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Title

Is there a European working class ? Social domination and national relegations in Europe

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Introduction

Although the working class have not disappeared with the 2008 crisis in Europe, it seems that they have disappeared from the minds of European politicians and bureaucrats. The European Commission prefers the terms ‘poor’ – those who earn less than 60% of median wage¹ – or ‘excluded’ – all those who lack the means to meet their needs. In technocratic discourse, Europe is summed up as an opposition between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, with unemployment the main differentiating criterion used to measure inequality. By thus homogenizing the ‘bottom’ of society, this approach conceals the relations of power and the social processes that are at the root of these subaltern positions. This binary perspective, dividing people into winners and losers under the new rules of the labour market, suggests that inequality can be reduced to differences between individual life paths. The concept of the working class² helps to break with this representation of the world in terms of singular viewpoints and mobilities, for it reminds us that subaltern positions are inherited and reproduced. The contrast between skilled workers, the proportion of whom is declining, and unskilled workers, on the rise owing to the expansion of the service sector, is accompanied by differences in class consciousness and in political and cultural participation.

Throughout Europe, the sense of belonging to the working class has diminished among manual workers and low-skilled white-collar workers, and been replaced by the feeling of belonging to a vast middle class. The notion of class, articulated as the political and symbolic construction of a vision of the social world,³ is thus far less central today than it was in the past. Nevertheless, class status remains a pertinent tool for reflecting on and describing inequalities and social boundaries on the international level.⁴ How can we talk about a European working class ? To what extent can similarity of social conditions outweigh the individual specificities of countries of residence?

Class relations are largely constructed in the context of nation-states, and in each country the outlines and intensity of these relations are shaped by the specific social and

¹ The median wage divides the total of wages into two equal sets: there are as many who earn more as there are who earn less.

² In France, sociologists use the plural notion and refer to “working classes”. It underlines the common points of subordinate workers but also their heterogeneity. Following the English term, we use here the singular.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The social space and the genesis of groups’, *Theory and Society*, 14:6, 1985, 723-744.

⁴ Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott and Rosemary Crompton, *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identities and Lifestyle*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

political history of the nation. In fact, until now there have been few studies of inequality that consider the issue in terms of class at the European level.

Arguing for an empirical sociology of working class in Europe means taking the opposite view from that disseminated by the European Commission, which remains anchored to a division along national boundaries. The Commission, via Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union) supervises the publication of data provided by national statistical bodies (rate of growth, percentage of national debt, etc.), and publishes data on the operation of job markets (levels of employment and unemployment) that tend to underscore national differences. The depth of the 2008 financial and economic crisis put the issue of wealth differences between social groups back on the agenda⁵ (Piketty, 2014). But defining inequality solely in terms of income tends to conceal not only the political power relations between social groups, but also the internal divisions within them⁶. The notion of class allows us to distinguish not only the lack of resources or dependence of the working class in relation to the middle class and the ruling class, but also an equally determining factor, what Olivier Schwartz calls the ‘assignment of low and subordinate status’⁷ that is manifested in exclusion from the centres of economic, cultural and political power.

In this article, we seek to highlight those factors that, beyond national citizenship, unite socioeconomic groups as disparate as cleaners, manual workers, retail saleswomen, small tradespeople and farmers, in order to shed light on the relations of power that operate throughout the continent. Identifying the common characteristics of the European working class is also a way of evaluating the effects the economic crisis has had on these social groups, by revealing their particular vulnerability, and emphasizing the obstacles to trade union and political activism among these groups throughout Europe.

Methodology

We draw on Bourdieu’s multidimensional approach (Bourdieu, 1984)⁸ to describe the social space in Europe, taking the view that the term ‘class’ refers to the combination of economic and cultural capitals that construct both the socially and economically dominated positions of certain social. However, it is not yet possible to measure the different types of capital at the European level since current statistical surveys do not include questions adapted to this perspective. We chose to assign individuals to a social class on the basis of their occupation because it remains a useful tool for shedding light on inequalities between citizens⁹.

⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Harvard Press University, 2014

⁶ John H. Goldthorpe and Abigail McKnight, ‘The economic basis of social class. Mobility and inequality: Frontiers of research from sociology and economics’, in Morgan Grusky (eds.), *Mobility and inequality*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 109-36.

⁷ Olivier Schwartz, « Does France still have a class Society? », *Books and Ideas*, 3rd March 2014. URL: <https://booksandideas.net/Does-France-Still-Have-a-Class.html>

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁹ David Rose and Eric Harrison, *Social Class in Europe: An Introduction to the European Socio-Economic Classification*, New York: Routledge, 2010; Daniel Oesch, *Redrawing the Class Map: Stratification and Institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

The standardized socioeconomic classification for Europe, known as the *European Socio-Economic Groups* (ESEG) adopted by Eurostat in 2016, has the virtue that it can be used in studies throughout Europe.¹⁰ We use these as a basis for separating the European social space into three classes: the working class, the middle class and the ruling class. The method by which these classes were identified is based on observation of the income, qualifications, standard of living and conditions of employment and work of the thirty socioeconomic sub-groups (see appendix for explanations). The working class incorporates unskilled white-collar workers and manual workers (cleaners ; farm labourers ; those employed in the retail and service industries, etc.), skilled workers (those employed in craft, in the food and drink industry ; in construction, metallurgy and electronics, and drivers), nursing assistants, childcare workers, home care assistants, craftsmen and farmers.

1. Portrait of a social group in competition throughout Europe

In recent years, every effort has been made to bring the working class of the different European countries into conflict with one another, exacerbating the competition arising from the globalization of trade. Indeed, it is primarily the sectors employing large numbers of manual workers that have been displaced from the centre to the periphery or even beyond the margins of the continent. Chains of outsourcing also developed considerably during the 1990s, and have been strengthened in the East since the 2000s: more than 4.5 million employees in Europe work in an industrial enterprise whose activity is subcontracted by a company in another European country.¹¹ These movements have major consequences for the social situation within a number of companies that are particularly at risk, where job blackmail has become common currency: adjustments of working hours, wage cuts, productivity pushes, everything becomes negotiable, even in the German automotive sector where the trade unions are still strong. Aside from these relocations, the fall in industrial employment in Western Europe is also due to a shift in the division of labour at the European level, mainly between the former Eastern countries and those of the North and West. This increasing specialization of work between countries alters the shape and composition of social classes in Europe.

1.1 The dream of a Europe without proletarians

According to the accepted doctrine currently operative in Brussels, the tertiarization of the European economy is synonymous with an unstoppable march towards a Europe of the knowledge economy that will become the domain of managers and highly skilled professionals. Manual professions and unskilled jobs would be destined to disappear, through the development of robots and digital technologies that would replace workers carrying out unskilled tasks. In reality, nothing is less certain. Undoubtedly, since the 1970s industry has been declining in importance in Europe, being replaced by new activities in retail, services, banking etc. The tertiary sector (services and retail) is now the biggest employer, representing seven out of every ten jobs. This development has by no means led to the disappearance or even the minimization of the working class in

¹⁰ INSEE, Eseg (European Socioeconomic Groups). Nomenclature socio-économique européenne, Working Paper, F 1604, 2016.

¹¹ 2014 figures from the World Industrial Subcontracting Show (Midest).

Europe. But the tertiarization process has also changed low-skilled jobs. In fact, unskilled occupations and jobs have increased markedly at the same time, because these new services also require a workforce that can take on tasks where skill is less recognized. Moreover, the increase in women's levels of employment, and the aging of the population in the North and West, create new needs in relation to childcare, care for the elderly and domestic tasks. Thus the number of domestic cleaners, childcare workers, home care assistants, shop workers, cashiers, sales assistants and nursing assistants (all jobs occupied predominantly by women) is increasing sharply all over Europe.¹² This has led some to conclude that a polarization of European social structures is under way: on the one hand, highly skilled, well-paid employees, and on the other poorly skilled, low-paid precarious workers.¹³

But this polarization is also related to patterns of specialization and division of labour linked to globalization. In the countries of the South of Europe and in Germany, the growth in unskilled occupations sits alongside a high number of skilled administrative workers. In most of the former countries of the East, the proportion of unskilled workers remains limited, while skilled manual workers still predominate. In Scandinavia social democratic governments have limited the decline in skilled work:¹⁴ Finland and Denmark, for example, have seen a sharp rise in the number of skilled female manual workers.

