CHAPTER SEVEN

IBERIAN SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

The Society of Estates endured as the dominant ideal throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but what was in theory a rigid system of social distinctions masked a considerable degree of flexibility in practice. Already by the fifteenth century, an increasingly complex social reality meant that the ordinary language of social description was unmoored from the simple functionalism of the tripartite system of estates—the *bellatores*, the *oratores*, and the *labradores*—if indeed that system was ever fully congruent with reality. The ensuing “terminological promiscuity” rendered any strictly hierarchical system virtually impossible to fix (Thompson 1992, 58; Monteiro 2006, 258). The terms endured, but their meanings expanded to accommodate new realities, groups, and outlooks. In a general sense, it may be said that the sixteenth century was a period of accelerated social mobility, during which wealth paved the way to social ascent, while the seventeenth century was one of consolidation in theory and practice, with a greater emphasis on blood and lineage—seemingly more immutable characteristics, though in practice open to challenge and manipulation.

THE NOBILITY

At the apex of the nominal hierarchy was the nobility, a term that obscured stark inequalities of power, status, reputation, and wealth, among other things. Its geographic distribution was also uneven—a legacy of the various stages of the medieval Reconquista. It was more densely concentrated in the north of the peninsula, where in certain regions the entire population claimed the legal status of nobility and thinning out towards the south. This was partly due to the largely rural character and lower average estate rents in the northern regions, in contrast to the more urbanised south where great lords of vassals dominated vast landed estates, enjoyed high rents, and extensive resources.

In fifteenth-century Portugal, the nobility or *fidalgia* constituted almost 1% of the population and was made up of the scions of known lineages whose origins were mainly in the north of the country (Marques 1982, 312–313). This relative homogeneity was gradually eroded over the subsequent centuries. The growth of the
state, and of the crown’s resources, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries contributed to the growth of the nobility as a whole, but above all its lower ranks, including the secondary branches of the great landed nobility, various minor lineages of medieval origin, as well as the recently ennobled. The younger sons of the great noble families were relegated to the lower reaches of a more stratified hierarchy as a result of a preference for impartible inheritance that favoured older sons through entail, and new rules governing the transmission of royal patrimony outlined in the Lei Mental (1434).

Similar processes are evident in Spain, where the nobility represented a larger proportion of the population, estimated at roughly 10% of the total, albeit unevenly distributed (Domínguez Ortiz 1992, Vol. I, 167–170). The number of secondary or cadet branches excluded from entailed family property also multiplied, although unlike in Portugal, royal grants were not subject to the right of reversion or forfeiture in the absence of a direct male heir. This meant that the Spanish nobility enjoyed far greater scope for social reproduction.

In both Spain and Portugal, the chief source of patronage and thus the agent of social mobility was the crown. Although the Portuguese kings in the course of the fifteenth century became the chief arbiters of social distinction, the criteria and the categories remained flexible enough to ensure the permeability of the boundaries of social groups, and the existence of parallel internal hierarchies. At the top of the pyramid this flexibility was due to the vagueness regarding the hierarchy of the titles granted by the crown, and the fact that the Avis dynasty (1383–1580) did not have a monopoly on awarding these; at the base of the noble estate, on the other hand, mobility was a product of the social status that was increasingly attached to government and military offices, in Portugal and in the overseas territories. The same ambiguity in the internal stratification of the nobility was evident in early modern Spain, where the situation was rendered even more complex by the aggregation of different peninsular kingdoms and their European territories (Álvarez-Ossorio Alvarino 2006, 161–163). The plurality of legal frameworks made it extremely difficult to identify proper equivalents between the various forms of classification used in the different territories.

The diversity and the different historical traditions of the territories of the Spanish monarchy account for sometimes vast discrepancies between the territorial possessions of their respective nobilities. Thus, the area under the jurisdiction of the Aragonese nobility at the beginning of the sixteenth century is estimated at around 28.5%, increasing to 40% by the early nineteenth century (Abadía 2017). In Valencia, the numbers were even higher, perhaps as high as three-quarters (Casey 1979, 105–106). In Portugal, meanwhile, the share of seigniorial jurisdictions rose from 38% in the early sixteenth century to 44% in 1640, thereafter declining sharply as the vast majority were absorbed into the royal domain (Monteiro 1996, 54).

