Five Centuries of Inequality and Socioeconomic Transformation in the Barcelona Area, 1451 – 1880

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Unequal distribution of wealth is a matter of growing concern in contemporary society, but it is also one with deep roots in the past. Several authors have traced the origins of this inequality by reconstructing historical series and collecting and harmonising data from sources and records with uneven territorial and temporal cover (Milanovic et al. (2011), Alfani (2015) Piketty (2014 and 2020)). Few places in the world have data series that make it possible to reconstruct the patterns of socioeconomic inequality by drawing on a single source. Barcelona, including its hinterland, is one of these places. The *Barcelona Historical Marriage Database*, which was created under the auspices of the Advanced *Grant project Five Centuries of Marriages* headed by Professor Anna Cabré, has made it possible to analyse, over a period of five centuries, the distribution of wealth by studying the taxes levied on marriages held in the Diocese from 1451 to 1880. This number of *Perspectives Demogràfiques* offers an account of the evolution of inequality from the ancien régime through to the consolidation of industrialisation, the concentration of wealth, and the composition and replacement of economic elites in the Barcelona area.

MEASURING INEQUALITY WITH THE BARCELONA HISTORICAL MARRIAGE DATABASE

The *Barcelona Historical Marriage Database* (BHMD) brings together the tax and occupational data provided by the Llibres d'Esposalles (Marriage license books) of the Diocese of Barcelona, which cover the years from 1451 to 1905. These books record the taxes levied on marriages held in the Diocese of Barcelona with the aim of financing the construction and subsequent maintenance of the city's cathedral. Accordingly, the BHMD contains tax information pertaining to more than 600,000 marriages occurring between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries and covering approximately 250 parishes distributed in the present-day Baix Llobregat, Barcelonès, Maresme and Vallès Occidental regions, which include big cities like Barcelona, Mataró, Sabadell and Terrassa. Recorded with each marriage are the given names and surnames of the bride and groom, place of residence or parish of the ceremony, groom's occupation, and amount of the marriage tax or fee paid, though this is information that can vary over time.

A tax was paid for each marriage, varying in accordance with the socioeconomic status of the bride and groom. This was classified into large groups: 1) Nobility, 2) Military, 3) Honoured citizens (those holding public office), 4) Merchants, doctors of law or medicine, 5) Guild masters, 6) Peasants and Artisans, and 7) Those classified as poor. Even if the poor declared an occupation, they were exempt from

FIGURE 1. *Gini coefficient for the Barcelona area, 1481-1880*
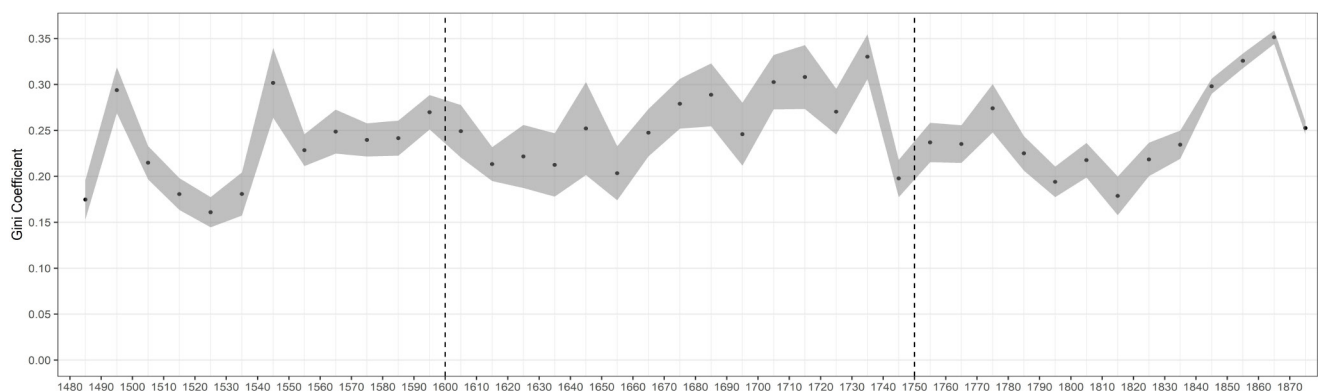
Note: *In order to calculate the Gini coefficient on the basis of the concept of "ability-to-pay", it has been necessary to transform occupations/social status into a continuous numerical value and, for this purpose, the international scale for classifying social/occupational stratification HISCAM has been used (Lambert et al., 2013)..*
Source: *BHMD and Brea-Martínez, Gabriel; Pujadas-Mora, Joana Maria (2019) "Estimating Long-Term Socioeconomic Inequality in Southern Europe: The Barcelona Area, 1481–1880". European Review of Economic History, 23(4): 397-420.*