The countries of Europe can thus be divided into three large groups, on the basis of economic structure: in the West and North, skilled service jobs predominate; in the East, industrial jobs remain central; the South is characterized by the persistence of a traditional and unskilled tertiary sector. Finally, while little remains of the agricultural sector in the North and West (making up 1% of jobs compared to an average of 5% in Europe as a whole), it is holding firm in the countries on the margins of Europe, which are also the least developed: Greece, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia and Bulgaria. The former countries of the East and those of the South effectively constitute the workshop, the market garden and the breadbasket of countries in the North and West of Europe.

Underlying this disparity there are differences in economic growth but also in social policy: the pressure from the European Union to reduce public spending is superficially comparable in each country, but not all states have the same capacity or the same desire to resist, as is manifested by the increasing national differences in expenditure on health, education, family support and unemployment benefit. Thus the experience of unemployment and precarity may vary from one country to another, depending on the level of benefits and social protection established by the different states.¹⁵ While deindustrialization has led to the decline of manual labour in the six founding members of

¹² Daniel Oesch and Jorge Rodriguez Menes, 'Upgrading or polarization? Occupational change in Britain, Germany, Spain and Switzerland, 1990-2008', *Socio-Economic Review*, 9:3, 2011, 503-531; Camille Peugny, 'L'évolution de la structure sociale dans quinze pays européens (1993-2013) : quelle polarisation de l'emploi ?', *Sociologie*, 9:4, 2018, 399-416.

¹³ Maarten Goos, Alan Manning and Anna Salomons, 'Explaining job polarization: Routine-biased technological change and offshoring', *American Economic Review*, 104:8, 2014, 2509-26.

¹⁴ Daniel Oesch, 'Welfare regimes and change in the employment structure: Britain, Denmark and Germany since 1990', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 25:1, 2015, 94-110.

¹⁵ Duncan Gallie and Serge Paugam (eds), *Welfare Regimes and the Experience of Unemployment in Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

the European Union, this is not the case at the level of the twenty-seven countries that now make it up.

1.2 Small-scale self-employed workers still present in substantial numbers

If we now consider the social characteristics and working conditions of those at the bottom of the European social scale, we find a number of common features that allow us to draw a group portrait.

One of these common features is that on the European scale, working-class people who are in work are predominantly men: they make up 60% of this group, compared to only 45% among the middle class. This overrepresentation is due firstly to the fact that women who work tend, in all European countries, to have higher educational qualifications than men. Furthermore, where qualifications are equal, they tend to work more in administrative jobs, while men are predominant in manual or technical professions.¹⁶ Working-class women are also more likely not to be in work, particularly in southern Europe, thus automatically increasing the proportion of men among people in work. And although there may be considerable differences between countries, the employment rate for men remains higher than that for women in all European countries, without exception.

The working class in Europe consist predominantly of low-skilled and unskilled manual and white-collar workers (40%) – mainly manual workers and domestic cleaners – and skilled workers (38%), most of them in industry (Table 1). To these are added other, mainly female occupations such as nursing assistants and childcare workers.

Table 1: Socioeconomic groups within the working class in Europe.

Skilled white-collar workers (7%)	Nursing assistants, childcare workers and homecare assistants	7%
Small-scale self-employed workers (15%)	Farmers	7%
	Craftsmen	8%
Skilled manual workers (38%)	Skilled construction workers	6%
	Skilled craft or food and drink industry workers	4%
	Workers in the metalwork and electronics industries	12%
	Machine operators	7%
	Drivers	9%
Unskilled manual workers and white-collar workers (40%)	Retail and service assistants	19%
	Manual labourers	10%
	Cleaners	9%
	Agricultural workers	2%
Total of working class		60%

¹⁶ Thomas Amossé and Monique Meron, ‘Le sexe des métiers en Europe’, in Margaret Maruani (ed.), *Travail et genre dans le monde*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, 269-278.

Source: LFS 2014. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (excluding Malta)

Over Europe as a whole, the proportion of self-employed workers – farmers and craftsmen– is fairly substantial. But this average masks wide disparities: in the regions of the East and South, being in paid work is far from the norm in all sectors, and a large proportion of the working class work for themselves. This situation contrasts strongly with that in France, the United Kingdom and Germany, for example, where the proportion of farmers is no more than 1%.

But there should be no mistake: these small-scale self-employed workers have little in common with entrepreneurs who have several employees under their command. In most cases, they are sole craftsmen, sometimes supported by one or two employees: they are particularly exposed to the vagaries of the economy, and are in a weak position to borrow or develop their enterprise. In Poland, four fifths of farmers (around 2.8 million people) work on small farms (less than 10 hectares) which earn them little (less than 3,000 euro per year). Such farms barely meet the needs of self-sufficiency, forcing both partners in the household to work on the land (mixed farming with cereals, sugar beet, potatoes, hay and pasture) and raise a few animals, while supplementing this income through other work¹⁷. The situation is similar, or even more difficult, in Romania, where three quarters of farms occupy less than one hectare. Very often these self-employed workers have no protection, and live in real social insecurity. Despite pressure from the European Union to subsidize only large farms, the Romanian authorities, particularly the Social Democratic Party, attempt to support small agricultural units, bypassing European norms in order to allow many working-class households to subsist – and thus secure their electoral support.¹⁸

In Greece, many self-employed people work for only one employer. These quasi-employees are, however, still registered with the social security system as self-employed, and thus assume all the risks associated with the vagaries of the economic situation: they have no right to redundancy pay, or to unemployment benefit if their contract is terminated. In Spain, those known as ‘autonomous workers’ have gradually been granted social rights similar to those of employees, but they have been hit much harder by the economic crisis. In some sectors such as transport, the self-employed lorry driver has to constantly increase his working hours in order to maintain his income, exposing him to the risk of legal sanction.¹⁹ The result is permanent state of competition between self-employed and employed drivers, enabling the large haulage companies to eliminate all possibility of collective action.

Increasing competition can also be seen among employed working-class people, where the proportion of manual workers remains high, particularly in industry. This preponderance of manual work nevertheless has a new geographical distribution: many industrial jobs have been relocated from western Europe to the margins, in the East and

¹⁷ François Bafoil, *Central and Eastern Europe: Europeanization and social change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

¹⁸ Antoine Roger, ‘Subversions locales et usages partisans des politiques européennes. L'exemple de la petite viticulture en Roumanie’, *Politix*, 83, 2008, 179-202.

¹⁹ Pablo López-Calle ‘L’autoexploitation au volant: les camionneurs indépendants espagnols’, *La Nouvelle Revue du travail*, 8, 2016, 167-206.

South. Poland offers a typical example. After it joined the European Union in 2004, the country became host to the factories of major electronics and white goods manufacturers, mainly in the Warsaw region and in the south of the country. American computer manufacturer Dell, for example, closed its production site at Limerick, in Ireland, transferring it in January 2008 to a new plant in Łódź, Poland's third city. Poland has also become the largest manufacturer of flat screens in Europe. More recently, in January 2017, the Whirlpool group announced its decision to close its tumble-dryer plant in Amiens, in France, and relocate it to Poland, despite having received subsidies to modernize the French site. For the last twenty years these movements have contributed, bit by bit, to altering the profile of the working class in Europe.

Beyond the division between self-employed and wage earners, what the working class have in common is that they are the group most exposed to international competition, through both migration and relocation.

1.3 The map of the working class in Europe

The new distribution of production in Europe means that the relative proportion of the working class is far from uniform throughout the countries of the European Union. In broad outline, a contrast can once again be drawn between a Europe of the South and East, including the Baltic states, where the working class form the largest proportion of the population, and a Europe of the North and West, where the middle class comprises a substantial share.