The upper or titled nobility—the barons, viscounts, counts, marquises, and dukes—were a far more exclusive group in Portugal than in Castile, due to the avarice of the Portuguese kings in granting titles. It is significant that the creation of new titles tripled between 1580 and 1640, when Portugal was part of the Spanish monarchy (Cunha and Monteiro 2010). This helps explain the steadfast support of the titled aristocracy for the Habsburg cause in 1580 and 1640 (Bouza 1994, 91). An early attempt to designate a more exclusive category within the Spanish nobility
was Charles V’s creation of the Spanish Grandees (Grandes de España). Yet over the subsequent two centuries the expansion of this group—from the original 25 Grandeeships to 113 in 1707, and continuing to grow in the eighteenth century—was such that it became necessary to create three degrees within the Grandee class, the highest being the most ancient (Soria Mesa 2007, 69).

The sale of titles was a major difference between Spanish and Portuguese titled nobilities. In Portugal, titles and lordships could never be purchased, but were exclusively granted as a royal favour (mercê). Yet this did not prevent jurisdictional rights and lordships exchanging hands between individuals, transactions that were on rare occasions confirmed by the crown. On the other hand, in the territories of the Spanish monarchy even Grandeeships were sold at the right price during the reign of Charles II (Soria Mesa 2007, 49–55). Nevertheless, in Spain by the seventeenth century the Grandees as a group were distinguished from the rest of the nobility by their relatively exclusive social origins. Dozens, if not hundreds, of titles of nobility below the rank of Grandee were granted. They were open to members of the upper levels of the urban patriciate, merchants, and bourgeois, as the expansion of commerce coincided with an increase in the crown’s financial needs.

The Portuguese landed gentry held jurisdiction over geographically fragmented territories. This dispersion obviated the establishment of a form of government based on regional units, and thus noble houses were not able to consolidate their power on a regional level, or to forge identities rooted in specific regions or provinces. This situation was mirrored in the Spanish monarchy, both in its peninsular and European possessions. This was partly due to the marriage strategies of the principal noble houses in the different kingdoms but was also a consequence of the wider distribution of Castilian honours, such as the order of Santiago. The phenomenon was especially evident in Aragon and Catalonia, where many of the most important local families became associated with the houses of the Castilian Grandees, assuming the latter’s titles and surnames as their main identifying marks (Abadía 2017; Molas 1997). Although some authors have designated this process as the Castilianisation of the noble elites, in truth marriage alliances were also forged between families from the other dominions of the Spanish monarchy, with the consequent dispersion of jurisdictions across the various territories (a process in which Portugal, Milan, Naples, and the Low Countries were not exceptions). The more nuanced, and arguably more appropriate, concept of a transnational nobility better explains the emergence of elites more directly linked to the political interests of the monarchy, without obscuring the particular advantages thus acquired by various nobles (Redondo Álamo and Yun Casalilla 2009; Cunha 2009; Terrasa Lozano 2012).

Another difference was the Spanish landed aristocracy’s right of sale of local offices. Furthermore, the accumulation of patrimony in different kingdoms through expansive marriage strategies—paralleled to some extent in Portugal, though only between 1580 and 1640—translated into various degrees of authority over dispersed regions of the monarchy, with all the strategic value this entailed. Moreover, when these families began to leave their estates for residence at court during most of the year, where there were greater opportunities for rendering services in exchange for royal favours, they continued to exercise their power at the local level, in contrast to what occurred in Portugal after 1640, with the definitive “courtisation” of the Portuguese nobility. In this way, the Spanish aristocracy managed to combine personal service with the
exercise of authority on the periphery through local agents, such as noble families of lower rank, or younger relatives linked through patron-client relationships (Carrasco Martínez 2010; Salas Almela 2008; Iglesias Blanco 2009).

In Portugal before 1640, seigniorial lordship and control over local government through officials based in a head town were the basis as well as the distinguishing marks of noble status (Cunha and Monteiro 2010). After 1640, and in stark contrast to Spain, there was a significant shift. In addition to the reduced number of new grants of seigniorial titles, there was a near total “courtisation” of the existing upper nobility with the growing monopolisation of the most important posts in the royal government by the titled aristocrats. Ascent to the upper ranks of the nobility would only be possible thenceforth as a reward for direct service to the crown, which signified the nobility’s renewed dependence on royal favours as the foundation of its socioeconomic status (Monteiro 1998).

