
Collection Social Divides

An Introduction

Jordi Sevilla
Economist

September 2021

socialobservatorylacaixa.org

TheSocialObservatory

Credits

**The Social Observatory of
the “la Caixa” Foundation**

**“la Caixa” Foundation, 2021
Plaza de Weyler, 3
07001 Palma**

Translations:

Debbie Smirthwaite

Graphic design:

César Jara

“la Caixa” Foundation
does not necessarily identify
with the opinions of the author
of this publication.

Contents

03	Summary
05	Social and democratic malaise
06	The pandemic is derailing (nearly) everything in its path. Temporarily
08	What unites and what separates
09	A short tour through history
10	A little bit of political theory
11	Money or recognition?
12	Liberty, equality, fraternity and the principle of difference
14	Inequality as a social earthquake
16	Six divides that are breaking up Spanish society

This issue forms part of the Collection “Social Divides”,
which is made up of the following publications:

- **An Introduction**
- **The Divide between Rich and Poor**
- **The Divide between Men and Women**
- **The Divide between the Young and the Elderly**
- **The Divide between the Rural World and the Urban World**
- **The Divide between Turbocapitalism and Retrocapitalism**
- **The Divide between Analogical and Digital**

1

Summary

We are living in an era of confrontation. A period in which the prevailing tones are “hate speeches that try to arouse not empathy, but antipathy; not belonging, but division; not continuity, but disruption”. An era of “chaos and clashes that leave little space for democratic deliberation, collective narratives or even, simply, the word”. A historic point in time that makes “strategic use of lies” and enforces “a head-on combat that puts an end to the field of the political and the diversity of society” (Christian Salmon).

- ▶ A wave of citizen fury is sweeping the world, with social mobilisations in France, Hong Kong, Chile, Algeria, India... a wave fuelled by the pandemic, even though the contents of the banners have changed. After the West’s defeat in Afghanistan, two things remain clear: there is no international order, and social liberal democracy is in retreat the world over. The Arab Spring, movements protesting over the 2008 global crisis, the Me Too movement, those advocating urgently fighting against climate change, or science denialists or the assault on the United States Capitol are all snapshots of these breaks with former social and political consensuses.
- ▶ We are living through an era of offended identities that are fragmenting democratic fraternity. In the absence of a shared goal that mobilises people and offers hope, this climate of crossed offences makes building something in common non-viable, because that aspiration has been removed from the equation with the revering of the banal and the ephemeral, replicated ad infinitum by the social media networks.
- ▶ After an initial moment in which the pandemic united us in incredulity and fear of the unknown, divisions quickly appeared between those who clapped for healthcare workers and those who banged pots and pans to protest against the government’s management of the pandemic.
- ▶ We have seen more protests in the first world against the restrictions set up to control the virus than protests in the third world demanding vaccines or better healthcare. And, everywhere, the amalgam of deniers and anti-vaxxers furiously taking to the streets.
- ▶ Following the last Great Recession, and the policies that were implemented, many citizens found themselves severely affected by the crisis, which left sudden deep wounds. Furthermore, when the citizens of developed countries, particularly the Europeans – looked to their governments seeking protection, they found their governments turning their backs on them, bound head and toe by international commitments that were limiting their margins for manoeuvre and pushing them to introduce cuts and austerity.
- ▶ All of this left behind it a trail of inequality and a feeling of discontent and social injustice. And this is now being taken advantage of by populism and extreme ideologies, fuelled by unfulfilled promises, by an economic recovery that is not reaching everyone

equally, by citizen dissatisfaction in the face of the growing polarisation of income and wealth, by the fear of those who feel that their future has been stolen and by the typically human need to find the guilty parties. The pandemic has aggravated this climate of discontent and unrest.

▶ We are faced with a series of uneven and disarticulated revolts against “what I don’t like”, whose origins lie in a collective that feels badly treated, attacked, or not taken into consideration (which leads us to the *divide* concept) by the public powers that be. Furthermore, the different divides that exist or have been created are sustained by what differentiates us; the adversary becomes the enemy, negotiation becomes claudication and agreement becomes surrender.

