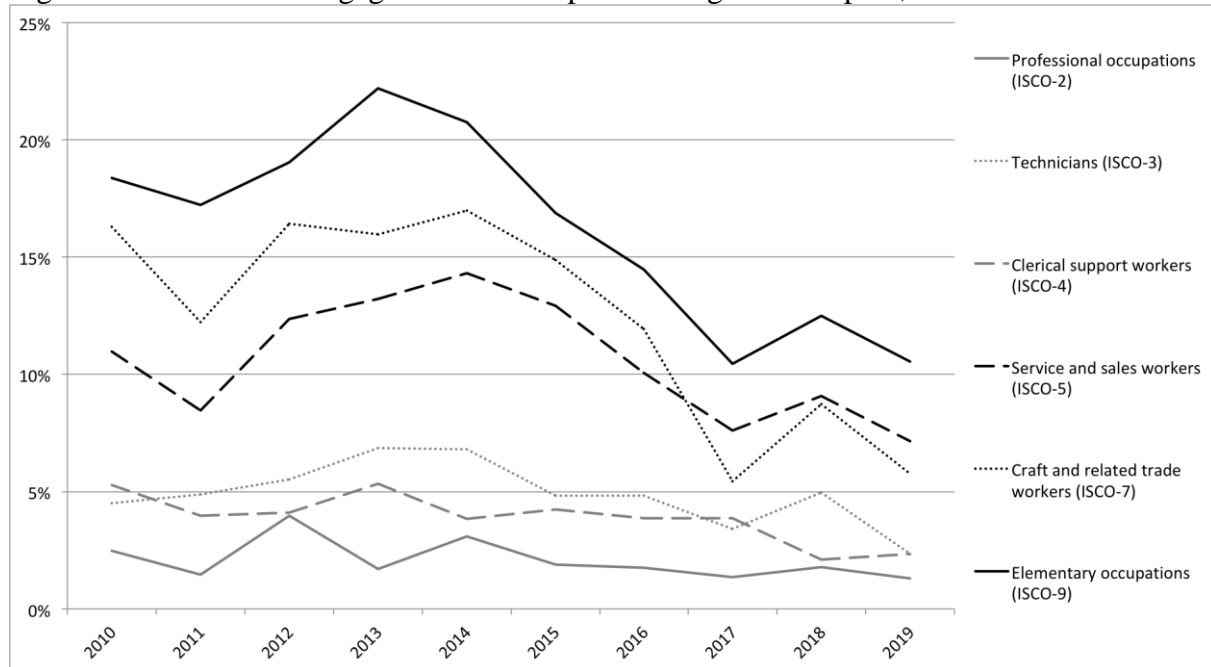
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<sup>6</sup> Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 1950–2000.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the issue of mortgages remained ill-documented in most surveys before the economic crisis. For example, in a survey like the Encuesta de condiciones de vida (ECV), which we have used here, the distinction between outright ownership and ownership with a mortgage is available only since 2010, that is, two years after the first economic shock of 2008.

has remained controversial, since it concerns the property wealth of a vast part of the Spanish population, and also the question of second homes: many households had invested in a second home, and felt ashamed of not being able to pay for it afterwards. Another reason for this ambiguous politicisation is that public debate has moved onto other issues, as we shall now see.

Figure 4: Arrears on mortgages across occupation categories in Spain, 2010–2019



Source: Survey on Income and Living conditions (SILC), 2010–2019. Field: All owners paying mortgages aged over 17 and having already been active.

### The role of class differences in recent electoral shifts

When considering electoral divides, it is relevant to first consider the issue of electoral turnout. In Spain, the participation rate for general elections lies between 68% and 80%, and no clear trend is identifiable for recent years. However, it remains striking that socioeconomic differences continue to determine electoral participation, in particular for other elections where electoral turnout rates are traditionally lower, such as those for the European parliament or municipalities. As a long-term trend, low educated and working class citizens are less likely to vote (Pallarès et al., 2007; Cainzos, 2010; Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2019). Yet this is complicated by the generational variable, which is particularly important in the Spanish case. On the one hand, younger generations are more educated, and would thus be expected to be more likely to vote than older generations. On the other hand, the latter are more numerous, owing to the decreasing rate of childbirth, and many from these generations experienced the transition from Franco to democracy in the 1970s. For decades these generations have been the main supporters of the two-party system, which delivers alternating majorities of the right-wing Partido popular (PP) or the left-wing Partido socialista obrera español (PSOE). For these older generations, the image of the PSOE is historically associated with significant social gains (the pension system, unemployment protection, industrial relations regulation, etc.), which were obtained in the 1980s under the leadership of Felipe Gonzales (PSOE Prime Minister from 1982 to 1996).