In one group of countries, then, the working class are predominant among people in work. This group comprises the southern periphery (Portugal, Spain, Greece) and the central and eastern periphery (the former socialist countries) of Europe (see Map 1). In these countries, the proportion of working-class people is higher than the European average (43%), and considerably greater than that of other social classes. In Romania they make up as much as two thirds of the working population. Italy, Cyprus and Austria have a similar class structure: the proportion of working-class people is slightly above the European average, but the middle class are also large.

In central and eastern Europe, but also in Portugal and particularly in Greece, a significant proportion of the working class work in agriculture, which remains low-intensity. The basic type of farm is centred on the family unit and self-sufficiency: in Poland, these farms occupy 16% of the cultivated land and employ 30% of the agricultural workforce;²⁰ the proportions are very similar in Romania. In Spain the agricultural sector still employs a large workforce – smaller nevertheless than in the former socialist countries – but in very different circumstances: it is highly dependent on immigrant labour, working on large mixed farms. In addition, temporary employment agencies in Spain provide the services of contract workers from Latin America and North Africa to farmers operating in other European countries, such as France. These workers are in principle affiliated to the Spanish social welfare system, but in practice have no access to healthcare, and the company deducts the cost of travel between Spain and the countries where they work from their wages.²¹

²⁰ Bertrand Hervieu and François Purseigle, *Sociologie des mondes agricoles*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2013, 239.

²¹ Béatrice Mésini and Catherine Laurent, 'Concurrence des marchés de main-d'œuvre et dumping social dans l'agriculture', *Économie rurale*, 349-350, 2015, 171-176.

Map 1: The working class in European countries



Source: LFS 2014. Note: on average the working class represent 43% of people in work in Europe. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (excluding Malta).

In the countries of the former communist bloc, the transition to a market economy has often been brutal. It was accompanied by a rise in inequality throughout the 1990s and 2000s, to the advantage of a small minority usually concentrated in the capitals or the major cities. In some countries, such as the Czech Republic, the working class have, however, been relatively protected by the state during the transition from a planned economy to liberalism. Moreover, the Czech government encouraged the establishment of new industries, for example in the automotive sector where Skoda – the Soviet-era carmaker of Czechoslovakia – was bought by Volkswagen. This kind of change results in major disruption for suppliers: the parts manufacturer Valéo chose to end production in Spain because Volkswagen had relocated its Spanish plants to Slovakia, while at the same

time the Czech Republic had supported the development of a network of subcontractors capable of collaborating closely with German constructors and parts manufacturers. However, the long-term unemployed and pensioners were less protected from the effects of the transition followed by the crisis.

Elsewhere, in all of the countries of the southern and eastern periphery the working class were particularly badly hit by the 2008 financial and economic crisis. In the South this resulted in a huge rise in unemployment, particularly among young people, and increasing job insecurity. The result has been a resurgence in undeclared work, the level of which is probably much higher than elsewhere in Europe.²² The former countries of the East and the Baltic states have also paid a heavy price for the crisis, which first took the form of a sharp increase in unemployment (except in the Czech Republic). Unemployment has fallen since 2011, although youth unemployment remains high in Poland, Romania and Slovakia. In the Baltic countries many workers have had to combine two jobs, while in Poland and Slovenia the number of short-term contracts has risen sharply.²³ However, in this region of Europe adjustment to the crisis has principally taken the form of powerful wage restraint, with levels of low pay, and hence of poverty among workers, that are the highest in Europe.

Overall, this group of countries of the southern and eastern periphery of Europe comprises on one side the winners from liberalization of the economy, who hold the monopoly on most of the economic, cultural and social resources, and on the other the large working class, who often survive by means of small underpaid jobs, meeting their daily needs through informal exchange networks of family and friends.

2. The common features of the European working class

There is clearly an unequal division of production labour between countries in Europe. But, it is also true that the working class share some common features beyond the country they live in. In particular, they correspond to a subordinate and fragile position in the world of work.

2.1 The working class, destination for migrants

The working class in Europe are characterized by the high proportion of immigrants among their number: they absorb many more foreigners than all other social groups (Table 2). Contrary to popular belief, this represents the continuation of an age-old process, originating in the Middle Ages and tightly bound up with the development of capitalism and the wage system.²⁴

Far from being confined to the richer countries, recourse to migrant workers is also common in the countries of central and eastern Europe. In Czech industry, for example, local employers called on foreign labour before the 2008 crisis, in order to meet labour shortages and particularly to counter the wage demands of workers in the large

²² Mihail Hazans, 'Informal Workers across Europe: Evidence from 30 Countries', *IZA Discussion Paper*, Institute for the Study of Labor, 5871, 2011 <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-5912>.

²³ André Cartapanis, Audrey Koulinsky and Nadine Richez-Battesti, 'L'hétérogénéité sociale de l'Union européenne après l'élargissement et la question des délocalisations', *Revue économique*, 57:4, 2006, 793-822.

²⁴ Yann Moulier-Boutang, *De l'esclavage au salariat: Économie historique du salariat bridé*, Paris: PUF, 1998.

international firms such as Skoda (motor vehicles, Volkswagen group) and Foxconn (a Taiwanese electronics corporation). Usually working in unskilled sectors, immigrants are also more at risk of unemployment throughout Europe.

Table 2: Non-European foreigners among the European working class

		Proportion of non-European foreigners
Working class (6%)	Nursing assistants, childcare workers, home care assistants	7%
	Farmers	0.5%
	Craftsmen	4%
	Skilled construction workers	6%
	Skilled craft or food and drink industry workers	5%
	Workers in the metalwork and electronics industries	3%
	Machine operators	5%
	Drivers	4%
	Retail and services assistants	5%
	Manual labourers	9%
	Cleaners	16%
Agricultural labourers	6%	
Ruling class		2%
Middle class		2%

Source: LFS 2014. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (excluding Malta)

These results shed a different light on the discourse among European leaders about the dangers of xenophobia emerging from the 'lower levels' of society: unlike the ruling class, who are so ready to promote transnational mobility and tolerance of others, the working class are in fact much more mixed and mingled than all other social groups. The increase in cross-national marriages in Spain in the last fifteen years confirms this: the least skilled workers are the Spanish people most likely to marry a non-European foreigner, usually from Latin America, or a migrant from central or eastern Europe.²⁵

In a period of crisis, this greater openness nevertheless manifests in competition on the labour market, leading to more powerful tensions and reactions among manual workers, low-skilled white-collar workers and farm labourers than among those higher up in the social hierarchy. These tensions sometimes limit the potential for mobilization. In the United Kingdom, for example, the strategies of the unions seeking to mobilize migrants and local citizens together are tested severely by the wide range of different statuses of

²⁵ Juan Diez Medrano, Clara Cortina, Anna Safranoff and Teresa Castro Martín, 'Euromarriages in Spain: Recent trends and patterns in the context of European integration', *Population, Space and Place*, 20:2, 2014, 157-176.

vulnerable workers. A recent campaign in the cleaning sector²⁶ shows that it is sometimes difficult to bring together the concerns and demands of workers who have different status, depending on whether they are British, EU citizens or non-European foreigners, legally resident or undocumented. The dilemma for the unions is then to know whether they should be incorporated into the campaign on the basis of their position in the organization of labour, or of their legal status.

2.2 Shared vulnerability in the European labour market

The increase in unemployment in Europe is often presented as afflicting all groups without distinction, but the effects of the crisis, of globalization and of the spread of new technologies are not undifferentiated in the world of work: the working class are in the front line of this destabilization of the labour market, making them more vulnerable than all other social groups.