▶ The aim of the study that we are introducing here is to help understand the causes of these worrying social phenomena and try to propose solutions. We are referring, in particular, to the divides that are threatening social cohesion and damaging the democratic coexistence between citizens who share the same formal rights. Fractures, in short, that prevent people from fully developing their life projects in freedom.

2

Social and democratic malaise

It is quite true that the tension between antagonistic factions has been a constant in recent decades. The tension of today, however, is internally dividing societies into various blocs, which are organised around a social fracture (real or perceived) from which it is sought to construct a self-identity. Political debate seems to have retreated from the public space to be substituted by confrontation. Therefore, we are crossing through that dangerous point of all social transitions, in which it is as defensible to shed light on signs of the new world order as to think that we will be living in a disorder marked by various forces: blockchain, big data, artificial intelligence, robotization or ecological transition, but also nationalism, xenophobia, intolerance, irrationality and totalitarianism. The causes of these phenomena have a great deal to do with social divides. In this respect, a broad consensus exists among experts:

- 1** The social pact established since World War II has gone up in smoke from the heat of globalisation, the technological revolution, and the primacy of a financial economy that has erected private profit as its new and exclusive totem. The Great Recession of 2008 and subsequent crisis signal the point of no return in a process of breakdown between global economic elites and sedentary workers, who soon see the emergence of losers among their ranks. And in the midst of public indifference, the middle class is disappearing.
- 2** This means that many citizens feel deceived and less important to “the system” than the businesses and the banks. In the words of philosopher Daniel Innerarity, “when the elites disconnect from what is happening to their co-citizens – and there are many people feeling excluded from the future – the grounds for confrontation are laid”.
- 3** This polarisation and distrust affect the quality of democracy: and the parties that pick up and express this anger receive increasing numbers of votes, even if they are not doing anything constructive. And as pointed out by Harvard University professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in *How Democracies Die*, they break two basic rules of democracy: “mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance”.
- 4** It all starts with the existence of social divides in the public space that are not recognised and that nobody feels compelled to resolve. As Ricardo Dudda says: “Politics today is a mixture of propaganda and media hysteria [...] with a surplus of political narcissists whose main objective is to avoid any loss of presence, and for that reason they aspire to make their identity public”.

3

The pandemic is derailing (nearly) everything in its path. Temporarily

The covid-19 pandemic has not put an end to social disturbances, although it has changed the excuse for them. Now the people protesting are those who deny the virus's existence and attribute everything to a major worldwide conspiracy designed to control people through vaccines, together with those defending their right to refuse the vaccine, without being stigmatised for doing so through compulsory displaying of the Covid-free certificate demanded for increasing numbers of activities. The same arguments that are wielded to ensure that vaccination is not made obligatory (for the time being) are being used to criticise control measures that limit individual freedom.

The pandemic has turned so much of life upside down. It has been as though, suddenly, our world has entered a dystopia, where nearly everything looks similar to our previous world but, deep down, is totally different. As I write this, nearly five million people worldwide have lost their lives as a consequence of covid-19, versus some 650,000 who die every year due to influenza. A more detailed analysis of the pandemic caused by covid-19 offers us the following reflections:

-
- ▶ It is crystallising a diffuse state of fear, even dread, which has been floating in our societies for some time, in response to the quantity and speed of disruptive changes we are living through. Like the paranoid person who really is being pursued, abstract fears are suddenly materialising in a virus. An enemy has appeared that is real and common to the entire species.

 - ▶ A recognition of the prominent role that chance plays in our lives. We know this, we live it, we experience it in the case of accidents, but we want to live our lives “as though” we have everything under control and what happens to us is almost exclusively the result of our actions and decisions. The need to feel control over things is a human characteristics that the pandemic has disrupted. Suddenly, I find myself directly affected by something that is happening in China, that is travelling around the world at great speed and that has an impact on me with relative independence of what I do. Perhaps “black swans” are much more common than we would like to think.

 - ▶ We try to overcome this objective lack of control over our everyday lives by converting science into a dogma and power into the (almost) absolute: “Let them tell me what I have to do”. In the face of my lack of protection, I create shields. The speed with which vaccines have emerged helps to reinforce the role of science.

