

Migration and the Reconfiguration of the Social Stratification System in Spain 2008–2023

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Introduction

Between 2000 and 2023 Spain experienced one of the largest migratory processes in contemporary Europe (Cebrián, 2009). Between 1998 and 2008, the country attracted over five million immigrants, raising the proportion of the foreign-born residents from 1.1% to 11.0%. Although the 2008–2013 economic crisis temporarily halted the growth in immigration rates, immigration continued to increase in its aftermath, reaching 7.5 million foreign-born residents by 2024, accounting for 18.2% of the total population. Over the last 25 years Spain absorbed one-third of all immigrant population arriving to the European Union. This process underscores the transformation of Spain into a Complex Demographic Reproduction System, where net migration has become the key driver of population growth.

Changes in demographic trends unfolded alongside profound transformations of the Spanish economic structure. The deindustrialization and tertiarization processes, and the liberalization reforms undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s contributed to a dualization of the labour market (Barbieri & Cutuli, 2016). Economic change increased labour demand in low-productivity, precarious and unstable sectors such as care, tourism and construction; while also rising the share of people employed in advanced service industries, characterised by higher protection and salary levels.

Against this backdrop, we hypothesize that the interaction between demographic and economic transformations has reshaped Spain's social stratification structure. These shifts may have produced patterns of segmented assimilation and contributed to both the absolute and relative displacement of certain population groups within the emerging social configuration.

Our approach to social stratifications moves beyond conventional perspectives based on linear hierarchical positions in a particular dimension (e.g., low-high income, elementary-qualified occupation). Instead, we recognize that individuals do not experience the social world through a

single characteristic, but at the intersection of multiple categories of social advantage and disadvantage (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). We therefore analyse how the confluence of multiple axes of inequality shapes individuals' resources and opportunities, and their position within the social stratification system. Such an approach to social stratification has become increasingly relevant given the growing relevance of factors like wealth and housing in shaping social differentiation (Adkins et al., 2020; Killewald et al., 2017).

Our contribution to current debates on migration and social stratification is threefold. First, we provide a multivariate and intersectional measure of the social stratification in Spain. Second, we analyse the evolution of the social stratification system across the three major phases of the early 21st century, namely, the economic and migratory expansion (2000–2008), the Great Recession (2008–2015), subsequent period of recovery (2016–2023). Third, we examine the role of international migration to Spain on the reconfiguration of the social stratification structure.

Data and methods

We draw our results from the Spanish EU-SILC (Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida-ECV) for the years 2008, 2016, and 2023, focusing on individuals aged 25 to 55 years old. The analytic sample includes 57,055 individuals.

To measure social stratification, we analyze the confluence of six key dimensions: educational attainment; housing access (including tenure type and affordability); household income per consumption unit; occupational position according to the ESeG classification; degree of urbanization; and housing quality. Taken together, these variables capture the cumulative result of the opportunities and achievements throughout the life-courses of individuals, along with their broader context and living conditions. The variables were selected after a careful examination of data quality and availability in the ECV, and are in line with multivariate measurement approaches to social stratification applied in Spain and in other European contexts (Atkinson & Schmitz, 2024; Fachelli & López-Roldán, 2022).