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payment. The tax was registered in pounds, shillings and pennies (in Catalan lliures, sous and diners) which were common units of account until the first half of the nineteenth century. In this study, in order to calculate the ability-to-pay of each couple, the tax paid (economic status), and the social-occupational group to which they belonged (social status) are combined (Kendrick 1939; Álvarez and Ramos Palencia, 2018; Brea-Martínez and Pujadas-Mora, 2019). Once the ability-to-pay is established, two indicators of inequality are calculated: the Gini coefficient and the Theil index. Using the latter, it is possible to decompose the contribution of each social group to the general inequality. Moreover, the wealth accumulated by the richest 1% is calculated on the basis of the total of taxes paid in each period.

INEQUALITY WAS ALREADY SIGNIFICANT IN THE PAST

Figure 1 shows the evolution of economic inequality using the Gini coefficient for the Barcelona area between 1480 and 1880, calculated using the information contained in the *Barcelona Historical Marriage Database*. A Gini index equal to 0 means that the wealth/income is equitably distributed, while a value of 1 would mean that all the wealth/income is held by one person or, in this case, by just one couple. As Figure 1 displays, the levels of inequality in Barcelona in preindustrial times (before the nineteenth century) were significant and in line with other countries like Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal (Reis, 2016; Alfani 2015; Van Zanden, 1995).

As for the evolution of inequality over time, three periods stand out (also indicated in Figure 1), coinciding, roughly speaking,

with the phases of economic development in Catalonia. The first period is between 1481 and 1649 and is marked by low inequality and subsequent stabilisation of its levels. This situation coincides with the period of economic stagnation in Catalonia after the Civil War (1462-1472) and the War of the Remences (peasants' revolt). Furthermore, the recurrent crises of mortality brought about by several outbreaks of the plague, especially that between 1647 and 1652, would certainly have contributed towards reducing inequality.

The second period, from 1650 to 1749, is characterised by a considerable increase in inequality as a result of the economic and political reorganisation after the crises of the previous period. From an economic perspective, this was a phase of growth and considerable expansion of viticulture in which a new kind of contract appeared, namely the rabassa morta whereby the peasant had usufruct rights to the land until the grapevines died. This led to major occupational and social transformations, accompanied by significant social mobility. The maximum level of inequality in this period is observed around 1740, coinciding with the development of forms of proto-industrialisation in many rural areas, as well as the establishment of the first calico factories in Barcelona.

In the third and final period, between 1750 and 1880, inequality is shown to decrease—except for the period of the Peninsular War (1808-1814)—until 1833, the date that traditionally marks the beginning of industrialisation in Catalonia. Thereafter, and until 1880, the inequality rate almost doubled, and this coincided with the growing number of tax-free marriages, mainly among day labourers and workers who were caught up in the process of industrialisation.

FIGURE 2. *Breakdown of inequality in accordance with the contribution of social groups in the Barcelona area, 1481-1880*
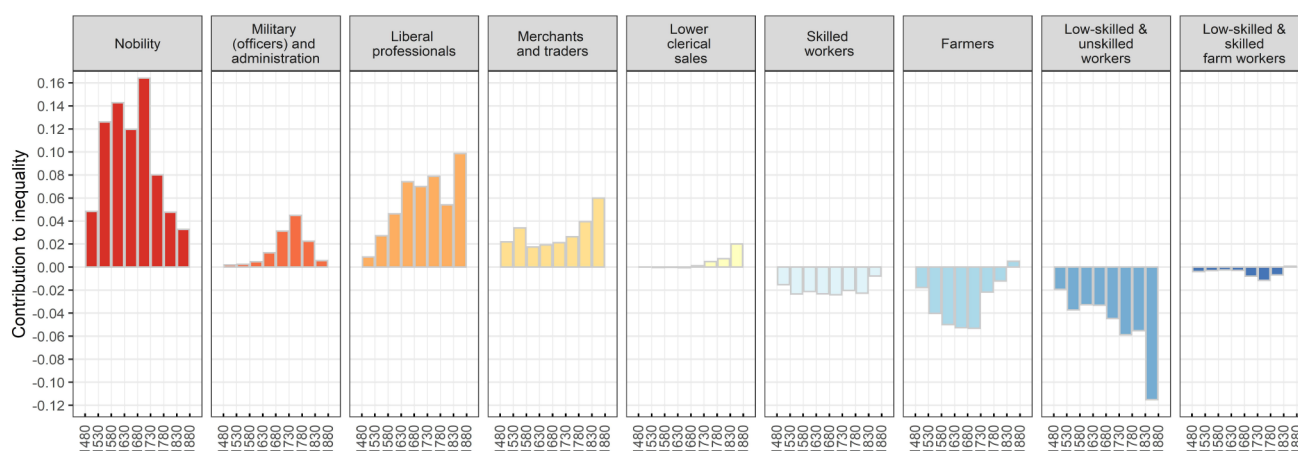