Another significant difference relates to what might be referred to as the “government of others”. Notwithstanding that in a corporate society, as António Manuel Hespanha has pointed out, the exercise of political authority was always in some sense the government of others, in Portugal the hierarchical power relations extended to the overseas territories, unlike in Castile (Xavier and Silva 2016). The Portuguese fidalgua circulated widely throughout the overseas territories, discharging military and administrative posts, and familiarising themselves with the world beyond Europe, which during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was extremely unusual among the nobility in the Spanish kingdoms, more accustomed to carrying out diplomatic missions or serving as viceroys in the different kingdoms. In both cases the rotation of aristocrats in the various higher offices of state in the different territories should have contributed to the greater territorial integration of the two monarchies.

Partly as a consequence of the greater material dependence of the Portuguese nobility on the monarchy, the direct association between the aristocracy and the exercise of power at the centre endured far longer in Portugal than in Spain, to the end of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the nobility’s power in the provinces, the exercise of seigniorial authority or the lords’ extractive capacity declined in Portugal during the eighteenth century, which was not the case in the other territories of the Spanish monarchy. Some authors even point to the bolstering of seigniorial rights, and even speak of a “refeudalisation” beginning in the seventeenth century. The kingdom of Valencia was exemplary in this sense (Casey 1979).

It should be noted that the Castilian nobility was no longer summoned to the Cortes of Castile after 1538–1539, while the Portuguese nobility remained a part of the kingdom’s representative assembly, much like their Aragonese, Catalan, and Valencian counterparts until the eighteenth-century Nueva Planta decrees. However, this should not be taken to signify greater participation in the business of government, since the nobility were well represented in the decision-making bodies in both Spain and Portugal, and exerted a preponderant influence on government everywhere.

Despite these differences, the Iberian nobilities had many things in common, besides their Catholic faith. The porousness of the frontier also had the effect of reinforcing a shared aristocratic culture thanks to the circulation of courtly models, as well as the use of Castilian in oral and written communication, especially among the lettered elites. However, it is equally true that the frontier regions could leverage
their strategic importance to extract certain advantages from the political centre, such as the reinforcement of their privileges or *fueros*. On the other hand, if the peripheral regions were well endowed with material resources, this could prompt more coercive policies and the strengthening of fiscal and repressive mechanisms. This twin phenomenon was evident in all the domains of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies.

Perhaps ironically, the years of Iberian union from 1580 to 1640 seem to have been crucial in crystallising particularities, and the construction of separate identities among the Portuguese and Spanish nobilities. The absorption of Portugal into the Spanish Habsburg monarchy created the need to clearly define and distinguish the rights of the native Portuguese from those of non-natives. It was a defensive reaction when suddenly joined to a larger and more powerful neighbour, subject to a foreign and distant new king and centres of authority. Such concerns however suggest that the Portuguese nobility was more concerned with preserving or augmenting its privileges rather than differentiating itself from the Castilian aristocracy. This was evident at the Cortes of Tomar, when the Portuguese nobility demanded—and was denied—seigniorial rights in the manner of Castile, as well as the abolition of *Lei Mental*, in recognition of Portugal’s value and importance for the Habsburg king. Monopoly over offices was not always respected in practice, but the union with the Spanish monarchy also created new opportunities for some Portuguese nobles, who took up posts in the central government or in the Spanish armies, particularly in Flanders and Italy.

The complex political allegiances of the Catalan nobility during the revolt of 1640 also advise against simple interpretations and overly schematic historiographic approaches. Some general tendencies in factional allegiances are nonetheless discernible: the aristocratic elites, closely intertwined with the upper echelons of the Castilian aristocracy, were more likely to identify with Philip and the Spanish cause, while the middling strata (urban magistrates, *caballeros*, or gentry) tended to favour the French. What is striking above all, however, is the primacy of particular interests, local contexts, and contingency in determining allegiances, rather than grand political strategies of the groups involved. Later, during the War of Spanish Succession, opposing factions would once again split along family lines, not unlike in the 1640s, whether for reasons of political opportunism or the sheer complexity of the ties that bound individuals and groups to the political community.

