



# From consumerism to guilt: Economic crisis and discourses about consumption in Spain

Luis E Alonso,  
Carlos J Fernández Rodríguez and  
Rafael Ibáñez Rojo

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Journal of Consumer Culture

2015, Vol. 15(1) 66–85

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1469540513493203

joc.sagepub.com



## Abstract

The economic crisis that Spain has been facing since 2008 has produced significant effects in the way citizens are dealing with consumption. Beyond austerity practices and concerns about an uncertain future, there is a rising anxiety about the sustainability of current consumption patterns. Moreover, it is interesting to analyse how consumption evolves in a situation in which the budget is highly constrained. How do people from different social classes perceive consumption under these circumstances? Our contribution deals with those issues using data from a focus groups based research project whose main goal was to map necessities and consumption practices in Spain, trying to assess the impact of the crisis. In this article we will discuss the results focusing on how different groups of interviewees elaborate a discourse about it which ranges from guilt to a strong moral discourse related to the adequate level of consumption. We consider that this paper might provide a deeper knowledge of the relationship between consumption and social class in a context of financial and economic crisis.

## Keywords

consumption, necessities, economic crisis, focus groups, guilt

---

## Corresponding author:

Carlos J Fernández Rodríguez, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Economics, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Campus de Cantoblanco, C/Francisco Tomás y Valiente 5, 28049 Madrid, Spain.

Email: carlos.fernandez@uam.es

## Introduction: Consumption in a time of crisis

Recently Spain has come under the spotlight due to the scale of the economic recession affecting the country.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the stream of headlines and special articles that appeared in the specialist English-language press (*Financial Times*, *The Economist*) on the crisis in the country over the course of the years 2010–2012. Before this, the country had enjoyed a decade (1998–2008) of prosperity (Éltető, 2011) as a result of major economic growth. However, this growth was founded on an extraordinary and unsustainable real estate bubble which helped forge a culture of over-consumption and over-spending in both the public and private sectors (Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez, 2008; López and Rodríguez, 2010). Easy access to loans and credit led Spanish families to become among the most indebted in the world; according to Bank of Spain figures, in spring 2008 household debt reached an astonishing 130% of GDP. When the housing market bubble collapsed in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008, the Spanish economy suffered a severe shock, subsequently intensified by austerity policies imposed by the European Union (EU), inevitably putting a brake on the established pattern of over-consumption.

This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the effects that the economic crisis is having, directly or indirectly, on social discourses around consumption in Spain. The dramatic economic decline of the last few years has had a significant impact on consumption practices, affecting social perceptions of what it means to consume and what constitute needs and luxuries. It has also fuelled concern about sustainable practices, and more particularly the emergence of a new moral discourse on consumerism and the risks of excess and saturation which is not unlike that found in other post-industrial societies (Humphrey, 2010; Sulkunen, 2009). While scholars have analyzed the dynamics of post-crisis consumption patterns, focusing on changes in values and attitudes in different countries (see e.g. Alímen and Bayraktaroğlu, 2011; Faganel, 2011), they have tended to overlook the discursive context in which these changes are framed. This discourse is an interesting and important subject of research. As some scholars have mentioned, the way people moralize about consumption is itself a worthy object of study (Wilk, 2001). In this article we will examine how these discourses operate ideologically in forming attitudes towards the crisis and practices of consumption. In our view, these discourses are key to any understanding of Spaniards' wider ideological and political behavior in the current situation, as they not only provide meanings for those in specific generational or class groupings, but also link these meanings to the problematic nature of consumption and in some cases to supposed national character traits, shaping in this way understanding of the crisis. This vision of the causes of the crisis is controversial in nature, since the discourses that emerged in the focus groups on which this article is based were relatively consistent in their view of the role consumption plays in the crisis. Participants, ironically including those from the middle and upper classes, tended to blame the crisis on past excesses and to call for a return to frugality. They expressed no

critical view of consumerism, rather defending the need for re-moralization and self-control linked in some cases to neoliberal logics of self-management and, in others, to a traditional working-class ethic. While the fieldwork for this research was carried out in early 2010, it remains relevant because the crisis has only continued to deepen. Hence this article aspires to offer valuable sociological insight into consumers' discourses in the midst of recession.

## **Methodology**

The analysis presented here draws on qualitative empirical evidence and research methods. We opted to use the well-known technique of focus groups on the grounds that they make it possible to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it in a group-discussion setting (see classic references such as Merton, 1987; Morgan, 1988; Silva and Wright, 2005; Skeggs et al., 2008). It should be noted, however, that in the Spanish sociological tradition the use of focus groups is generally understood as a critical version of market research focus groups (see Alonso, 1998). Accordingly, our methods have some peculiarities with respect to the mainstream tradition of sociological focus group research. For instance, anonymity is maintained within the group: not only does no one know each other, but nobody is introduced and names are never used in discussions. While individual statements are quoted, they are not linked to any specific individual, but rather to a generational, class or professional group position.

Following these guidelines, nine focus group (FG) meetings were held in seven Spanish cities. Each group comprised participants from a specific social background in terms of income, skills and probable class trajectories.<sup>2</sup> The sample was designed to enable us to map the basic differences in the images that different social groups have of the relation between the economic crisis and patterns of consumption. While the authors of this paper designed the sample and moderated the groups, participants were recruited by a specialist firm with a proven track record in the field. The starting point for the focus groups was our interest in changes that the crisis may have brought in patterns of consumption. As moderators, we posed a few questions regarding the crisis which participants discussed for about two hours. The questions were as follows:

1. How has the crisis affected your consumption practices?
2. How has the crisis affected the people around you in terms of consumption practices?
3. Could we live with less?
4. Is it possible to go back to pre-crisis patterns of consumption?
5. Is the current model of consumption sustainable?