- ▶ Political management disappears and decisions are adopted following the verdicts of “the experts”, including the pharmaceutical lobby, to whom we hand over a large part of the ritual power over what we can and cannot do. This, for example, is not done in the case of the fight against climate change.

- ▶ In line with the above, a daily valuation is established of the evolution of the disease, and based on this, the measures adopted are corrected and graduated. This is a way of taking public decisions on the basis of data and studying the impact of the overall set of public and budgetary policies.

- ▶ However, the management of the pandemic responds to one of the greatest political decisions that every society must adopt: what is the accepted balance between freedom and safety, within a gradual scale among the restrictions that evolve with the progress of the pandemic? The data, but also the values, configure collective decisions: we locked down our freedom in pursuit of greater safety, above all at the initial stages, when we knew very little about the virus.

- ▶ The pandemic is evidence that, even with regard to disease, there are social divides. And, much more, with regard to the restrictive responses given to it which, despite the compensatory measures implemented by national governments, are evidence of a clear increase in social inequality as a consequence of the pandemic in its dual facet: the disease in itself and the capacity to respond to it in equal conditions (income, housing, studying and working online, etc.).

For a time, as human beings we felt fraternal, children of the same life force, waging a war, together, on a common enemy, from a planetary conscience. It was a mirage that did not last very long. The unanimity of the clapping for carers was quickly shattered by the pan-banging of those who did not want to lose the social and political polarisation on which they feed, and very soon after, also, by a string of deniers, conspiracy theorists and anarcho-liberals bordering on sociopathy, because the right to transmit disease does not exist.

The pandemic has been a highly disruptive element for our social evolution, but rather than causing a change or a break with pre-existing tendencies, instead it has accelerated some of the tendencies that were already developing. So it does not appear that it will act as a salutary lesson against the growing polarisation and social discontent, beyond some illusions that have already been seen.

4

What unites and what separates

The tension between unity and diversity, between what unites us and what separates us, is not new in history. To cite one classic from our Judeo-Christian tradition, the Bible recognises the unity of humans. Beyond the religious arena, however, it is necessary to wait until the 18th century to find, in the United States Declaration of Independence (1776), that all men are created equal and that they all have the same, inalienable rights.

This idea crossed to Europe when, in August 1789, the brand new French National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. We owe the idea that “human beings” were situated between the gods and the rest of the animals, and had certain natural, evident and universal rights, to a large extent, to the Enlightenment.

With these precedents, it is easier to understand the step taken in 1948, when the United Nations, just created following the Second World War, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With this, our coexistence is based on something essential that makes us all equal. Social divides, however, are constructed around the existence of an inequality, in other words, of a controversial difference, through some type of reasoning or prejudice, intended to justify discriminatory treatment. Such divides can exist despite a country’s legal system recognising the validity of human rights and they often lead us to shut ourselves away inside a small community.

The dynamics of these types of divides help to explain what is happening and what has happened in many parts of the world.

5

A short tour through history

We form part of a Europe that, since the French Revolution, has moved between three fundamental divides: nationalism, the class struggle, and the divide existing between liberal democracies and authoritarianisms.

Between the post-Bonaparte revolutions of 1848 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, the confrontation between the middle classes and the proletariat was possibly the main axis of social polarisation. The main political parties positioned themselves on the left and right of this confrontation, just as the majority of countries around the world aligned themselves either with the communist bloc or the capitalist bloc. Even if we accept this as the main divide from which the debate and political confrontation became divided, it was never the only one. In fact, at many points it was eclipsed by another major divide: the nation and nationalism. Something more than chance led to the coinciding, in 1948, of the publication of the Communist Manifesto, written by Marx and Engels, and the middle-class revolutionary wave that led, right across Europe, the defence of the idea of the nation, together with some timid democratic advances. Perhaps this was the first time that an international view of the working-class cause been pitted against the nationalist values defended by a growing middle class. And so then, the cause of the nation triumphed.

Following World War II, another divide appeared, overcoming the two previous ones: democracy versus totalitarianism. While the right, following the bloody war fought against fascism and Nazism, the right defended democratic values together with the idea of nation and the advantages of the free market, an important part of the internationalist working-class left found itself trapped in the defence of the proletariat dictatorship, which in the communist countries subordinated, initially, the working-class cause to what were considered to be “middle-class freedoms”. The social-democratic faction that criticised the lack of freedoms and democracy in the communist countries continued defending that the values of social equality had to be situated at the same level, or even above, the principle of freedom, as criteria for organising a fair society.