Unemployment does not affect Europeans at random: it has a more systematic impact on the lower end of the social hierarchy.²⁷ In 2011, three years after the start of the economic crisis in Europe, unemployment among the over-25s was on average 5%, with wide disparities between social classes: the level was 11% among the working class, compared to less than 3% among the ruling class. Whereas only 3% of executives experience unemployment, it affects 11% of skilled workers and 14% of unskilled manual and white-collar workers.²⁸ Moreover, for many households in working-class neighbourhoods, the risk of losing one's job is doubled, for it threatens both partners. This heightened risk of unemployment is accompanied in most European countries by drastic reductions in unemployment benefit, in the name of promoting an 'active' social state that makes any new benefit conditional on the individual taking steps to find work.²⁹

Table 3: Unemployment among Europeans

	Unemployment rate
Managers	3%
Intellectual and scientific professions	3%
Intermediate professions	4%
Self-employed workers	4%
Skilled white-collar workers	7%
Skilled manual workers	11%
Unskilled manual and white-collar workers	14%
Ruling class	3%

²⁶ Gabriella Alberti, Jane Holgate and Maite Tapia, 'Organising migrants as workers or as migrant workers? Intersectionality, trade unions and precarious work', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24:22, 2013, 4132-4148.

²⁷ Duncan Gallie, Serge Paugam and Sheila Jacobs, 'Unemployment, poverty and social isolation: Is there a vicious circle of social exclusion?', *European Societies*, 5:1, 2003, 1-32.

²⁸ The survey population does not include those unemployed people who could not be redeployed in their profession, and workers in those countries where this information was absent or incomplete (Ireland, Malta, France, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Romania). We used 2011 data and aggregated level of ESeG because the data are missing or very incomplete, depending on country, in the 2014 LFS survey.

²⁹ Vincent Dubois, 'The economic Vulgate of welfare reform: Elements for a socioanthropological critique', *Current Anthropology*, 55:S9, 2014, 138-146.

Middle class	5%
Working class	11%

Source: LFS 2011. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (except for France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, for which the rate of failure to provide ESEG-related unemployment data was over 30%, and which were therefore excluded).

Hit by redundancies, an increase in long-term unemployment and the erosion of social protection, the European working class lives in uncertainty about the future: more than any other group, they fear losing their job within the next six months (+ 3 points more than the average for Europeans overall). But this fear of unemployment is not evenly spread throughout the working class: it is expressed by a quarter of skilled construction workers, 23% of manual labourers and 22% of farm labourers; among drivers, nursing assistants and childcare assistants, on the other hand, only 17% fear losing their job, probably because many of the latter work in the public or quasi-public sector. Thirty years of successive relocations, initially within Europe, then throughout the world, have thus undermined manual workers' relationship with future employment, particularly among those who work directly with machines. For all of these people, the threat of unemployment is felt beyond the sphere of work: it feeds into a social vulnerability that taints their relationship with the future and produces a persistent but vague sense of abandonment, a process that leads them from being integrated in society to feeling themselves marginal.³⁰

The working class' higher risk of unemployment is combined with a weaker status and a level of part-time employment higher than among other employed workers. In 2014 around 14% of working-class people in employment had a temporary contract, compared to less than 9% of the ruling and middle classes. Here again, there was a particularly sharp contrast between unskilled manual and white-collar workers, particularly manual labourers and farm labourers (17% on temporary contracts), and senior managers (3%). In most European countries these insecure jobs are also the least well paid, regardless of age, level of education and sector, and women are those most likely to be employed in them.

Among women in employment, this precarity usually takes the form of part-time work. At the beginning of the 2010s, women predominated among part-time workers in Europe, whether under the pretext of adjustment of working hours or of flexibility.³¹ At first sight, this gender inequality seems generalized: part-time work is equally common among the working class and the middle class, although the latter has a higher proportion of women. But this is only a superficial resemblance. Part-time work is twice as common among the working class as among the middle class, and particularly affects low-skilled women workers.

For these women, part-time work often prevents them from achieving an adequate standard of living, and forces them to find another source of income. The occupations where part-time work is most common are the least skilled: cleaners, childcare assistants,

³⁰ Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, 2003.

³¹ Margaret Maruani and Danièle Meulders, 'Genre et marché du travail dans l'Union européenne', in Margaret Maruani (ed.), *Travail et genre dans le monde*.

home care assistants and home care assistants are now included in the sector of ‘staff providing personal and household services’. Between 2008 and 2014, employment in this sector rose by 12%, against a fall of 3% in employment over all sectors during the same period.³² At a time when the number of women in work is rising and the population aging in every country in Europe, occupations involving domestic work (childcare, care for the elderly and domestic tasks) constitute a sector that is creating jobs, principally for women.

Whether they respond to a need or to a desire for comfort, these occupations now comprise one of the largest elements of the working class (except in the countries of central and eastern Europe). Some researchers see these caring professions (‘care’ for short) as a new marker of an increasingly globalized capitalism.³³ Thus, the persistence of the patriarchal system – childcare, elderly care and domestic work are still predominantly the province of women –combined with the rising number of women in work in western countries, particularly among more highly educated women, means that these tasks are taken on by working-class women who are very often immigrants or foreigners, and low-paid. In some countries, such as Germany and Austria, public policy has encouraged the employment of domestic staff on precarious contracts for low wages, reinforcing inequalities related to class and national origin among women.³⁴ Among cleaners, the proportion of non-European foreigners is 16%, compared with an average of 6% in the working class as a whole. In Austria, Spain, Estonia and Latvia, between 20% and 30% of industrial cleaners are foreigners from outside Europe, and in Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Denmark the figure is between 30% and 65%.

The working class as a whole are burdened by an accumulation of disadvantages that have intensified since the 2008 crisis: regular full-time work is increasingly less common, being replaced by hybrid forms of insecure jobs. The employers and the most liberal governments have taken advantage of the crisis to flexibilise the labour market, to the detriment primarily of manual workers and low-skilled white-collar workers. Rapid turnover, temporary contracts and part-time work have thus become the general rule, to the detriment of certain sections of the working class. Those particularly affected by unemployment and insecurity are women, non-European foreigners and young people. These destabilising factors prevent them from becoming integrated into the labour market and reduce the protection they are entitled to. Insecurity, moreover, is not confined to young people: unlike those in managerial and intermediate occupations, the working class are at risk of precarity at any age, including those aged over fifty. Job insecurity remains a constant in their working life.

2.3. Onerous working conditions

Working-class people in Europe is also those most likely to face hard and dangerous working conditions (Table 4). Contrary to popular belief, the technological advances of recent decades have not in fact put an end to the rigours of low-skilled and unskilled labour.

³² European Employment Policy Observatory (EEPO), *Thematic Review on personal and household services*, European Commission, 2015, 4.

³³ Arlie Russell Hochschild, ‘Global care chains and emotional surplus value’, in Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (eds), *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2000, 130-46.

³⁴ Karen Shire, ‘Family supports and insecure work: The politics of household service employment in conservative welfare regimes’, *Social Politics* 22:2, 2015, 193–219.

Table 4: Hardness of working conditions in Europe

‘Does your main job involve...?’	Repetitive hand or arm movements	Painful or tiring positions	Carrying or shifting heavy loads	Exposure to loud noise	Exposure to smoke or dust	Working standing up
Ruling class	54%	29%	12%	13%	8%	16%
Middle class	52%	32%	17%	20%	9%	23%
Working class	71%	58%	50%	38%	24%	65%

Source: EWCS 2015. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (excluding Malta). Note: Onerous working conditions are usually defined as those in which survey respondents report being subject to them for at least one quarter of their working hours. Those defined as working standing up are respondents who reported that their job ‘never’ or ‘almost never’ involved working sitting down.

For the vast majority of the working class in Europe, work involves ‘repetitive hand and arm movements’ (+ 20 points more than in the middle class). To these are added ‘painful or tiring positions’, which are much more rarely encountered in other occupations. There are significant class differences in physical hardness of work in terms of jobs that involve regularly carrying heavy loads, regular exposure to loud noise or to smoke and dust, and those that involve working standing up. A number of occupational groups are particularly affected: half of all machine operators work exclusively with repetitive hand and arm movements; a quarter of skilled construction workers report working all or almost all of the time in painful or tiring working positions; a quarter of manual labourers state that they routinely have to carry heavy loads. These factors particularly affect workers in the metalwork and electronics industries, whose working conditions are much more onerous than those in the service industry, and who continue to suffer physically stressful working conditions as they get older. Small-scale self-employed workers are not exempt: they also have to carry heavy loads, and are relatively likely to be exposed to dust and smoke and to loud noise.