In this article, rather than offering an in-depth discussion analysis of each focus group, we try to present a more general analysis of the meaning and significance

that each social group ascribes to the current economic crisis as well as the relationships between consumption, social position, and well-being.

### The drama of the crisis

Regardless of their social position, nearly all the groups began by referring to the sense of *fear* generated by the crisis. Their discourses referred to the fear that “you can be sacked from one day to the next”; now that the traditional dualization between stable and precarious employment no longer holds, no job is secure. As one participant put it, “My outlook has changed to one of fear, I think a lot of people are scared, like that other participant said, of being sacked, of redundancy, that before we thought our jobs were guaranteed...” (FG7). The focus groups explicitly mentioned that “the tendency now is to save,” because “uncertainty is now a part of us.” The main effect of the crisis is to spend less:

We are like the Spaniards who went to Germany in the 1970s, they met up in houses, put a bottle of beer on the table, two cans of sardines and a television which they had for all of them and there they watched the match, well that’s what we do now, we meet up in someone’s house, “I’ll bring the first course, you the second, you bring the *chorizo*, you the dessert,” and that’s it, and we’ve spent 10 euros, while otherwise we would have spent 80 euros. (FG1)<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the groups reveal the symbolic importance attached to buying super-market own brands, systematic bargain hunting, the search for discounts, etc. This imaginary circulates when the groups were asked about the effects the economic crisis has had on consumption. There is clearly a generalized sense of crisis, even if, as we shall see, the actual consequences of this are perceived and judged very differently by the different social groups. The focus group setting encouraged participants to stress the dramatic nature of the crisis at an early stage of the discussions; indeed, nearly all the groups began by referring either to the impact the crisis has had on their own patterns of consumption or, more frequently, by talking about the sense of crisis existing in their social circle. This perception of a situation of crisis, which at first sight appears to be almost entirely media driven,<sup>4</sup> is remarkably consistent across the different groups. In mimesis with their surroundings, even the participants in the most privileged focus group (FG2, comprising upper-class housewives) reported cutting back on their outgoings:

... I buy a bag, but imitation leather, that’s what I do, and before going to the hairdresser’s, well now I have to wait until my head is full of grey hairs before going, while before I used to have highlights done; well now I don’t to save a bit, that is it, we’re a large family, my daughter, you know, and I’m unemployed and I don’t get any benefits so I have to cut down. (FG2)

A similar consensus emerged among the socially most privileged young people included in FG9. They represent the position of those who have had to give up certain luxuries, who have internalized the need to restrict themselves to going out “just to window shop,” and who in this way also feel affected by the crisis:

And then going skiing for the weekend, that is, this year I’ve been affected an awful lot because of course, driving there, for example, OK, I do because that’s where I’ve got a house, but getting to la Cerdanya alone costs me 60 euros what with petrol and tolls, 60 euros you can’t get around, then there is the ski pass, and if you go with friends or whoever what with drinks, dinner and so on, and this year I have only been two weekends while before I’d go one weekend after another. (FG9)

In short, although in practice the crisis may not have really affected them personally, the way participants in the superordinate positions dramatize the crisis does suggest a renewed awareness of the extent and generalization of risk. While sociologists have been theorizing about the destabilization of the stable for years (Castel, 2003), this umpteenth rendering of the permanent crisis of the model has helped disseminate this idea in a discourse with ambivalent ideological consequences:

- ...there have been no problems until now, but it’s true that there’s a sense of uncertainty, people very close to me who are working in fantastic companies, excellent, extremely qualified people, and well, they’re already out on the street.
- Unemployment exists, we are beginning to realize that unemployment exists. (FG2)

The group whose practices had been least affected by the crisis, that is, the group of middle-ranking civil servants (FG5),<sup>5</sup> adhered even more strongly to the media’s portrayal of it. In fact, in order to allow this group to identify with the problems of society as a whole, they espouse an even more dramatic image of the crisis than that propagated by the media. Nonetheless, conscious of their privileged position, they anticipated measures the government would in fact only introduce a few months later:

- In any event, personally, even though I’m a civil servant, a year ago I didn’t even consider the possibility that the crisis might affect me, and now I’m not so sure and still less after what they’re saying about Greece and all that; what has happened there, I’m not as sure as a year ago, not even with me being a civil servant.
- But what do you think? That they are going to give you the boot?
- In Greece they’re giving civil servants the boot. (FG5)

The practical consequences of this sense of the crisis as drama is to encourage the emergence of consensus discourses on the crisis among those in superordinate social positions, giving rise to an ideological framework which helps to ensure

that social inequalities remain unquestioned and to rationalize the existing social structure and order. In any event, given the initial questions presented for discussion in the focus groups (centered on patterns of consumption), the discourses did not include more general or abstract interpretations of the current crisis; it is unclear whether this was because it was not considered necessary to describe the situation in general terms, or because it was considered pointless to do so. Despite the absence of an abstract discourse on the crisis, the dramatic representations of the situation and the uncertainty surrounding the chances of economic recovery led some of the groups to visualize (in more or less grotesque terms) the situations of extreme poverty caused by the worsening economic situation. The discourse of the upper-class housewives is the most explicit in this respect, in its emphasis on the fear that hardship might spread, even to the point of threatening the social order:

- Of course, the thing is that there're people in great need, since once their dole runs out they ask for benefits. . .
- And they'll get just over four hundred.
- Of course, and then your benefit entitlement runs out and what do you eat?
- And in the supermarket, that's right, at night you see people who ...
- In skips.
- Or stealing a ham, hiding it underneath their pram.
- And near Alonso Martínez there're some nuns who give out food, and there's a queue, you see normal people, before there were only beggars but not anymore. (FG2)

Although participants mention that 90% of those in need are foreigners, their latent fear is that the hardship will eventually affect not just the working class, but even people such as themselves. As has been noted in the US case (Grossberg, 2010), the media have obviously played an important role in shaping these discourses on the crisis.

### **Popular discourse on the crisis**

Despite the groups' shared vision of the crisis noted above, social differences surfaced when discussion turned to daily practices of consumption. The popular classes in our groups experience the crisis as a particular type of drama. They see themselves as people who have always had to be careful with money, quickly drawing a distinction between themselves and those experiencing the crisis for the first time. They consider themselves to be the people who have always "done the rounds" of the supermarkets in search of the lowest prices:

Me, as I'm, well, how shall I put it, tight, I'm very tight, I've always kept an eye on the pennies to see if I can save a bit at home, the truth is I have changed where I shop, and I do the rounds of all the shops to see where they're selling things cheapest, so it affects me, of course it affects me, since I've got less money coming in, but as I've always had

to be careful in the end I don't feel it so much, what you do is cut down a bit on leisure, especially on leisure, but not on the home. (FG6)

Behind the naturalness with which these lower-class housewives confront the crisis, we perceive a highly rationalized relationship with consumption and the day-to-day management of the domestic economy. Neither this relationship, nor their actual practices of consumption have changed significantly as a result of the crisis. As we shall see below, the consumer subject that we discern in the housewives' discourse represents precisely the negation of the type of behavior and subjectivity attributed to them by those in superordinate positions, for whom the "popular" classes epitomize lack of self-control and reason. In practice, however, their predominant form of behavior is just the opposite, as they are the groups least influenced by the pressures of excessive consumption and imitation. And this is precisely what distinguishes them socially from those who experience the crisis as something new. For these lower-class housewives, as long as they continue to earn enough to cover their basic costs their lives will continue essentially unchanged:

- But come on, now with the crisis I get more leisure than ever, as with a cooler box and a picnic you can go to the end of the world. I've been round half of Andalucía.
- Picnicking, we have always done it, but I don't go out drinking so much.
- No, of course, it's not the same.
- But of course I've always had to keep an eye on the pennies.
- The way you spend your free time changes, while before maybe you went out to eat with the children now you go to the park with a picnic.
- Or with a potato omelet.
- And you have a fantastic afternoon or a fantastic summer. (FG6)

In fact, this group dwells with pleasure on what is left of this working-class rejection of consumer culture, a return to traditional leisure activities, trips with "a picnic and cooler box." Evidently, this discourse echoes the dominant moral discourse which criticizes the excesses of consumer culture (Soper, 2007). While, when asked by the moderator, none of the participants denied that they consumed "too much," the participants who did not feel under pressure to consume from their material conditions and everyday social relations (as was the case of the housewives in FG6) drew a sharp distinction between themselves and other people who do feel obliged to maintain a certain level of expenditure. The ethic of popular consumption articulated by the housewives in FG6 shows a clear aversion to credit and dependence on banks, debt, loans, bank cards, etc. The minimal degree of independence available to them lies, precisely, in the systematic control of their outgoings:

- And I haven't got any cards at all.
- I for example have got a card from the Corte Inglés [department store], but Carrefour [supermarket] and...

- I haven't got a single card either, not even a bank credit card.
- I've got a card to get money out, or with my savings book, I prefer the savings book.
- I haven't got any cards either.
- The moment I get paid, I go to the bank to pay in for the electricity, for this, and for that.
- So much I have, so much I spend. (FG6)

This representation of their own careful management of consumption stands in total contrast to the image the superordinate classes have of them. In the discourse of the higher-class groups, the popular classes represent extravagance, lack of control, debt, and the irrational management of the household income, epitomizing the ignorance of those who easily got carried away by consumerism and who, implicitly, are responsible for the crisis. However, it is evident that the subjectivity of these housewives is not precisely that most likely to lead to the practice of a profligate model of consumption.

The discourse of the young people from more modest social backgrounds, and under greater pressure both at work and in their habits of consumption, reflects profound anxiety about the privation that defines their experience of the crisis and their relationship to consumption, making them some kind of collateral casualties of the crisis in the sense suggested by Bauman (2007). In contrast to the references to values and social pressure that permeated the discourse of other social positions, the young people in our group FG8 immediately located themselves through reference to the extreme employment and existential conditions that nearly all of them seem to have experienced at some time or other, and which they dream of escaping:

- So the suicide rate has gone up.
- As you'd expect, of course, you come out from there all stressed out and depressed because you haven't got a penny and everything is well expensive.
- If they want to put me in prison, then put me in prison, that way I won't have to pay for anything.
- It's all just a chain. (FG8)