6

A little bit of political theory

All political theory is based on two original questions: the first, what do we do with people who are not like us? And the second: does society exist as an entity with its own life, one greater than the sum of its parts? The first question verges on the philosophical, as it requires accepting and understanding that an “us” and a “them” exist. If an “us” exists, it is because there is something, some dominant characteristic, that identifies us. And if a “them” exists it is because there are other characteristics that identify “them” as something that makes them different to “us”. From here on, what do we do with people who are different?

The first reaction consists of not accepting that difference and fighting the other with the use of force in order to subject, dominate and assimilate him. A second reaction is to co-exist, isolate the others in ghettos where they can live in accordance with their difference, but without mixing with us. The third possible reaction is to establish norms and regulations for coexistence in the same spaces and with the same opportunities: we all form part of the same community, where all are capable of working together on collective projects. We are united by something higher, something so strong that it may be compatible with the existence of other subsets ordered by any other characteristic that may occur to us.

The second seminal question is related with the existence, or not, of a collective logic derived from a whole that is greater than the sum of its component parts. Oft repeated is the famous phrase by Margaret Thatcher in which she said, from her extreme liberalism, that there is no such thing as society, that she had only known individuals who interacted in the defence of their own interests, under the principles of the law. Taken to our reflection, this would mean recognising that there is no “us” and “them”, but rather only a lot of “mes” and a lot of “others”. In our reasoning, if there is a unit of reference sufficiently general as to include various private collectives, the divides between the latter could generate tensions but only to the point at which the greater unit of reference is put at risk.

For years, the so-called higher common interest acted as a lid that lessened the intensity of the tensions between the different private interests. However, the globalisation of the economy and the boom in communication technologies have so weakened the sphere of the nation-state that a reference point is being lost. With this, the analysis of social divides takes on renewed interest because they are acquiring new dynamics that often reflect a generalised malaise.

7

Money or recognition?

The rise of identarian politics of the self as the affirmation of group specificity in the face of the search for a common good has been evolving over the course of the years; there has been a gradual loss of the awareness of the existence of something common that unites us all. Today's identity movements, Lilla insists, are becoming stronger by defending their differences, even at the cost of losing what unites them with everyone else. And in this entropic dynamic where the idea of a global "us" disappears, in this era of private identity, where the space for the discourse aimed at the whole of the nation and at general interests as citizens is reduced to almost nothing, the right moves a lot more ably than the left.

This conclusion has also been reached by another of the best interpreters of the importance that identity has acquired in recent times, Francis Fukuyama, who points out that "demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today" (*Identity. The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*). Thus, this crisis of identity leads us in the opposite direction "to the search for a common identity that will rebind individual to a social group".

For this reason, "the principle of equal and universal recognition has mutated into the special recognition of particular groups". Within this context, the perception of invisibility is key for determining political decisions to the point that "to be poor is to be invisible to your fellow human beings and the indignity of invisibility is often worse than the lack of resources".

8

Liberty, equality, fraternity and the principle of difference

From the point at which we define something that unites us more than it separates us, the next question is how we establish the rules of coexistence between those who are different. For some, the answer must be sought in religion. A second answer also robs human beings of the capacity for establishing their own rules, leaving them in the hands of social evolution and of history. The third answer focuses on the centrality of human beings when establishing rules for coexistence. We would situate its founding in the movement of the Enlightenment, with two historical points of reference: The United States Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution, which summarised the basic principles for human coexistence into the triad of liberty, equality and fraternity. And we ask ourselves: liberty, for what? Equality, of what? Fraternity, among whom?

For years, the majority identified freedom with political liberties. Principles converted into rights to which (nearly) everyone should have access. However, the road towards universal suffrage was long and tortuous, as was the expansion of the concept of liberty, from the political sphere to the social, which was made possible by the trade-union struggle and the social-democratic movement, with the generalisation of the Welfare State. From there the concept of liberty must be understood as the real possibility that individuals can move ahead with their life projects without restrictions or domination from outside.