Note: The social groups provided in the HISCLASS classification have been conserved in order to facilitate comparison. Nevertheless, given the idiosyncrasy of the nobility, a separate group that is not included in the HISCLASS classification has been created for it.
Source: BHMD and Brea-Martínez, Gabriel; Pujadas-Mora, Joana Maria (2019) "Estimating Long-Term Socioeconomic Inequality in Southern Europe: The Barcelona Area, 1481–1880". European Review of Economic History, 23(4): 397-420.

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WHO CAUSED INEQUALITY IN THE PAST? NOT ALWAYS THE SAME PEOPLE

Figure 2 shows the social groups which, throughout the five centuries covered in the study, contributed to the economic inequality. The contribution to the inequality (negative or positive) is calculated on the basis of the relationship between two specific components: 1) the population weight of a certain social group with regard to the total number of individuals; and 2) the weight of the wealth/income of the group with regard to the total of taxes paid. Accordingly, when the proportion of wealth/income accumulated by a certain group is greater than its population weight, this group positively contributes towards generating inequality. By contrast, when the population weight of a group is greater that the wealth it accumulates, its contribution towards creating inequality is negative.

In order to simplify the analysis, occupations/status have been classified into nine social groups in keeping with the *Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations* (HISCO) and the *Historical Social Class Scheme* (HISCLASS) (van Leeuwen et al., 2002, and van Leeuwen and Maas, 2011). A glance at the magnitude of the figures is sufficient to realise that the nobility and the bourgeoisie (liberal professionals and merchants, among others) significantly contributed towards generating inequality since, relatively speaking, they accumulated much more wealth than the other groups. However, the capacity for accumulation of the nobility decreased from the eighteenth century onwards. Until 1730, 45% of the inequality in the Barcelona area was attributable to the influence of the nobility. Then, the bourgeoisie and, more specifically, the liberal professionals conspicuously emerged in the nineteenth century to become the group that concentrated the most wealth. Although on a smaller scale, this trend is also visible among the merchants.

FIGURE 3. Accumulation of wealth/income among the top 1% and its social composition in the Barcelona area, 1481-1880
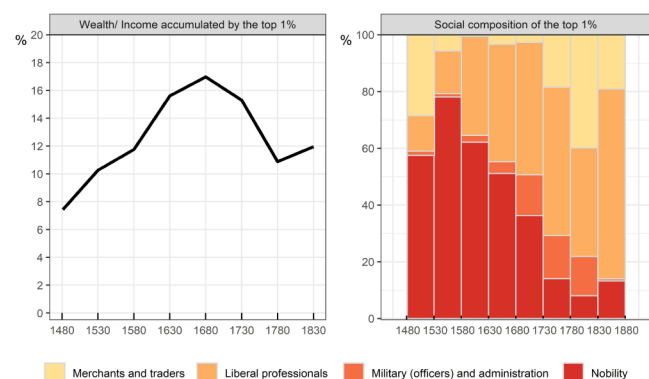
Source: BHMD.