Although the idea of a flight to unrestrained consumption always figures as a desire, the shared material conditions point to the existence of a reality principal which fits in with the dominant moral discourse against squander and excess. For that reason we find that a central position soon emerges, in which the problem is the imbalance between income and expenditure. For example, the hegemonic discourse among the lower-class housewives emphasizes the need to avoid getting into debt (and, in fact, to do exactly the opposite: pay for things in advance when a little money is going spare) in a context in which there has never been enough money to waste time thinking about anything other than necessities, about squandering on useless goods. In contrast to the rather cynical way in which those focus groups fully integrated into wasteful consumption talked about the irrationality of certain



practices of consumption, what is left of the logic of necessity among these housewives leads them to criticize those who have forgotten their past. This is a critique of people who have lost their class identity, who have been entrapped by the disruptive power of consumption. From this perspective, the pressure to acquire certain status symbols (such as an “island kitchen”) is merely conspicuous consumption:

You knock down a wall and build a kitchen twice the size of this room, American-style, with an island in the middle, but with the money you spent on the kitchen you could have furnished the whole house. Please, at their age, it’s a whole load of luxuries and nonsense that, well, of course. . . (FG6)

These housewives coincide in signaling that tensions over consumption are introduced by their children who, like young people more generally, are irrationality personified when it comes to consumption. These women’s discourse is very explicit in this respect: they feel they have done everything for the good of the house, the family, the home. . . that they had to made enormous sacrifices in order to pay off the mortgage, while as for young people, “how are they going to buy a flat if they’ve got a massive car worth as much as a house?” (FG6). From this perspective, the center which rationalizes and articulates consumption for them is “the flat,” also understood as the home. As a result, this discourse, as popular discourse, is articulated around saving and security objectivized in the basic requirements of the “flat.” That apart, it always has been, and may still be, possible to satisfy their leisure needs outside the market.

These groups of young people and housewives not integrated into determined practices of consumption feel no sense of “blame” for the extravagance and ostentation of “fictitious” wealth, the ultimate cause of the current “fall.” However, the discourse developed by a number of the industrial workers in FG7 reveals the point of inflexion, the ideological ambivalence of those who did have access to high levels of consumption, opening the door to the internalization of guilt and the assumption of personal responsibility for the crisis:

. . .another thing is that we lived beyond our means, which is what I think has happened these last few years. Because the truth is you hear of people, me too, I’ve got a beach apartment and well, and then when we bought it, well, you know, generally you used to imagine that the people who bought them were more or less comfortably off, and well, what was not normal was what I saw there. For example, there I’d say, “I can’t believe it, that is, people, I say, well, that is it, big cars, all new.” So, well of course, then you’d notice other little details, for example at the meetings of the house residents’ association, which didn’t make sense, and it’s that we’re real show-offs. Well obviously, when things have slumped well, hold on, hold on, hold on, and then on top of all it is something that is superimposed on it, which is not real, because *to keep it real you have to spend what you have. . .* (FG7)

This is the starting point for the emergence of an abstract identification with that “unreal” society of plenty we have “all” formed part of, as well as with its collapse for which we are “all” responsible.

## **We will never be European**

Much of the symbolic efficacy of this discourse on “values” and the “moral” dimension of consumption derive from well-established and still influential ideas about the supposed existence of a peculiar, national idiosyncrasy which distinguishes Spain and Spaniards from Europe, and which is considered responsible for Spanish “backwardness.” The supposed peculiarities of the “Spanish way of being” allow actually existing inequalities to fade into the background at the same time as they ensure that other, different ways of representing the crisis and its effects have little chance of circulating socially or achieving similar symbolic efficacy. Therefore, we should consider the surprising vigor with which this self-conscious, negative representation of the peculiarities of the Spanish still circulates in most of the groups, irrespective of their social class.<sup>6</sup> In nearly all the focus groups, participants made reference to this vision of the uncontrollable nature of the “Spanish character,” prone, in the absence of the necessary mechanisms of repression, to excess and lack of restraint. The crudity with which this notion was expressed by the owners of small- and medium-size construction and hotel industry companies is especially noteworthy. In their eyes, the banks (which were also demonized at times) and the government share responsibility for making it too easy to obtain credit, something these participants consider the Spanish were unprepared for:

...so I think that we have advanced very quickly, there have been boom times, as those gentlemen have already said, I think things came too fast, things were made very easy for us. In my opinion, neither the government nor the banks controlled things. Here everybody was happy, it was all one big *fiesta*, you went to the banks, asked for money and they gave it to you and you didn't have to show them any papers. And I was in the bank today trying to negotiate three promissory notes from a solid company and they wouldn't negotiate, that is, the situation is very serious. (FG1)

“Blame,” in this case for Spain's current economic situation, can be laid on those people who are unable to control their impulses and desires, who want to rise “above their station,” higher than they “deserve.” In this way, the irrationally uncontrolled behavior of part of society is the explanation for why Spaniards have now woken up from “a dream.” The focus groups usually turned readily to commonplace notions about the excesses which many people happily committed during the years of apparent economic boom. A latent idea in this discourse is that blame lies with groups which became rich very quickly and that allowed themselves

to get carried away, victims of a consumerist frenzy, of their alleged inability to administer their income rationally:

- I think the thing is also that many people took on obligations which were unnecessary. If you consider that, while it's true that they pay 3,000 euros what with the mortgage, the car, the Kawasaki motorbike, they bought themselves a holiday home in Lloret de Mar because it was cheap, and then what happens when one of them loses, well, one or both of them, whatever, well obviously it's a mess, but then I think people went over the top, I think. . .
- Lived it up, so well then, the crisis has come, yes, but the thing is that before that we were living as if in a dream, that wasn't normal either.
- Well, there was a lot of money, people speculated, there were pots of it, so everybody was happy.
- All that's over now. (FG5)