In that sense, liberty has a lot to do with equality. But equality, of what? Individuals have to be equal in political and social rights, as there cannot be any true liberty if there is not a minimum degree of equality between members of the community. It seems reasonable, also, that all of them should enjoy equal opportunities that, moreover, is the only real way of demanding responsibilities from individuals and making them participants in the results of their efforts. Together with this, welfare equality seeks to improve social welfare through redistribution policies. And the equality of capabilities, developed by Amartya Sen, includes other essential aspects such as healthcare.

Next, we reach the third ordering principle, the worst understood of all, fraternity. Fraternity, between who? Some ideologies base this principle on difference. In contrast, it is also possible to organise fraternity around that which unites us. As can be seen, in the rational form of organising coexistence between different individuals in a fraternal way, equality of rights is fully compatible with diversity, at the same time that it permits the incorporation of feelings. Fraternity, therefore, eliminates current national frontiers based on a fortuitous

and involuntary event, and creates new frontiers based on the rational and voluntary decision of respecting the democratic norms of coexistence.

Therefore, a society of diverse individuals that wishes to respect feelings of belonging, without that being incompatible with self-organisation based on rational principles that allow it to be fair or consider itself as decent, must treat equals equally and unequals unequally. In other words, it must protect preferentially those who are different, in order to integrate them on the basis of the principle of fraternity. This is thus because social cohesion is appreciated as an essential value of coexistence and, therefore, social divides are fought because they threaten peaceful and democratic coexistence.

9

Inequality as a social earthquake

It is difficult to express the surprise with which, as we enter into the second decade of the 21st century, we are seeing the forceful resurgence of two focuses of tension that seemed typical of the 19th century: nationalism and social inequality. The retreat into the nation at the height of the era of globalisation and of new technologies for world connectivity seems as inexplicable as the fact that a human society, living in its best times of wellbeing and quality of life, is seeing how its social inequality is growing, its poverty is becoming increasingly chronic, and its middle class is disappearing. And although not everyone accepts the data and facts that prove this reality, below we summarise what is accepted by the majority consensus of experts:

- ▶ The richest 1% of the planet possesses 45% of the global wealth, while the poorest 50% barely possesses 1%.

- ▶ Inequality between countries has declined, largely because of the progress of India and China, but it has grown inside countries, mainly among the most advanced. It is calculated that three quarters of the world's inequality is due to the inequality inside countries.

- ▶ Worldwide poverty has reduced, especially severe poverty, although it has risen in the developed countries, and there is a risk it will become chronic.

- ▶ Wealth inequality is greater than income inequality. The rich are richer today because the value of their wealth, often inherited, has grown, and not because they earn more for their work. This is compatible with the fact that income inequality derived from the wide salary range has also grown in recent years.

- ▶ In two thirds of OECD countries, inequality has grown since the year 2000 in two thirds of countries. Nearly half of the population of advanced countries believe that, on average, the current situation is worse than it was twenty years ago.

- ▶ Many indicators reflect the fact that poverty levels in the G7 countries have increased, from 23% of the population in 1985 to 30% in 2016.

- ▶ The boom in populism in more advanced countries has been fuelled by the tension that exists between the equality goals they have announced and the reality of seeing how inequality is growing within them, while there is an appreciable improvement of the situation taking place in the poorest countries.

Inequality is not a new phenomenon, but its acute growth in recent years represents a failure of the economic and political discourse dominant in the West, at least, since the end of the Second World War. Economic growth, the distribution of this growth, plus equal opportunities and liberal democracy with counterpowers: these have been the four pillars upon which the world that we know has been built. And today the four are being seriously questioned. The first questioning of economic growth as an unquestioned goal has come from the recognition that natural resources are limited, and this criticism has been expanded, today, by its incompatibility with environmental sustainability. The second criticism comes from the confirmation that the existence of economic cycles has not been prevented, neither with the presence of the State as the regulating agent of economic activity (Keynesianism), nor with the exclusion of the State leaving a supposedly self-regulated market to act fully independently (neoliberalism).