Working-class women seem to suffer less from some forms of harsh working conditions associated with industrial labour. For example, they are less often exposed to smoke or dust. However, they experience other forms of physical hardship, such as shifting heavy loads. The majority of cleaners, nursing assistants and childcare assistants have to remain standing for virtually the whole of their working day. Overall, 70% of

working-class women in Europe report that their work never or almost never involves working sitting down; this is the case for only 20% of ruling and middle-class women.

Being regularly subject to the hardest working conditions significantly affects the relationship working-class people have with their professional future: only two thirds of them think they will be able to do the same work when they are sixty, compared to more than four fifths of the ruling class. While this proportion is roughly equal between men and women, it varies markedly with age. Young people are more likely to anticipate being worn down by work: among the working class, a little of over half of those aged under 35 state that they would be able to do the same work at sixty, compared to three quarters of those aged over 50. This disparity relates both to socialization at work and to changes in people's relationship to the future over the course of their lives. The disenchantment born of a difficult start to working life in manual or unskilled jobs prevents people from imagining that they might continue in this work for many years. By contrast, once past a certain age, the fear of redundancy can make working conditions that younger people find intolerable seem acceptable.

The working class occupy a subordinate position in the labour market, which is manifested in an accumulation of disadvantages that vary depending on gender. In simplified terms, on one side are men who work in farming, skilled manual work and craftsmen, whose working conditions are physically hardest, involving exposure to painful positions, loud noise, heavy loads, dust, smoke and vapour, and repetitive hand and arm movements. On the other are the female cleaners, retail and service assistants, nursing assistants and childcare workers who tend more to work standing up, in insecure jobs.

3. Income and consumption: the working class split in two

While the working class in Europe have been severely weakened on the labour market, their situation in terms of level of resources and access to consumer goods gives less cause for concern, particularly compared to their peers in other parts of the world. Moreover, over the last decade the level of education has risen throughout Europe, helping to bring the cultural practices of the different social groups closer together. Nevertheless, substantial inequalities remain, both in the financial domain and in access to leisure.

3.1 Low income, families in poverty

A first measure of relative position in the social hierarchy is household disposable income: 22% of the working class in Europe live below the poverty line, meaning that they earn less than 60% of the median wage in their country. This is due to the increase in unemployment, which forces more and more households to depend on a single source of income, and to wage restraint policies. For these groups, deprivation is evident in every area of daily life. Those most at risk are farmers (40% living below the poverty line), small-scale self-employed workers (29%), low-skilled manual and white-collar workers (24%) and farm labourers (23%). These results offer a glimpse of the financial deprivation of whole swathes of the European working class, particularly in the countries of the South and East of Europe, where a class of small subsistence farmers, together

with small-scale retail and craft sectors, persist. The financial subordination of the European working class emerges more clearly still when the composition of households is taken into account (Table 5).

Working-classes households in Europe are those most at risk of falling into financial poverty, but those with dependent children fare still worse. Those most affected by this poverty are single-parent families consisting of single women with children, the number of whom has increased markedly in the countries of northern and western Europe. An ethnographic survey conducted in a large social housing neighbourhood in Nottingham, in the East Midlands, revealed the mechanisms leading to such situations of poverty in the United Kingdom.³⁵ Against a background of deindustrialization men, primarily the descendants of Jamaican immigrant workers, are turning to the drug economy, and therefore tend to be absent from the home either because they have to be constantly travelling or because they are in prison. Forced to accept precarious jobs in order to meet the needs of their family, women are in the front line of attacks from the social services and public authorities, who accuse them of living on welfare. The exclusion of these women is reinforced by austerity policies, and their children (who are often mixed-race) and their black partners suffer institutionalized racial discrimination, particularly at the hands of the police. The combination of these factors contributes to them becoming confined to their neighbourhood, which becomes the only place where they are safe from symbolic attacks and discrimination.

Table 5: Poverty among European households)

		Proportion of individuals belonging to a family living below the poverty line
Working class	Lone parent with one or more dependent children	41%
	2 adults with 3 or more dependent children	38%
	2 adults with 2 dependent children	23%
	2 adults with 1 dependent child	19%
Middle class	Lone parent with one or more dependent children	19%
	2 adults with 3 or more dependent children	10%
	2 adults with 2 dependent children	7%
	2 adults with 1 dependent child	6%

Source: EU-SILC 2014. Population: People in work aged between 25 and 65, EU 27 (excluding Malta and Slovenia). Reading: 41% of working-class people belonging to a household comprising a lone parent with several dependent children live below the poverty line in their country.

³⁵ Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2015.

The financial vulnerability of the working class can be qualified with reference to inequalities in assets. Overall, self-employed workers tend to have more resources than employees, but these small variations are difficult to document over the whole of Europe. Moreover, limiting consideration merely to the financial dimension fails to take into account other forms of exclusion. In order to gain a more reliable representation of social inequality, the picture needs to be supplemented with information on access to certain consumer goods, and hence to cultural, symbolic and physical resources.

3.2 The digital divide: Financial or cultural boundary?

Computer ownership is now widespread throughout Europe: nine Europeans in ten own a computer and indeed, most (80%) of the working class owns one, although in this domain too, they are less well off than others.

The digital divide in effect owes as much to unequal grasp of IT skills as to difficulty accessing a computer or the internet. More than two thirds of Europeans state that they have a good understanding of new information and communication technologies (NICT),³⁶ a definition that encompasses the use of word processing and calculation software, the ability to copy, save and compress files, to connect a peripheral device, to change software parameters, etc. The proportion is somewhat lower with regard to navigating the internet, which includes using search engines, sending email, downloading and sharing files, posting messages on sites and forums, and so on. But these figures hide major inequalities. While a little under half of working-class people have a good grasp of new technology, more than four fifths of middle-class people, and more than nine tenths of the ruling class say they do. Similarly, a little under half of working-class people know how to use the internet, compared to three quarters of the middle class and four fifths of the ruling class.

Those who have greatest difficulty with new technology and the internet are farmers, cleaners, farm labourers, manual labourers and skilled workers in craft, or in the food and drink industry or in construction. At the other end of the scale, executives and most of those working in intellectual and scientific professions have full grasp of NICT and the internet. The middle class report very similar levels of competence, with the exception of shopkeepers, more than 40% of whom have difficulty with these tools. These disparities in new technology skills to a considerable degree reflect the unequal importance of information technology in different occupations: those who use computers in their day-to-day work are most likely to be able to take full advantage of it at home. But these inequalities are also due to levels of skill and qualification: working-class people with the lowest educational qualifications are those least able to access these technologies. They suffer a double handicap as a result: firstly on the labour market, because knowledge of these tools has become imperative even in jobs at the bottom of the social scale. Secondly, in terms of access to rights, since the development of an administration without counter service³⁷ and the progressive move to electronic services places users less comfortable with text and computers at a disadvantage.

³⁶ Owing to a high level of non-responses, the United Kingdom is excluded from this indicator of NICT use; Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands are excluded from the indicator of internet use.

³⁷ Aurélien Buffat, 'Street-level bureaucracy and e-government', *Public Management Review*, 17:1, 2015, 149-161.

Inequalities in grasp of technology are also linked to gender and age, two criteria that create greater discrimination at the bottom of the social scale. The gap between working-class men and women is 8 points, and the generation gap is wider still: more than 70% of those aged 25-35 have a good grasp of information technology, compared to about 32% of the oldest group (aged 50 and over). These divisions also pertain in the ruling and middle classes, but to a much lesser extent.

In a Europe where physically present staff are disappearing from public services, new technology could alleviate geographical and generational disparities, but in fact many indicators show that it usually reinforces phenomena of exclusion.