Iberian nobilities, and especially their lower ranks, experienced greater social mobility and expansion in the early modern period. For the upwardly mobile commoners, noble status not only had symbolic value, but also brought tangible material advantages: exemption from taxes, debtors, prison, torture, forced recruitment, and labour. Social promotion was eased both by the crown’s largesse in dispensing offices and titles, the amplification of the concept of nobility to accommodate the claims—albeit contested—of personal virtue and wealth as well as those of birth and lineage, and finally the possibilities for refashioning or inventing the latter, often with the aid of professional genealogists (Soria Mesa 2004; Figueiroa-Regó 2011). Yet the ambiguities, the manipulations, and the expansion of the nobility, especially in the sixteenth century, also led to intense social competition, greater internal stratification, and eventually a closing of the ranks by blocking avenues of access to the most privileged group.
In Portugal, where the possession of local office was key to noble status, the accretion of fiscal and judicial privileges by the social elite was paralleled by more exacting criteria for access to municipal government posts. The result was a sharpening of distinctions between the rulers and the ruled at the local level, between the commons at large and the oligarchic elite—judges and aldermen—sometimes designated as the “nobreza da terra” (local gentry), reinforced by greater endogamy. Thus, while in the sixteenth century town councils were relatively open to new members, the seventeenth century saw greater closure (Coelho and Magalhães 2008). The members of the urban oligarchies thus belonged to the lower nobility, although they represented the commons in the Portuguese Cortes, as the deputies of the cities and the towns. It is notable that, in contrast to Castile, the Portuguese local magistracies were filled by a process of election that was subject to confirmation by the crown, and these offices were never sold. Moreover, these were unpaid, voluntary positions. The lesser civic offices on the other hand were salaried, inheritable, and sometimes, though rarely, sold by the Portuguese monarchy.

The progressive aristocratisation of municipal offices was also evident in the Crowns of Castile and Aragon, although this process was offset to some extent by the large-scale sale of regimientos (city councillorships), that at least in the sixteenth century left the way open to “wealth, more than nobility or virtue” (Fortea Pérez 2004, 252; Fortea Pérez 2012). Many of these posts had initially been granted to individuals as royal favours (mercedes), but through sales, transfers, or inheritance they came to be monopolised by a narrow oligarchy of families linked to one another by kinship ties. The first large-scale sales of offices took place under Charles I and Philip II, but the practice would become even more widespread by the mid-seventeenth century. Despite the continued insistence of the cities and their representatives on the application of strict social criteria—living nobly without public taint of commerce or mechanical work, being a hidalgo of pure blood—in practice many exceptions were made, and many more relied on false instruments and testimonies of their suitability.

The crown’s exclusive right of granting favours (mercedes), and especially habits of the military orders, played an important role in the social disciplining of the Portuguese nobility, as well as in reinforcing a sense of noble identity (Olival 2001). Following the crown’s annexation of the orders of Avis, Christ, and Santiago (1551), the award of habits became a crucial mechanism for controlling access to knightly status at the base of the noble hierarchy, just as the distribution of encomiendas (more than 600 in total) was a primary means of creating distinction at its summit. However, the key development in the process of imposing greater social exclusivity was the introduction of purity-of-blood statutes and prohibitions against the taint of mechanical labour in 1570, with manual work and racial impurity formally declared antithetical to the quality of nobility. These processes took place earlier in Castile, where the Grand Masterships of the military orders were incorporated into the crown in 1493, with the creation of the Council of Orders (Postigo Castellanos 1987). In both Portugal and Castile these new socio-professional and ethnic requirements shaped the nobility’s self-representations. It should be noted however that in Castile prohibitions against the taint of “mechanical” work were introduced much later than blood purity requirements for nobility, which suggests a greater emphasis on ethnic-religious purity than noble lineage. In Portugal, on the other hand, the
fact that both forms of exclusion were introduced at the same time reinforced the
association between nobility and distinct lifestyles. The spread of these practices in
the seventeenth century undoubtedly contributed to restricting access to the lower
echelons of the nobility in both Castile and Portugal.