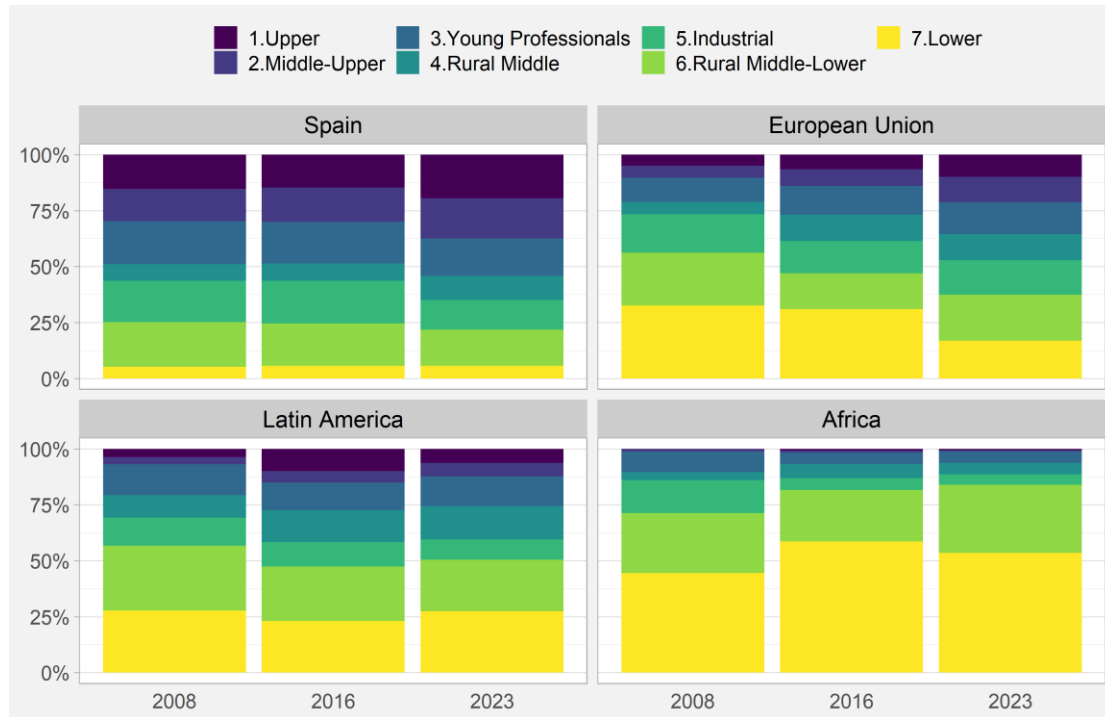
We implement a multivariate, data-driven approach to identify the social stratification structure. The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we apply a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)—a dimensionality reduction method—on the six variables to identify the social space of inequalities and the most relevant axes of social differentiation. Second, we use Cluster Analysis on the first two MCA dimensions to classify individuals into distinct social strata.

Preliminary results

Our preliminary results indicate that the Spanish social stratification system is structured around two principal axes of social differentiation. The first axis distinguishes individuals according to the volume of accumulated capital expressed through income level, education attainment and

occupational prestige. The second axis, instead, differentiates individuals based on housing conditions, including both the quality of the dwelling and the mode and financial burden of access. Within this structure, we identify seven social strata, ranging from the most socially privileged (1. Upper) to the most socially disadvantaged (7. Lower).

Figure 1. Distribution of the population by region of origin and social strata



At the aggregate level, the overall configuration of the social stratification system remains relatively stable across the three periods analysed. That is because the upward mobility among natives has been partially compensated by the concentration of foreign-born population in the most socially disadvantaged strata. As Figure 1 shows, once we consider individuals' region of origin, substantial changes emerge in the distribution of the population among the social stratification structure, reflecting the demographic and economic transformations that have taken place in Spain.

The data shows an increasing concentration of Spanish-born individuals located in the two most socially advantaged strata. Similarly, since the Great Recession, changes in the sociodemographic composition of the population from EU countries have reduced the weight of the two most socially disadvantaged strata, and increased their representations in the upper and middle-upper social groups.

On the contrary, we observe a consolidation of the ethnic stratification process among individuals born in Latin American and African countries residing in Spain. This process is particularly salient

for the African-born population, who are virtually excluded from the most socially advantaged strata irrespective of the period considered.

The next phase of our research will incorporate data at the subnational level and apply fixed-effects models to examine how macro-level socioeconomic dynamics—such as GDP growth and real estate price fluctuations—have shaped changes in the stratification structure across different origin groups.

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