Conversely, artisans, day labourers, and peasants present negative values since their demographic weight is greater than the wealth they accumulate. The negative coefficient among unskilled or low-skilled workers increases as their number grows to the point of accounting for 33% of the inequality in the Barcelona area. As the number of peasants falls, their negative contribution also diminishes. The most disadvantaged peasants began to feed the industrial sector after the eighteenth century when economic growth accelerated. The groups that drove the growth of inequality, for example day labourers and weavers, were closely linked with the industrial system. Although these were very numerous groups, they did not accumulate wealth, which makes it possible to suggest the existence of a process of proletarianisation connected with unskilled work.

REPLACEMENT OF THE ECONOMIC ELITES

The accumulation of wealth/income among the richest members of society explains, in great part, the rise of inequality in the preindustrial era, mainly after the end of the sixteenth century until the second half of the eighteenth century. Figure 3 shows the concentration of wealth by social group in the Barcelona area during this period: 1% of the population went from holding 10% of the total wealth to almost doubling its share to 17% in the second half of the seventeenth century, which is the highest point. Thereafter, the concentration of wealth held by the traditionally richest groups started to decline. Accumulation of wealth was greater in periods prior to the consolidation of industrialisation and capitalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the richest members of society were much richer in the preindustrial period and, although the development of capitalism allowed greater levels of concentration, it should not be forgotten that this had already begun in the ancien régime.

While it is important to know how much wealth/income the richest people held, it is also necessary to know who they were, socially speaking, throughout the five centuries covered by this study. In the Barcelona area, this richest 1% can be classified into four categories: nobles, military and members of the administration, liberal professionals, and merchants and large retailers. With this classification it can be seen how, in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries, the nobles constituted more than 50% of the richest 1%, although their presence declines after the mid-seventeenth century to reach a figure of 10% at the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, in a situation resembling what occurred in countries like France and England in an even earlier period.

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The lost prominence of the nobility was largely capitalised on by the liberal professionals (in principle identified as doctors in law or medicine) who went from representing about 15% of the richest 1% in the fifteenth and sixteenth century to three quarters of it by the end of the nineteenth century. Army officers and public office holders in the different branches of the administration (royal, the Barcelona municipal government, universities/councils, the General Regional Council, etcetera) belong in this group, although their weight was fairly limited, which would be explained by the low numbers of people engaged in these functions. The big traders were the last group to join the top 1% and their weight kept increasing as the accumulation of wealth among the traditionally richest groups decreased. This group constituted about 30-40% of the total composition of the 1% when the concentration of their wealth rose to about 10%. However, the total accumulated wealth among the bottom 10% (results not shown in the graph) shows that in periods when there was less concentration among the top 1%, the total wealth of this 10% was greater, with figures of about 7-8% at the end of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, and also at the end of the eighteenth century. Conversely, when 20% of the total wealth was in the hands of the richest 1%, the poorest 10% only possessed about 4% of the total.

CONCLUSIONS: ACCUMULATION, DISPOS-SESSION, AND EMERGENCE OF NEW SOCIAL CLASSES

Using data from the Barcelona Historical Marriage Database (BHMD), this study analyses the evolution of inequality and its relationship with the emergence of new social groups in the Barcelona area over a period of five centuries. It shows how levels of inequality in the ancient régime were higher by comparison with the industrial era. The mere fact of ascertaining the evolution of inequality over such a long period is unprecedented for any region in Spain and in most European countries. This study would not have been possible without the valuable information supplied by the data brought together in the BHMD. It is just one example of the enormous potential of the database.

The results confirm that the social groups who generated economic inequality were not always the same, as evidenced in the breakdown of contribution to inequality by the different groups. A clear distinction is observed between the preindustrial and industrial periods. In the earlier phases, economic disparity is explained by the notable contribution of the nobility, while in more recent periods, the negative contribution (impoverishment) of unskilled workers generated greater inequality. These would have been day labourers, an occupation that did not figure in the Marriage licence books until the end of the eighteenth century, when a notable process of proletarianisation extending through the period of industrialisation is observable.

The composition of the economic elite varied over time. This study offers empirical and quantitative evidence of how the transition of the ancien régime to the industrial period brought about a change in the prominence of the wealthiest groups, shifting from the nobility to the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, long-term analysis has made it possible to situate accurately in time the process of substitution of some elites by others. In this regard, the data shows that when the weight of nobles and bourgeoisie is similar, the general inequality worsens. These results suggest that it is precisely in moments of economic and social transformation that disparities can have a greater impact, a crucial fact not only in the past but also the present, especially in a context where inequality keeps growing.

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