Nevertheless, it is worth repeating that the Portuguese and Castilian-Aragonese
nobility were never closed groups. With the passage of time, increasing social com-
plexity, the pressure for rewards based on military service, and the sale of noble
distinctions and honours all contributed to the greater porousness of the noble estate.
Even if exclusionary statutes remained in force at the institutional level and in the
sphere of social representations, in practice effective mechanisms were developed,
such as genealogical fictions and effacement, that made it possible to evade the stigma
of social and ethnic-religious impurity. These in turn provided scope for consider-
able fluidity and the continued renewal of the upper ranks without undermining the
formal values of the hierarchical system of estates, which helps explain the relative
stability of both monarchies (Soria Mesa 2007; Olival 2001).

THE CLERGY

The clergy was in theory another privileged social group, although in prac-
tice equally heterogeneous. There were vast differences in the social origins of its
members, the power and influence they wielded, their education, doctrinal positions,
and lifestyles. They were imbedded in myriad institutions that varied greatly in char-
acter and function—dioceses, cathedral chapters, religious orders, the Holy Office,
educational and charitable institutions, among others. Far from united in pursuit of
a common goal of promoting Catholic and Church doctrine, these were more often
engaged in pursuing particular interests that often placed them at odds with one
another. The clerical estate was thus composed of men and women who possessed
ecclesiastical dignity and the various privileges associated with it, as well as a more
or less direct relationship with the distant seat of the Church in Rome. On the other
hand, the churches in Portugal and Castile-Aragon also shared a dependence on their
respective monarchs, which took on a somewhat different aspect in each kingdom.
It is little wonder, then, that the social space of the church was riven by multiple
tensions, both internal and with different powers, born of different understandings
of its priorities, as well as the means and resources necessary for the fulfilment of its
mission.

In both Portugal and Spain, it nevertheless seems possible to identify two similar
tendencies from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. In the first place, there was
an undeniable rise in the number of ecclesiastics, in conformity with the rise in reli-
gious fervour as well as the institutional proliferation instigated by Catholic Reform.
Precise numbers remain elusive, but the size of the Spanish clergy is estimated
between 90,000 and 100,000 at the end of the sixteenth century, although unevenly
distributed across the various kingdoms and territories, for the Crown of Aragon
accounted for less than 20% of this total. As a group, the clergy made up around 1%
of the total population of the monarchy, rising to roughly 2% over the subsequent
century and a half, a trend that was reversed only in the second half of the eighteenth
century, when their numbers fell back to 1.5% (Dominguez Ortiz 1992, Vol. 2, 6;
Barrio Gozalo 2010, 48–49). For Portugal, the best estimate is 25,000 ecclesiastics
in the mid-sixteenth century, of whom at least 30% were secular clergy, and possibly more (Bethencourt 1997, 150; Paiva 2000, 208). In Spain the proportion of the secular clergy was significantly higher, estimated at around 45% of the ecclesiastical estate (Barrio Gozalo 2010, 49). Although the numbers are not exact, they represent a similar proportion of the total population in both Spain and Portugal.

The trajectory of episcopal rents in the Spanish monarchy reveals a similar pattern of long-term growth, although with a pronounced spike in the second half of the eighteenth century. There were nevertheless significant differences at the regional level. Between 1600 and the first half of the eighteenth century the rise in episcopal rents in the Crown of Castile was evident above all in the Canaries and Murcia, while Catalonia stood out in the Crown of Aragon. Moreover, towards the end of this period it was the dioceses of the Aragonese Crown where rent extraction was most pronounced, especially in Catalonia, Valencia, and Mallorca (Barrio Gozalo 2014, 222–223). In terms of the territory under ecclesiastical jurisdiction, according to some authors, 25% was in the hands of the secular church, while the larger part, around 27.5%, belonged to the military order of San Juan. Overall, the noble domain was somewhat larger than the ecclesiastical, and this difference was more accentuated in Valencia (Abadía 2017, 461; Casey 1979, 105).