The more developed Welfare States in Europe also emerge as an alternative model of consumption. Some groups came to the conclusion that Northern Europeans know how to live with less, how to enjoy themselves without the angst that seems to constitute the Spanish subjectivity with respect to consumption. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that, in this case, participants spontaneously refer to the relationship between this alternative model of consumption and the sense of security afforded by State protection:

- . . . because I have some Scandinavian friends and neighbors and I see them a lot and they see things differently. They attach more importance to just having a glass of wine and chatting with people at home. We want a Mercedes and to go on holidays, and they are happy with a glass of wine, the sun, a book or whatever.
- Because 45% of whatever they earn goes to the State, they have all their basic necessities covered and are happy like that, they are way ahead of us; they are not more intelligent, just less ignorant. (FG1)

From the point of view of the upper and middle classes, until recently Spain benefited from low prices, meaning that at least their inferiority complex was made more bearable by the fact that they (like European tourists) benefited from income inequalities, apparent above all in access to everything but basic necessities. With everyone wanting to consume as if they were rich, these social groups have lost their class privilege. At the same time, now they are worried that they will be definitively excluded from the European "club" since, as in the case of Greece, "now they won't be able to stand us":

- And I think that they're going to throw us out of the euro. I'm convinced of it. I'm absolutely sure that they're going to throw us out because they won't be able to stand us, we're just going to be a burden, the Europeans, just, come on. (FG2)

This discourse brings into circulation a whole series of media clichés about a country “which devoted itself to destroying the productive economy... What about Germany and France, well they have a productive economy” (FG5); about a grotesque and surreal country (compared to Europe) in which all kinds of wasteful extravagance is permitted; a land of uncontrolled public spending. Ideological dislocation means that most of the “blame” falls on an “us,” which interpellates the citizenry in an abstract sense. In this discourse, Spaniards’ “non-European” character also accounts for their apparent inability to formulate and press demands. Demagogic and media criticism of politicians’ attitudes can only be countered by a “culturalist” discourse about the “peculiarities of the Spanish,” the country’s eternal backwardness, and the fragmentation of a society and political world plagued by corruption:

- Better to hang them, if they’d been hanged they wouldn’t make any money, although even while hanging there they would still be robbing us, even if they were hanging from a pine tree they’d be committing fraud, think about it.
- I’m telling you, the Spanish mindset also...
- We are still so... because in many countries that wouldn’t be allowed, look at what happened to that German minister, they found out she’d used an official car for some trips here to Barcelona and they almost strung her up, here everywhere they use everything everywhere, and we all keep our mouths shut and until, I think that until we get it into our heads that we don’t have to put up with it...
- We throw up our hands in horror, we scratch our heads and shout about how bad they are and the poor innocent little lambs we are, but we don’t demand that they change the laws as the only way of...
- We’re to blame. (FG3)

Despite the more or less fragmentary character of their comments on this issue, the whole notion of the “peculiarities of the Spanish” constitutes a coherent discourse endowed with considerable symbolic force. This is a discourse which still situates Spain “in the back of beyond of Europe” (as one of the participants in FG3 put it), and which helps explain the latent violence palpable in the groups’ desire to distinguish themselves from the inhabitants of countries even lower down the pecking order (notably Greece and Portugal).<sup>7</sup> This discourse about the upstarts who never catch up with their masters evidently tends to put the blame on those who have forgotten who they were, their social roots, whether politicians, bankers, or more usually, ignorant and irrational Spaniards who allowed themselves to get carried away by the prospect of easy money.

Participants in the groups in more subordinate positions scarcely made any reference to an alternative or oppositional discourse with respect to the “European model.” For example, for those in the most precarious position, namely the young people in our FG8, Europe is not a model to follow with respect to productive activity or mentality, but rather in terms of labor employment. From the very beginning of the discussion, this group put unemployment at the

heart of their discourse, identifying it as the defining feature of the “Spanish difference”:

...Germany, France, all the European countries have managed to reach agreement with the workers and distribute working hours, that is, if before they worked eight hours well now they work four and that way two people work and here we've not considered this type of proposal which would be that everyone gets a little, not one person have more and another less, we could think about this kind of thing and I think it's a bit unfair that Spain's in the last place. (FG8)

Something similar was evident in the group of industrial workers. Some considered that Europe is still a social policy paradise, a notion which provoked an intervention expressing abstract criticism of the Spanish situation through comparison with those paradisiacal social States seen in television news reports:

...we see all these TV reports about other countries which seem to be paradises. Nobody buys a flat; they rent, their social security is paid, their schools are paid for, and I wouldn't mind paying higher taxes with all that covered and I imagine that that would be the starting point for all of us, and not like now when those of us who thank God are few... but those who come after us, like someone has said, your children's friends, hell, it's not that their future is dark, but rather it's completely black, because things show no sign of getting better any time soon, this is here for a good while. (FG7)

All of this gives rise to a moralizing and blame-inducing discourse on consumption. In their endeavor to reconstruct the moral order, they too put the blame on those who fell into the trap of immediate gratification and debt. The participants backed each other up in voicing the cliché of “a problem of mentality” which allegedly continues to afflict Spain, distancing the country from Europe, and in practice meaning that Spaniards want to live beyond their means:

- But look, while you are completely right in what you are saying, I think that our biggest problem is the Spanish mentality.
- Yes, I'm absolutely sure.
- I've got some neighbours, I've got a normal car, whatever, I've got some neighbors who do regular work, earn an average amount, and fucking hell, so-and-so has bought a car, well I want to buy this car, and then it turns out that they eat potato omelet, you know what I mean, because they were obsessed with buying the car, and that other guy has a big house, so I am going to borrow, and so on, and the basic problem with the crisis, I mean personally, is that they got into mortgages, they've got into big houses, they got into town houses, they got into whatever, without being sure they could pay for it, so what happens...
- And without any need for it. (FG3)

This paves the way for a discourse in which Spain is a society in which the most sensible thing to do is to know how to adapt to one's proper place "because people who forgot their rightful place have been caught with their trousers down." This is especially true of those who lived "beyond their means." This idea is at the center of the discourses of the superordinate groups. In these groups, a superficial consensus was always reached regarding the consumerist excesses of those who consume "without rhyme or reason." In this case it is not so much a question of drawing a social distinction between those who are and are not affected by the crisis, but rather of drawing a moral distinction; it is a question of constructing a discourse which puts the blame on the hedonistic excesses of part of society. In this way, the superordinate groups often implicitly called for measures to restrict these strategies of "consumerist mobility," seen as a source of unnecessary social disturbance and upheaval, even if the passage of time will ultimately put everyone in their place.

Yes, and my husband's job has been very stable when people got rich and bought thousands of apartments, or whatever, and I always said, hell, we're doing alright but we've never suddenly gone up in the world, and now, well of course, when people go mad, without rhyme or reason, buying everything and I said, this can't be, sometime this just has to collapse. (FG2)

In this respect, our focus group of civil servants was the one which most explicitly elaborated the hegemonic discourse articulated by the middle- and upper-class groups. This hegemonic position is a technocratic discourse which seeks to legitimize social differences on the basis of efficient management of time, effort and money. In the central vision of our FG5, the problems caused by the crisis (and the associated problems of consumption) are the result of the difference between income and expenditure. While this group feels that it forms part of the opulent society, and admit that "we all fell for it," they implicitly draw various important distinctions. Above all they distinguish between their own discourse, presented as rational, calculating (in consumption), "strategic" with respect to their life trajectories, prudent, and technocratic in terms of the solution to the crisis, and that of those who are portrayed as impulsive and irrational consumers. Within this discourse, the absolute prototype of victim of the crisis is a member of that "uneducated" part of society who gets one credit card to pay off another. These civil servants drew a significant moral distinction between themselves and such people:

- Yes, there was a TV program about that, a bit crappy, they showed it on Channel 4, which was about how to manage a family. That is, it was about people with problems and they are taught how to manage their money, and there were completely surreal scenes and you think, it's a bit like you were saying, they've got cards and then they get another to pay off the debt on the other and they had five credit cards.
- Yes, I've seen that, it's terrible, I was amazed.

– And it was a bit like you get the family together and how to cut your costs a little on this and that, it was crappy but you really got into the program and you thought, how can you get into that state?

[...]

– And you saw their income and outgoings and there was a gap which you think, well, what's going on, credit cards, they are mechanisms the bank has, well, then, listen, if I put the plastic in here it gives me dough, that's the end of it then. (FG5)

As was the case in other groups, if the banks (the focus of media attention at the time the focus groups were held) are responsible for the crisis, it is because they made it too easy for people who did not know how to manage money to get credit. It seems as if the inability to think about the future, to predict the crisis, and to develop self-defense mechanisms are characteristics of the Spanish “popular” classes:

– ...so, I think that people begin to feel the pain when they've already been hit, they're never conscious of what's going to happen...

– It's the old ostrich technique. Lots of people use it, sticking your head in the sand when a problem comes along. (FG5)

– A lot of people lived well beyond their means, with loans, with a loan on a loan, mortgages, loads of things, and now they've stopped giving loans or mortgages to any old body, so...

– People learn but they also forget very quickly, as soon as the situation settles down for those people they forget the problems. (FG9)

Clichés echoing this core idea circulated more or less systematically in all the other groups. The recklessness of those who allowed themselves to get carried away (and who require external control and repression) serves as the basis for many other arguments. The group of middle-tier white collar workers (FG4) pointed in a similar direction when assigning blame for the crisis: “the problem is that people want everything and in the last few years they were mad for property.” The participants who reported that they knew people in economic difficulties as a result of the crisis always distanced themselves morally from those people “who went mad, who tried to make money buying flats, speculating with them until in the end it all blew up.” In this discourse, “it is the responsibility of the people who bought flats without having money to pay for them” (FG4).

As for the civil servants, the problem is one of ignorance. For the white-collar workers in our FG4, immigrants exemplify the type of people hit by the crisis. Not, however, because of their position in the job market or because of the sectors in which they work, but rather because “they haven't a clue and so of course they sign anything stuck in front of them and then the problems start.” More particularly, their “ignorance” means that they have a propensity for consumerism and debt:

...and can you believe it, they ask for 5000 euros from the bank to buy a car for the son, and I say to them, “but come off it, isn't that too much?” And they say “the thing

is the kid wants it and other children have them and so, well in the end I bought it” and I was amazed, the thing is they’ve got no financial culture. (FG4)

On the one hand, by systematically criticizing those who have dared live beyond their means, this discourse helps these groups shake off any sense of privilege they might have with respect to people affected by the crisis.<sup>8</sup> The participants who espoused this discourse always did so from an idealized subjectivity, that of someone intelligent enough to have avoided the consumerist trap. On the other hand, at least in the case of the more conservative participants, this discourse reveals a latent envy of people who spend, of those who have not internalized the ethic of saving and sacrifice (or at least restraint).