The last Great Recession and, above all, the policies set up, have fundamentally been designed to produce a generalised disconnection from the existing economic and social model. The evidence of globalisation having losers and winners, linked to the feeling of helplessness derived from the lack of action of national governments, if not direct open criticism of their unequally-applied austerity policies, have been key for explaining the current social breakdown and disappointment with “the system”. The turnaround that has transformed an integrating, inclusive economic, social and political model, that made a supreme value of social cohesion, into another from which an important part of the population feels excluded and is fleeing, can be situated in the early 1980s with two parallel policies: the globalisation of the economy together with the retreat of the State, associated with the governments of Reagan in the United States and Thatcher in the United Kingdom. We entered, with that, into another sphere that has taken us to where we are now: elites that live in a global world, middle classes in decline, significant social sectors that feel forgotten, marginalised or excluded from the future, and a national policy that seems to have resigned from its fundamental task: to be a mechanism for resolving the problems of citizens. The origin of our problems does not stem from today, therefore, so when it comes to understanding them, we cannot overlook this historical context.

But it is a good idea to point out that the increase in inequality and the chronification of poverty in the developed countries have not been inevitable, nor the secondary result of blind market forces or of globalisation. They have been caused by political decisions that renounce any conscious quest for social cohesion. Understanding the problem is always the first step towards trying to find a solution. Otherwise we will advance towards a dangerous situation that starts off in “irascible” democracies and may lead to what some have called “democratures”: political systems that maintain a formal appearance of democracy, but that in their real functioning contain elevated traces of authoritarianism and pseudo-dictatorial practices. This, furthermore, without losing sight of the repercussions on inequality, emigration and poverty already being caused by climate change.

10 Six divides that are breaking up Spanish society

Social divides are real, existing differences, converted into discrimination, when not directly into inequalities, which are not sustained by reason, but by the prejudices of those who are building up the interior walls that are breaking up society. In other words, frequently, the divides come from social injustices or lead to them. For that reason, we say that the divides are ruining social cohesion, breaking up unity and the common purpose of society and that these are gaps through which populism and totalitarianism are seeping, putting an end to democratic coexistence in plural societies such as our own. This is why it is so important to know them, analyse them and combat them.

In Spain, the deep mark left by the last decade – the crisis, the depreciation of wages, the cuts in social spending, plus a recovery that is not reaching everyone equally – is opening up too many social divides. These, in turn, have become breeding grounds for populism, neo-authoritarianism and the blockage of the political situation, with four elections in five years and a proven incapacity to form governments and stable parliamentary majorities. This, in turn, is further hindering the adopting of the necessary measures for reducing these divides, therefore citizen dissatisfaction is growing as citizens see that nobody (apparently) is doing anything to resolve “their” problem or even, that this problem is not easily recognised or assessed. It is no coincidence that “politicians and politics” are now considered by citizens as the second biggest problem, after unemployment, according to the Centre for Sociological Research. From this, all that can be deduced is a widespread distrust of citizens towards those who are most prominent in this democracy.

However, although media attention is short-lived, the real problems exist and real people continue suffering them. That quasi-structural reality of the problems encompassed in the social divides that we are analysing is what gives meaning to their study and to the civil-society effort to present ideas that may help to solve them. In this study, we will analyse six divides that are cutting obliquely across the Spanish society of today. It may be that some are missing, but we believe that none of them are surplus, although not all have the same intensity nor the same weight. For the time being.

However, in times in which in Spain, the territorial question has taken on undeniable and almost monothematic prominence, we have felt it timely not only to remember that the country might break up geographically, but also that it is already breaking up socially, having unleashed the forces that call into question the necessary social cohesion compatible with a democratic society.

And taking awareness of this aligns social and political forces in a different way to how territorial debate does. In the same way, we want to point out that situations of domination of one social group over another, of certain individuals over others, do not come exclusively from the economy. For this reason, there are various forces at work that define a specific social moment for a country.

In this collection, “Social Divides”, we highlight six major cross-cutting divides in the country: **rich-poor**, **women-men**, **young-old**, **rural-urban**, **turbocapitalism-retro-capitalism** and **analogical-digital**. These are fractures that, as a whole, the country cannot overlook and that it has the responsibility of healing, so that the turbulent times of the present do not lead to even more severe consequences and do not endanger Spain’s democracy.



"la Caixa" Foundation