The continued growth of the clerical population in Iberian societies over the course of the early modern period may also be inferred, albeit indirectly, based on other indicators such as the number of new monasteries and convents, especially abundant in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries thanks to the establishment of new religious orders, and even the number of religious professions (Atienza 2008). Most of these new foundations were in urban centres, where the wealthiest and most exclusive monasteries and convents were concentrated. Among the regular clergy, men were always more numerous, although the number of women taking religious vows increased with the diffusion of the new Tridentine religious sensibility as well as obstacles to marriage imposed by paternal authority. The same was true of many younger sons. This steady rise in the membership of religious orders began to subside in the second half of the eighteenth century, but until then it constituted a means of escape, a way of overcoming the constraints imposed by the spread of mayorazgo/morgadio, and in Portugal also the Lei Mental—mainly for the upper and middling strata of Iberian societies. Another source of attraction was the founding of new religious orders and the insistence on the importance of missionary work after Trent. The evangelising effort had its greatest expression in overseas territories, in particular through the efforts of the Society of Jesus, the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and Mercedarians.

The growth in the number of secular clergy was another measure of the positive resonance of Trent in Iberian societies, which was a major reason behind the greater uniformity of religious practices and of social disciplining. This greater efficacy in turn may be attributed to improved clerical training, and greater control over the priests’ pastoral work, namely through the obligation of residence, diocesan constitutions, and regular visitations and inspections. Although Trent raised the bar in terms of the social criteria for membership of the clergy—including age, education, legitimacy, blood purity, moral attributes, and physical capacity—along with the costs of the necessary checks and inquiries, in practice these requirements were not always enforced, and numerous New Christians, as well as indigenous or
mestizo individuals—above all in the overseas territories—entered the church. But aspirants were also required to possess the means of supporting themselves, such as an inheritance or a dowry. If this requirement deterred some from pursuing an ecclesiastical career, the expectation of upward mobility and improved social status encouraged many among lower income families to find ways to gather the necessary funds and dowries to ensure that at least one of its members would be able to take holy orders.

The second tendency mentioned above is the growing interference by the monarchy in ecclesiastical matters. The process was complex and involved numerous disputes and conflicts, not only between the crown and the church hierarchies in both Spain and Portugal, but also with Rome. An emblematic example of the Portuguese Crown’s greater involvement in ecclesiastical affairs was the establishment of the Mesa da Consciência e Ordens (1532) to oversee royal pious bequests, social welfare institutions, the royal Padroado, the reform of religious orders, the University of Coimbra and the already mentioned administration of the military orders.

The right of royal patronage over the church played a key role in this process in both Portugal and Spain and was claimed by both Crowns around the same time (Paiva 2006). The kings of Portugal obtained de iure control over ecclesiastical appointments in the conquered territories in 1514–1515, and de facto authority over the kingdom as a whole during the reign of king Manuel (a concession that was not legally and officially sanctioned until 1740). In Castile the process began in 1486 with the papal concession of rights of appointment in the bishoprics of Granada, the Canaries, and the Indies, and in 1523 extended to all of Castile, having already been granted in Navarre. Royal control over ecclesiastical appointments had a number of important consequences including the progressive aristocratisation of the upper ranks of the clergy, and the transformation of bishops into royal agents dependent on the king’s favour for appointments and promotions in return for services rendered. It should be emphasised that in Catalonia this tendency was less pronounced, given that scarcely 50% of its bishops were of noble extraction (García Oro and Portela Silva 2000; Barrio Gozalo 2010). In any case, it seems that Castilian-Aragonese bishops were recruited mainly from the middling nobility, in contrast to Portugal, where the upper aristocracy monopolised the appointments from the seventeenth century (Monteiro 1998; Paiva 2006). Finally, analysis of the origins of Catalan and Valencian bishops provides further evidence that non-natives were preferred in royal appointments. From the second half of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth century less than half of the bishops appointed to Catalan dioceses were natives of the territory, and this phenomenon was still more striking in Valencia in the sixteenth century (Fernández Terricabras 2009, 86).

Finally, it should be noted that relations between the monarchy and the Iberian church, alternating between conflict and cooperation, were shaped less by particular ideologies (regalism or ultramontanism) and more by complex and volatile jockeying interests of individuals, families, groups, and institutions. The immense opportunities offered by the church in both Spain and Portugal to a wide range of social actors, in the form of access to material, social, and symbolic capital, led to a rise in conflicts over honours and dignities, the award of jurisdictions and the defence of privileges. It also enabled the accumulation of power by individuals and social mobility, albeit within limits, given that one’s original social status invariably
determined the upper limit of one’s social ascent—even if the clerical estate was, despite everything, more open to the rise of those below than the lay sphere. Observing the world of the clergy, it is possible to identify a plurality of vertical and horizontal solidarities which, in addition to being the source of internal cohesion, also extended the boundaries of the group and of the Iberian peninsula itself. These solidarities articulated geographic spaces and interests of different social strata, becoming an essential sphere in the symbolic representations of the Iberian societies. In Castile, however, the clergy, like the nobility, were not represented in the Cortes, in contrast to Portugal, Aragon, and Navarre.