3.3 Health inequality and going without treatment

While in comparison to other regions of the world, it may appear that in Europe social welfare systems enable the majority to access a basic level of care, there are nevertheless marked inequalities in the arena of health between different social groups. Here the disadvantaged position of the working class is due primarily to their living and working conditions: exposure to pollution, to work-related cancers and premature death vary according to occupation and place of residence. The risks related to asbestos for manual workers, and to pesticides for farm workers, offer two examples. To these need to be added all the deleterious effects on health of harsh working conditions: restricted capacity for work, chronic illness, and the feeling of being in poor health, particularly among older workers.³⁸ Vulnerability to unemployment and job insecurity also has serious effects on health.³⁹ These work-related social inequalities nevertheless vary considerably from one country to another, owing to the lack of common European legislation.

In Greece, for example, the financial crisis and austerity programmes have only increased these inequalities, by substantially reducing access to care and undermining the health of the population. The drastic financial measures imposed by the European Union reduced public health expenditure to the strict minimum, the effect of which was to withdraw social protection from the most vulnerable groups. This resulted in an increasingly unequal system of access to care, whereas before the crisis the entire population benefited from health insurance. More generally, since the 2008 crisis in public finance, many countries have increased the share of costs that patients have to pay, resulting in an increase in health inequality across Europe.

Overall, inequality in access to healthcare relates mainly to income and educational qualifications: this explains the disadvantaged position of working-class people, 9% of whom, on a Europe-wide level, stated that they had had to forgo a medical appointment during the previous year. 11% of working-class people have already given up dental care, compared to only 6% of middle-class people and 5% of the ruling-class people. These figures, however, contain some bias, as the definition of doing without care may vary depending on the importance attached to prevention and the necessity of looking after oneself.

Among the working class, 38% of those who had gone without healthcare had done so for financial reasons (compared to 12% among the ruling class), but many had gone

³⁸ Thierry Debrand and Pascal Lengagne, 'Pénibilité au travail et santé des séniors en Europe', *Économie et Statistiques*, 403, 2007, 19-38.

³⁹ David Rose and David Pevalin, 'Social class differences in mortality using NS-SEC – Too little too soon: a reply to Chandola', *Social Science and Medicine* 51:7, 2000, 1121-1127.

without treatment for other reasons: because they did not have the time (16%, compared to 30% in the ruling class), hoped they would get better without taking anything (18%), or because the waiting list was too long (14%, compared to 22% in the ruling class). This range of reasons shows that going without healthcare is far from an exclusively financial consideration: it relates to forms of self-censorship that need to be analyzed in terms of class, not just income bracket. There may be reasons related to awareness of the need to look after oneself, to the availability of information, to the possibility of accessing specialist medical treatment, and to geographical isolation, particularly in rural and periurban areas. All of these obstacles combine to contribute to deepening social inequality in relation to mortality. The highest mortality rates are found among low-skilled workers, with managerial staff at the least risk, and this contrast is observed in all European countries.⁴⁰

Income, consumption, access to information technology and health: these various domains of social life offer a glimpse of how the European working class split into two distinct groups. On one side are the small-scale self-employed workers, mainly farmers, and low-skilled and proletarianized manual and white-collar workers. They often live below the poverty line, report that they find the end of the month difficult, and more often have difficulty accessing healthcare. They constitute the disadvantaged section of the working class. On the other side, skilled workers in the metallurgy and electronics industries, drivers, machine operators, and nursing and childcare assistants have greater access to everyday consumer goods such as cars, holidays and computers. This split in the working class does not follow national boundaries: it is common throughout Europe, though it may be more or less marked depending on the country.

4. At the bottom of the European social space

At the bottom of the European social pyramid, the working class of the South and the East are revealed in many ways as much more disadvantaged than the equivalent groups in the rest of Europe. At the top of the pyramid, the ruling class of the countries of the North enjoy complete supremacy. The increasing number of spaces where these groups encounter one another in the European arena makes the contrast between these two extremes all the stronger: direct relations between individuals of different social groups are proliferating, through migration for work of course, but also through student mobility and through tourism.

Over the last thirty years, the economic and social equilibriums that previously held sway in Europe have been progressively modified as the EU expanded to include new countries. Historically, there was a structural divide between the rich nations of the North, including those that initiated the European project, and those of the South, which were brought in more recently. Since the entry of the former countries of the East into the European Union, this structural opposition has been overturned. It is now the working class in the eastern part of the continent who form the base of the European social space, albeit with internal variations: Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have seen strong

⁴⁰ Adrienne Cavelaars et al, 'Morbidity differences by occupational class among men in seven European countries: An application of the Erikson-Goldthorpe Social Class Schema', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 27:2, 1998, 222–230.

economic development, while Bulgaria and Romania are still characterized by great poverty. For their part, the workers in the countries of the South such as Portugal and Greece are on a socioeconomic level substantially higher than that of their peers in central and eastern Europe, but bear the full force of the austerity policies that Brussels enforces as a condition of their staying in the European Union.

4.1 The working class of the East and South: the dogsbodies of Europe

In many respects, the working class in the countries of the East and South occupy the lowest position in the European social space, and show signs of great financial poverty, combined with working conditions that are harsher than anywhere else.⁴¹ Moreover, the statistical surveys available relate only to people in employment, resulting in an underestimate of the difficulties encountered by the most marginalized groups, particularly those who make their living from the “informal” economy.

This highly disadvantaged position in the job market is due in large part to the social shifts that have taken place in these countries in the last twenty years. In Romania, one of the most economically disadvantaged countries, the number of industrial jobs fell from 4.7 million in 1990 to 1.7 million in 2012. Redundancies in industrial and mining regions have forced many workers to return to the rural regions they came from, where they live at barely more than subsistence level. In the Jiu valley, restructuring in the mines has definitively broken the power of the miners, who formed the working-class aristocracy prior to the fall of Ceausescu. This forced-march transition of the former industrial regions has resulted in deteriorating living standards and the destabilization of home and family. While some emigrate – initially to Hungarian mines, later to other EU member countries following the 2007 enlargement – or start their own businesses, there are many former miners who are isolated in their homes. Through the drastic reduction in jobs resulting from voluntary redundancies, places of male sociality have become deserted, and local and family solidarities dislocated. The reduction in the status of worker has eroded the system of values associated with the mine, which extolled class loyalty and physical labour. The wives of ex-miners have been forced to look for work, usually of a highly precarious nature: agricultural day labour, short-term contracts in the cleaning and maintenance sectors, or retail jobs in the clothing industry and small-scale food production.⁴²

Within each of the countries of central and Eastern Europe, there is a hierarchy of exclusion.⁴³ But the working class in these countries, who sit at the base of the European social space, has all been affected by economic restructuring. The accelerated conversion to a capitalist economy has gone hand in hand with the loss of large numbers of industrial jobs and a collapse in agricultural activity in some regions. In the late 1990s, countries such as Poland and Bulgaria saw an unprecedented rise in undeclared work (classified by

⁴¹ For a similar observation based on substantially different indicators, see Frédéric Lebaron and Pierre Blavier, ‘Classes et nations: quelle articulation à l’échelle européenne’, *Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 219, 2017, 80-97.

⁴² Maria Voichița Grecu, ‘On est resté l’écume du métier.’ Le groupe des mineurs de la vallée du Jiu (Roumanie) disloqué par les restructurations, 1997-2013’, *Travail et Emploi*, 137, 2014, 123-138.

⁴³ In 2014, for example, the annual income of working-class people in employment ranged from 6,500 euro in Romania to 12,700 euro in the Czech Republic, with Hungary in the middle at 8,600 euro (these figures are expressed in purchasing power parity, i.e. corrected to take into account the wide disparities in the cost of living in different countries, in order to draw a meaningful comparison).

international organisations as “informal”). This sector of the economy in the former countries of the East is difficult to evaluate: its share of GDP remains high, but the proportion of workers working in the informal sector has fallen, to the extent that with the exception of Poland, it is similar to that in the West. According to some studies, this is not the case in the countries of the South, particularly Greece, Cyprus and Portugal,⁴⁴ where undeclared work has continued to flourish owing to the rapid shifts in social structures⁴⁵: still today, it is the only way that many households hit by the crisis manage to get by.