This is precisely the consensus that was called into question by the 2008 economic crisis. At the general elections of 2011, the majority changed once again from the PSOE to the PP,

but both dominant parties successively failed to alleviate the substantial rise in unemployment. A few days before the general election of May 2011, the famous *Indignados* (or 15-May, or 15-M) Movement appeared: after a demonstration against the corruption of elites and the precarity experienced by many in the country's large cities, crowds occupied public spaces, such as the Puerta del Sol in the centre of Madrid, for two months. Various *in situ* surveys (Anduiza et al., 2014; Calvo et al., 2011; Arellano Yanguas et al., 2011) showed that demonstrators were mostly young, educated people confronted with a high degree of precarity in the labour market (unemployment and short-term or part-time contracts). This sociological composition echoes that of the Arab uprisings (also in 2011, just a few months earlier). It was directly linked with the effects of the 2008 economic crisis on career prospects for young generations, and also offered a significant contrast with the previous tendency for demonstrations to be organised by trade unions. Participants of the 15-M movement were much more connected through social networks compared with participants in previous protest movements, were less likely to be affiliated to political parties or trade unions, and associated their engagement with extended sociability by coming to the occupation with friends or acquaintances (Anduiza et al., 2014, Table 3, p. 758). Although this movement was limited in terms of the number of participants, it reflected the strong critiques that were then being addressed by young educated generations to the two traditional parties, a sentiment which was embodied by the slogan “no nos representan” (they don't represent us). These mobilisations of younger generations were distinct from those of working class organisations, such as trade unions or left-wing parties, even though they had some links with the latter (Narotzky, 2016) in terms of activists, demands (for dignity, social justice, etc.), and their propensity to take to the streets.

The emergence of *Podemos* at the European parliament election in 2014 and afterwards can be interpreted as a manifestation, on the electoral stage, of this social movement and the social fringes that supported it. However, it remains unclear to what extent *Podemos* has been able to appeal to the Spanish working class, which was one of its goals (Iglesias, 2015). On the one hand, electoral support for *Podemos* is clearly driven by the precarity endured by young educated people. But on the other hand, *Podemos* has had difficulties in gathering support from older working class voters, who have mostly remained staunch supporters of the PSOE. A key event in this fight on the political left of Spanish society was the general parliamentary election of 2019, when *Podemos* did not succeed in surpass the vote of the PSOE. On the right of the political spectrum, the *Ciudadanos* party emerged as a challenger of the traditional PP, with an emphasis on liberal values and corruption. All of this challenged the two-party system that had prevailed until then, leading to a situation that Piketty and his team have called a “multiple elite system”: over the last few decades, education and income inequalities have become less relevant to an explanation of political divides between right- and left-wing parties, suggesting that politics is becoming less polarised by class divides (Gethin et al., 2019). In Spain, the generational dimension plays a large role in determining electoral opinion: older generations broadly continue to support the two main old parties (PP and PSOE), whereas young generations support “new” parties such as *Podemos*, *Ciudadanos*, and more recently the extreme-right party *VOX*. Clearly, this overall picture must be nuanced for at least two reasons. Firstly, other variables remain relevant, some of which are also connected to class divides (e.g. wealth or religion). Secondly, there exist strong regional discrepancies, and the vote for regionalist parties remains structured by class divides, such as in Catalonia or the Basque country: it is generally rich citizens who support political independence movements, even though electoral support for these parties has recently been extending towards the working class.

The current political turmoil can therefore be seen as a consequence of the 2008 economic crisis, especially in connection with social class and generational divides. However,

the situation cannot be conceived as a direct consequence of socioeconomic issues, and is likely to keep evolving in the coming years in the wake of the emergence of new political parties.

## Conclusion

The consequences of the 2008 economic crisis in Spain with regard to social class have been at least twofold. Firstly, it reversed certain previous trends, owing to the repercussions of previously high incomes and inequalities in living standards: certain groups who had taken out high value mortgages and had come to expect increased living standards, such as immigrants who had arrived since the 1990s and unqualified workers in the construction sector, were hit first and most severely by the crisis. However, the crisis also affected middle class households, who have faced difficulties both in the labour market and in ensuring the social reproduction of future generations – leading to intergenerational solidarity and strong competition in both education and the housing market. Many households struggled to make mortgage repayments owing to sudden unemployment, leading to arrears or even eviction. This consequence of the property bubble has been the focus of political protest by the anti-eviction movement (*Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca*) and political parties such as Podemos, but political debate has paid greater attention to the subject of corruption arising from housebuilding and other major public constructions (airports, motorways, etc.). Secondly, the economic crisis challenged the two-party system that had prevailed until then: new divisions between regions, generations, and now between natives and immigrants (accompanied by a return of the far right), have led to political fragmentation and difficulties in establishing a stable government. It was in this historical context that the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly appeared. As in other European countries, the working class has been hit hardest owing to its position in the labour market, where it suffers from a lack of labour protection and its dependence on certain sectors that have either been heavily hit (e.g. tourism) or on certain jobs that are particularly exposed to the virus (e.g. cashiers, health service workers, etc.). In this context, the 2019 regional elections saw a decrease in the share of the emerging political parties (*Podemos*, *Vox*, and especially *Ciudadanos*), and an increase in the share of the traditional parties, PP and *PSOE*, but here again there was considerable spatial differentiation. In Madrid, it was very striking that the right-wing PP candidate Isabel Díaz Ayuso won the election after having refused to apply central government recommendations. Pablo Iglesias, the former *Podemos* leader who had decided to run as a candidate in this region, lost the election and retired from politics. In terms of the political representation of social class, this election showed that the situation still – ten years after the emergence of the *Indignados* Movement – remains unstable and in a transitional phase.

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