The discourse of the more popular segment of the group of small shopkeepers (FG3) admits (rather paradoxically, given that their businesses would benefit from consumerism) that they too are guilty of displaying a similar lack of self-restraint. According to this group, “all of us” must change our consumerist mindset; it is no longer a question of consuming more or less, but rather of consuming better. In our interpretation of these discourses, appreciation of this simply means that each individual should adapt to his or her rightful place in society, for if the Spanish had all limited their consumption to the level that corresponds to them, they would not have got into their current dire straits. The traditional working-class savings ethic, which (as noted above) is systematically hostile to the idea of getting into debt, reemerges now in the form of a blame-inducing discourse.

- No, the thing is we have to change the consumer mentality; it’s not a question of consuming more or less but rather of consuming better and of setting the limits better, that is what it is.
- Yes, the barrel of oil drops and petrol goes up.
- But we have to get it into all our heads; you cannot simply get it into the heads of one group. The whole country has to get it into their heads to learn how to buy well and buy quality and to get by on what they earn now, not to spend more like we’ve been doing recently, spending more and doing too much of what we shouldn’t have been doing because if we’d shown greater moderation we would not be where we are now. (FG3)

## Conclusion

The discourses in the groups give us an insight into a particular politics of consumption. While in the social discourses that circulated during the transition to democracy after the Francoist dictatorship the notion of “libertinage” served to discipline the Spanish working class, the discussions in our groups reveal how the idea of “consumerist excess” now operates to sustain inequality and to require adaptation and subordinated integration. The effect of spending “restraint” and, above all, of the critique of consumerism that circulated in our groups, is not fruit



of a “lifestyle” change (towards new forms of hedonism), but rather a disciplinary effect of the crisis, especially on the popular classes. The economic crisis converts liberty and choices into rules and norms that must be obeyed.

Despite the obvious and superficial consensus which exists with respect to consumerism, none of the groups were able to come up with principles which might serve to curb consumption, or even offer a hint as to what a new politics of consumption might consist of (Littler, 2009; Schor, 1999). We found that there was hardly any space for suggesting that a limit exists to the type of needs that the consumer society constructs. Only the group of industrial workers mentioned the relation between practices of consumption and working conditions. They reveal the paradoxical situation of the working class when no criteria exist for assigning a social value to labor. Nonetheless, this too occupies only a very marginal place in their discourse.

However, none of the groups established a relation between consumption and production, or consumption and labor (except for the absence of income due to the absence of a salary). Totally disconnected from the material conditions which link it to production, in the discourses of the various groups the desire to “put limits on consumption” appears absurd. Common sense itself immediately rules out any questioning of the use value (“if you can have one costing 20,000 why wouldn’t you?”) (FG9). In all the groups with a certain level of income, not consuming is not an option. Given the impossibility of articulating a discourse based on basic necessities, the only remaining trace of common reason refers back to the logic of working-class saving, austerity, and self-protection from the perils of the market.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the current economic crisis appears to have had a major impact on perceptions of consumption. The discourse that surfaced in our focus groups was permeated by a sense of fear and uncertainty with respect to the future. This could be mistaken for the adoption of greater restraint after a period of excess. However, the crisis is seen differently by those in different class positions. Ironically, those in superordinate positions put the emphasis on irrational spending as the cause of the crisis, while at the same time relieving themselves of any responsibility. For others, the crisis is purely and simply their existential economic condition, something which, as a result, they do not experience as a great drama. However, the dominant majorities in the groups did not articulate a critical discourse on consumption, mainly identified as the driving force of the economy and of well-being. The majorities only criticized excessive consumption “by the others,” without giving any serious consideration to the possibility of developing alternative forms of consumption or questioning the sustainability of the current model. Ultimately, the crisis is seen to be the result of mistakes made by other people who accumulated debt and lived beyond their means, and the only possible solution a potential re-moralization of consumption and saving habits, a possibility viewed with some skepticism. This return to moralism is the result of the collision of different perspectives, some linked to neo-liberal conceptions of the self and others to working-class frugality, as well as old myths regarding the Spanish national character. In this sense, the economic crisis

which hit Spain a few years ago after a period of historically unprecedented consumption has not served to challenge the Spanish model of consumerism. Rather, it has revived a series of discourses regarding the peculiarity of the Spanish (who have only themselves to blame for the lack of rationality displayed by an uncontrolled and ill-disciplined nation) which, at the symbolic level at least, revives the idea that Spain forms part of semi-peripheral Europe. Such ideas, evidently, do not challenge the existing socioeconomic model or, in conclusion, the current model of consumption.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Justin Byrne for the translation of most of this text, and Riie Heikkilä and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the paper.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Education (grant number CSO2011-29941).