Until the 1970s, the working class in Portugal worked predominantly in agriculture, but over the space of thirty years the agricultural sector has shrunk, being replaced by manual work and particularly by unskilled white-collar jobs. This restructuring of the working class has been less centred on industry – which has been stagnant since the 1980s – than on the construction sector for men, and unskilled services for women. The rate of women’s economic activity has risen from 29% in 1970 to 65% in 2001. The majority of working-class people in work now live in cities (38% of the population lived in Lisbon and Porto in the 2000s), with precarious conditions of work and employment that force regular migrations to neighbouring countries. In the cities, the growth of a skilled sector may offer some opportunities for mobility for the working class, but it is rarer in the rural areas of the country, where social reproduction is still significant and levels of education remain fairly low.⁴⁶

Although their situation is a little more favourable than that of the former countries of the East, the working class in the South of Europe is still very far removed from those of the rest of Europe: in Portugal and Greece, earned income among the working class hover around 9,000 euro, far below what they might aspire to in Italy (15,750 euro), and only a third of average working-class income in Denmark (28,000 euro). It is easy to understand why almost the entirety of the Greek and Portuguese working class state that they find it difficult to make ends meet at the end of the month. By comparison, only half to one third of the working class in Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands describe this kind of financial fragility.

Over Europe as a whole, inequalities in living standards are intensified by the varying extent of systems of social protection. The consequences can be measured in the arena of access to healthcare: among the working class, one quarter of Lithuanians, one fifth of Portuguese, and 17% of Greeks report that they have been forced to go without a dental check-up they needed for financial reasons, whereas going without dental treatment is reported by only 3% of the working class in Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. These disparities are due to differences in income, but also derive from the shortcomings of the state, which offers little in the way of social protection in the

⁴⁴ Mihail Hazans, ‘Informal Workers across Europe: Evidence from 30 Countries’, *IZA Discussion Paper*, 5871, Bonn, Institute for the Study of Labor, 2011.

⁴⁵ Other estimates of the informal economy in European countries offer a slightly different picture: amounting to approximately 18% of GDP in Europe as a whole in 2015, it is thought to be high in the countries of the South (22% of GDP in Greece for example), but still higher in many countries of central and Eastern Europe (31% in Bulgaria, 28% in Romania, 23% in Poland, over 24% in the Baltic countries). Friedrich Schneider, “Size and Development of the Shadow Economy of 31 European and 5 other OECD Countries from 2003 to 2015: Different Developments”, January 2015.

⁴⁶ José Madureira Pinto, ‘Cultural and Educational Heritage, Social Structure and Quality of Life’, in Guy Neave and Alberto Amaral (eds.), *Higher Education in Portugal 1974-2009: A Nation, a Generation*, London: Palgrave, 2012, 89-107.

countries of the East and South of Europe. In Portugal, the serious difficulty in accessing healthcare combines with a high, and lasting, level of poverty, owing to the pitiful level of social security benefits and compensation, in a country where state intervention in healthcare was only recently introduced.⁴⁷ In effect, the social security system that was put in place after the 1974 revolution in Portugal leaves whole sectors of the working class without protection, while the ruling class benefit more from social security payments than in other countries.⁴⁸ This increases the importance of family support. Following the 2008 crisis, in countries such as Greece and Portugal the drastic reduction in public spending on health imposed by the European Union resulted in the reactivation of informal mechanisms of mutual support between friends and relatives.

Thus the process of European integration has two faces: if we go only by macroeconomic national indicators, it presents as a relative narrowing of the gap between the countries of the East and South and the rest of Europe. But behind this deceptive image of overall increase in wealth, the economic changes have mainly benefited a minority, and have increased inequalities between regions.

4.2 The destabilisation of the rural working class in the East

The accelerated transition of the former socialist countries to a market economy not only destroyed many jobs in industry but also radically transformed the conditions of access to the labour market: a high-school leaving certificate has now become an essential condition for entry to and remaining in employment, resulting in the relegation of entire generations of workers with little or no education to unemployment or inactivity. As we have already seen in relation to Romania, many have then been forced to return to rural areas, a factor that has helped to reinforce the economic disparity between urban and rural zones.

The social conditions of the rural working class are far from uniform throughout the countries of central and Eastern Europe. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, for example, the farming population has continued to fall, while it has stayed relatively stable in Poland and Romania⁴⁹. However, the reforms of the last twenty years have exacerbated inequalities, while redistributing positions of power. In the Romanian village of Aurel Vlaicu, for example, the restoration of land to its former owners or their descendants, which was instituted in 1991 under pressure from international institutions, has inverted the relations of power between landowners and tenants.⁵⁰ To begin with, the former officials of the Ceausescu regime who had been managing collective and state farms retained a monopoly on farm machinery. They were thus the only ones able to cultivate the land, and were able to dictate rent levels for farmland to the new small landowners. These 'supertenants' rapidly became the affluent class in the privatized Romanian

⁴⁷ Alfredo Bruto da Costa, Ana Cardoso and Isabel Baptista, 'The Dynamics of Income Poverty and Social Exclusion in Portugal', in Eleni Apospori and Jane Millar (eds), *The Dynamics of Social Exclusion in Europe. Comparing Austria, Germany, Greece, Portugal and the UK*, Glos and Northampton: Edwar Elgar Publishing, 2003, 114-138.

⁴⁸ Leonor Vasconcelos Ferreira, 'Persistent Poverty: Portugal and The Southern European Welfare Regime', *European Societies*, 10:1, 2008,49-71.

⁴⁹ François Bafoil, *Central and Eastern Europe: Europeanization and Social Change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

⁵⁰ Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*, Ithaca/New-York: Cornell University Press, 2003.

countryside. Subsequently, in the late 1990s, they were in a position to buy land and sold it to foreign investors, while remaining as managers of commercial farms. Thus within the space of twenty years the rural grandees of the former regime have managed to convert their power into economic capital. They have become the main beneficiaries of the economic changes resulting from the opening of the country to foreign investors, in rural zones hit by lasting unemployment, where many poor labourers nevertheless still manage to find a way to subsist. In 2014, 35% of the Romanian working class and 22% of their Polish counterparts worked in the agricultural sector, either self-employed or as employees. Most farms are small (averaging 3.5 hectares in Romania, 8.1 hectares in Poland), and small farmers still today make up substantial social groups: in 2014 they comprised 19% of people in work in Romania (28% of the working class) and 10% of people in work in Poland (20% of the working class). In the South, only Greece has as many farmers.

Over twenty-five years, the economic transition of the former countries of the East has thus pitched a large proportion of the rural working class into extreme poverty, while at the same time inculcating in them a sense of their own unworthiness. These pariahs of Europe now emerge as the people most excluded from the resources that enable access to the most everyday goods and facilities. For example, four in ten working-class people in Bulgaria say they can only afford to eat meat or fish every other day, and one third are in this position in Hungary. Such nutritional deprivation is almost unknown (between 2% and 5%) among working-class households in Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden. Ownership of domestic appliances reveals the same stark discrepancies: around 10% of working-class people in Romania and Bulgaria state that they cannot afford a washing machine, whereas almost all Europeans in the West and North have one. The working class in central and Eastern Europe thus find themselves permanently relegated to the paradox of the conquered: in a context of increasing valorisation of Western European lifestyles, they have to deal with the economic deprivation that prohibits access to them.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the crisis has hit the entirety of the working class in Europe with full force: unemployment and insecurity are part of their everyday experience and mark them out from other classes. Another recurrent feature is the physical hardness of their work – which affects low-skilled and unskilled workers the most – in almost all European countries. Yet little political attention has been paid to these inequalities in work. As working conditions concerns have been relegated to an increasingly marginal space, the growing insecurity of the working class has been concealed. This insecurity takes the form of financial vulnerability, expressed sometimes as destitution, sometimes as precarity and social insecurity; it is also manifested in ‘subordination in the division of labour and in political and social relations’, and by deprivation of a range of cultural resources – whether these relate to new information and communication technologies, healthcare, or lack of skills in foreign languages. All of these markers of domination point to forms of social and cultural separation that define the contemporary working class. In this sense, the concept of class retains all its relevance.