### Notes

1. The recession has resulted in record levels of unemployment (24% by July 2012), high public deficit and, in general, Spain's poor performance in almost every economic indicator. In June 2012, the growing risk of default forced the Spanish government to reach agreement with the Eurozone authorities on a bailout for part of its financial system.
2. The focus groups were made up of participants with the following profiles: FG1 (Construction and hotel and catering employers, male, aged 55–65, Málaga); FG2 (Upper-class housewives, aged 45–55, Madrid); FG3 (Small shopkeepers and self-employed workers, male and female, aged 45–60, Valencia); FG4 (Middle-tier white-collar workers in the service sector, male and female, aged 25–35, Zaragoza); FG5 (Middle-ranking civil servants, male and female, aged 35–45, Barcelona); FG6 (Lower-class housewives, aged 35–45, Seville); FG7 (Skilled workers in large manufacturing and service-sector companies, male, aged 50–60, Madrid); FG8 (Young hotel and catering workers, male and female, aged 20–30, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria); and FG9 (Interns and trainees, male and female, aged 25–35, Barcelona).
3. In this paper we have selected representative extracts of the recorded conversations. Some are quotes from individuals, others fragments of unfolding conversations. It is important to clarify that in many of these focus groups the participants moved on quickly from one topic to another, giving their discussions a lively Mediterranean feel but also at times making them sound a little chaotic.
4. These focus groups were organized before the introduction of austerity policies in the country. It is interesting to note that, at that stage, the message from the Spanish government and authorities was still moderately optimistic, as were the declarations of at least some national business leaders. At that time, in early 2010, the most consistent message was “the worst part of the crisis has been left behind,” in contrast with the “apocalyptic” vision propagated by the opposition (and particularly by the conservatives) and most of the media. Interestingly, while the discourse of austerity had still not taken root among Spain's leaders it was already pervasive in society.

5. The fieldwork for this paper was carried out just before the Spanish government introduced a series of major reforms and cutbacks, including a pay cut for civil servants.
6. It should be noted that this discourse has long been present in the Spanish political imaginary; see, for example, Caro Baroja's analysis of the deep-rooted notion that Spaniards require disciplining and control (1970).
7. This explains why, for example, in the worst moments of the Greek crisis in spring 2010, the Spanish media and politicians seemed obsessed with highlighting the differences between Spain and Greece. Rejecting the idea of the slightest similarity between Spain and the European periphery, some declarations by politicians and commentators, which were almost xenophobic in nature, seemed to confirm the existence of a Spanish inferiority complex in this respect.
8. These discursive strategies are obviously in line with broader sociological debates about the role played by concepts such as "responsibilization" or "individualization," linked with neoliberal logics of self-management.

## References

- Alimen N and Bayraktaroğlu G (2011) Consumption adjustments of Turkish consumers during the global financial crisis. *Ege Academic Review* 11(2): 193–203.
- Alonso LE (1998) *La Mirada Cualitativa en Sociología*. Madrid: Fundamentos.
- Alonso LE and Fernández Rodríguez C (2008) Emploi et précarité des jeunes: Le cas de l'Espagne. *Travail et Emploi* 115: 71–80.
- Bauman Z (2007) Collateral casualties of consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(1): 25–56.
- Caro Baroja J (1970) *El Mito del Carácter Nacional y su Formación con Respecto a España*. Madrid: Seminarios y Ediciones.
- Castel R (2003) *From Manual Workers to Waged Laborers*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Éltető A (2011) The economic crisis and its management in Spain. *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 2(1): 41–55.
- Faganell A (2011) Recognized values and consumption patterns of post-crisis consumers. *Managing Global Transitions* 9(2): 151–170.
- Grossberg L (2010) Modernity and commensuration: A reading of a contemporary (economic) crisis. *Cultural Studies* 24: 295–332.
- Humphrey K (2010) *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Little J (2009) *Radical Consumption*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- López I and Rodríguez E (2010) *Fin de ciclo. Financiarización, Territorio y Sociedad de Propietarios en la Onda Larga del Capitalismo Hispano (1959–2010)*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- Merton RK (1987) The focused interview and focus groups: Continuities and discontinuities. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51(4): 550–566.
- Morgan DL (1988) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Schor J (1999) The new politics of consumption. *Boston Review* 24(3–4): 4–9.
- Silva E and Wright D (2005) The judgement of taste and social position in focus groups research. *Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale* 26(76–77): 241–253.
- Skeggs B, Thumin N and Wood H (2008) 'Oh Goodness, I am watching reality TV': How methods make class in audience research. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11(1): 5–24.

- Soper K (2007) Re-thinking the 'good life': The citizenship dimension of consumer disaffection with consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2): 205–229.
- Sulkunen P (2009) *The Saturated Society*. London: Sage.
- Wilk R (2001) Consuming morality. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(2): 245–260.

### Author Biographies

**Luis E Alonso**, professor of Sociology at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. With a background in economics and sociology, he has worked on a variety of areas related to consumption, employment and industrial relations, where he has published widely. His research draws on qualitative methodologies, particularly focus groups. He has also written on sociological theory including the work of Bordieu and many others.

**Carlos J Fernández Rodríguez**, lecturer (with tenure) in Sociology at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. His research interests are sociology of organisations, sociology of consumption, sociology of labour and industrial relations. He has published several books and peer-reviewed articles in those knowledge areas. He has a background in economics, sociology and business studies.

**Rafael Ibáñez Rojo**, lecturer (with tenure) in Sociology at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. He has a background in economics, sociology and history. His work has focused on labour movement during the political transition in Spain, and wider aspects of sociology of work, employment and consumption, drawing on qualitative methodologies, particularly focus groups.