We should add that with those at the bottom of the hierarchy being systematically set in competition with one another, the process of their political marginalization is exacerbated. This division helps to explain why some sections of the working class have ceased believing in the possibility of workers emancipating themselves, why others ally themselves with protectionist small-scale employers within national boundaries, and others still grasp onto the idea of a possible alliance with the middle class. If they are unable to identify a common outlook the risk is that they will withdraw from political activity. For a long time now the working class has been underrepresented among elected representatives in the countries of the European Union, and this exclusion is reinforced by a retreat from the electoral arena: abstention rates are much higher among working-class people than among employers and managerial staff.⁵¹ In short, the entire base of the social hierarchy is excluded from political life.

⁵¹ Aina Gallego, 'Unequal political participation in Europe', *International Journal of Sociology*, 37:4, 2007, 10-25.

Appendix : Statistical construction of social classes at European level

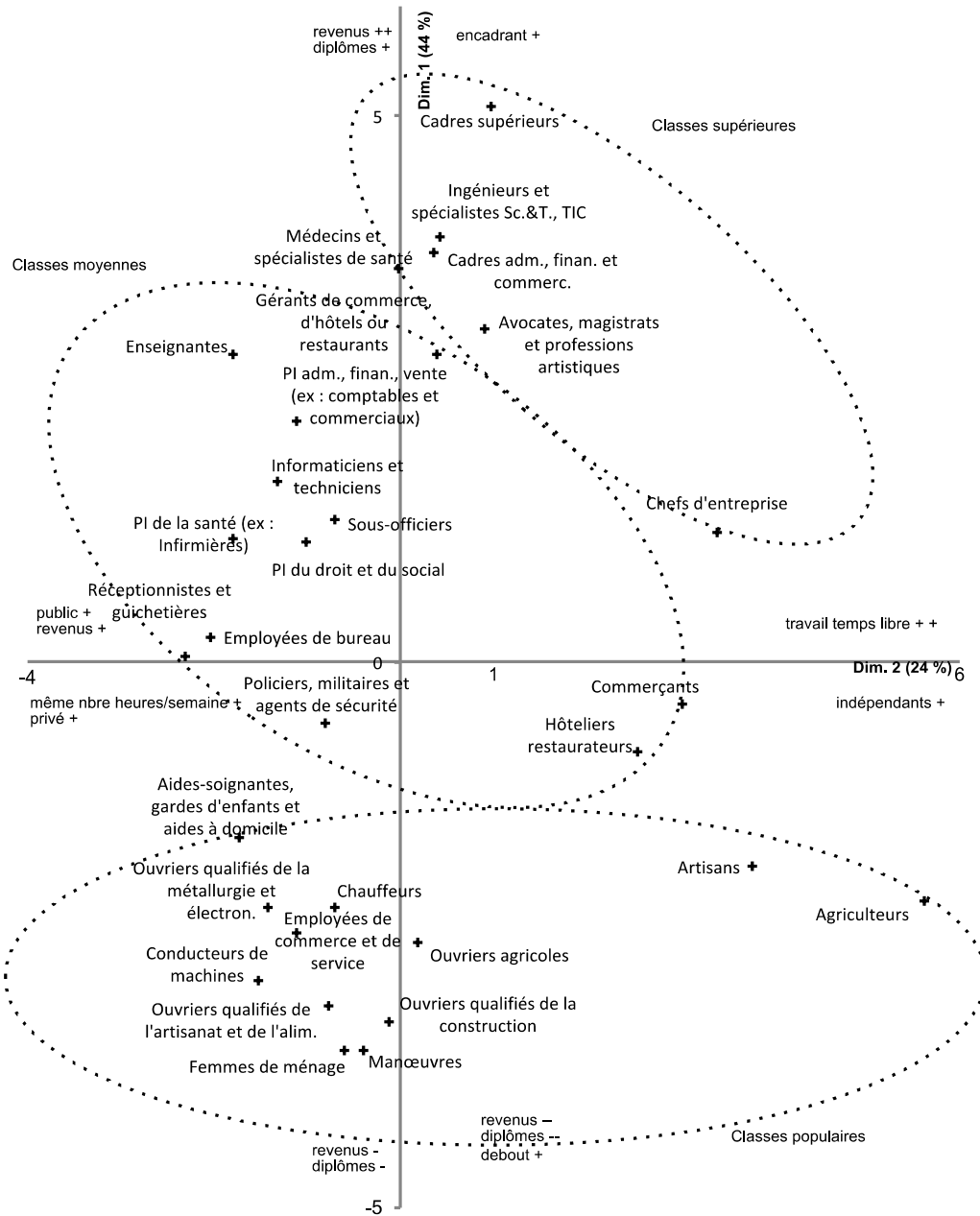
To build social classes in Europe, we use the European socioeconomic classification (ESeG) of Eurostat, based on the most recent version of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08). The ESeG classification is especially useful because it incorporates the employment status of those surveyed (employed or self-employed). It opens up new possibilities for identifying and evaluating social inequalities and comparing them at the European level. The complete ESeG classification comprises nine main groups and 42 sub-groups. For people in work, the aggregated level comprises seven groups, while what is known as the detailed level is made up of 30 sub-groups

In order to analyse social inequality at European level, we combined various features of the thirty socioeconomic groups in the classification. Our multidimensional approach to inequality in Europe was based on observation of different aspects of social hierarchies, cross-referencing possession of various kinds of capital (financial, cultural) with working environment (position, sector and working conditions). We used a number of indicators for this purpose. Equivalised disposable household income (by European quartile) and level of education (higher or further education, secondary, or lower than secondary) are fairly widely accepted indicators of financial and cultural capital in studies of social stratification. Among employees, supervisory duties mark an asymmetric position in the workplace that relates to a social hierarchy. Constructing a variable that distinguishes between employees in public occupations (or the public sector), employees in private sectors, and the self-employed offers a better way of assessing different relations to the state. We used two indicators related to working hours (frequent working in free time, and regularity of working hours each week) in order to take into account both the flexibility and time commitment required by some jobs, especially for the self-employed, and the balance between private and work life. Finally, the use of body position (seated or standing) marks the distinction between indoor work activities (in an office, moving little) and outdoor work (farming, construction and even industry), where workers move about more.

Principal component analysis outlines a European social space where, on the vertical axis, subjects belonging to the wealthiest households in Europe (members of households in the fourth European income quartile), who have higher education and supervise others in their workplace, sit at the top. At the bottom of the vertical axis are subjects belonging to the poorest households in Europe (members of households in the first European income quartile), whose qualifications are below high-school leaving certificate and who work standing up. The horizontal axis reveals another opposition, with on the left, employed individuals who have regular working hours and tend to be members of households in the third European income quartile, and on the right, freelance (self-employed) individuals who state that they very often work during their free time. Thus we have a number of significant indices for identifying the key sub-groups at the top, middle and bottom of the European social space.

The grouping into three classes is represented by the three ellipses on the graph. This grouping is the result of a two-pronged, empirical and theoretical, evaluation. We first identified the sub-groups typically situated at the bottom (working classes), in the middle

(middle classes) and at the top (privileged classes) of the European social space. It was more difficult to allocate the remaining ESeG sub-groups – the self-employed, particularly ESeG 11 (*Chief executive officer*) and ESeG 14 (*Shops, hotels and restaurants managers*) to one social class rather than another purely on the basis of the results of this PCA. This division into three social classes follows social science convention. It remains schematic and is primarily a working tool, influenced both by the tenuousness of the internal distinctions within each ESeG socioeconomic group and by variations in the coding of professions in different countries, noted above.



Authors' note : *This graph will be translated in the final version of this article.*