THE THIRD ESTATE

The third estate was not a formal category in the Spanish kingdoms; rather there was a cluster of terms used to describe all those who were neither nobles nor churchmen—the estado llano, the común, or the pecheros (tax payers). After 1539 the Castilian Cortes was no longer a representative assembly of the three estates, but of the kingdom’s 18 most powerful cities, and thus the third estate was stripped of its constitutional function, which it retained in Portugal throughout the early modern period. As in the case of the lower tiers of nobility, the status of commoner was primarily a juridical distinction, indicating little more than one’s lack of fiscal exemptions and other statutory privileges of nobility. Beyond that common denominator—and powerful urban oligarchs frequently made exceptions of themselves even in this respect—the third estate was the largest and most variegated group, in theory comprising everyone from a simple labourer to someone like the sixteenth-century Sevillian merchant Juan Antonio Corzo Vicentelo, whose legendary wealth and munificence evoked comparisons with Cosme de Medici and Alexander the Great (Vila Vilar 1999, 46–48). Yet it was neither a static nor an amorphous group. Wealth, literacy, purity of blood, occupation, and corporate membership were some of the principal means of distinction, albeit highly mutable through fortune or craft.

The majority of the Iberian population lived outside the largest urban settlements, in small towns and villages. The sixteenth-century price inflation of agricultural staples drew many peasants into the urban-based market economy, and patterns of debt-financed investment and consumption that proved to be unsustainable in the long term. As structural limitations—especially in the arid and impenetrable interior of the peninsula—and conjunctural crises began to slow down agricultural growth in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, peasant indebtedness became widespread. Some fared better than others during the boom years, and rural society, although less socially differentiated than in the cities, became more polarised. In Castile in particular, a relatively small number of wealthy farmers imposed themselves over a growing majority of wage labourers and landless peasants. In Portugal, more than half of agricultural workers by the later seventeenth century were day labourers (jornaleiros). The peasantry in the south and centre of the peninsula, in Castile and Andalusia, were particularly vulnerable to agricultural crises and encroachment on commons and wastes by their more prosperous neighbours, by members of a late-feudal urban aristocracy, or by large seigniorial landholders. Contributing to the relatively greater precariousness of peasant life in much of the Crown of Castile was a tradition of land-tenancy based on smaller plots and short-term leases, in contrast
to the more secure forms of peasant proprietorship that were the norm on Spain’s Mediterranean periphery. Rural dispossession and impoverishment throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries nourished migration to the towns and cities, rapidly overwhelming their capacities to absorb the influx.

Rural society—and Iberian society in general—was highly mobile, judging by the motley procession of itinerant merchants, pilgrims, bandits, and vagabonds crossing paths with the famously errant Don Quixote. Historians, however, have only relatively recently begun to dispel the myth of the quiet and timeless Castilian village (Vassberg 1996). Villagers and townsmen travelled near or far in search of markets, seasonal employment for themselves or their children, or in response to economic downturn. They were lured further afield by the promise of the expanding frontier, from the newly conquered city of Granada after 1492 to the Americas in the sixteenth century (Coleman 2003; Altman 1989). In the opposite direction came soldiers, tax collectors, lawyers, and magistrates. Yet despite this, a sense of identity rooted in a stable local community of neighbours (vecinos) continued to be a salient feature of Iberian life. Indeed, the relative acceleration of life and greater mobility, which brought communities in closer contact—and competition—with one another and with the world beyond, may have also led to renewed emphasis on communal boundaries and jurisdiction, on “immemorial” local customs, and on peculiarly Iberian notions of citizenship or vecindad.

It was for all that not always clear where the village ended, and the city began. The peripheral neighbourhoods of even the largest cities were distinguished by a preponderance of market gardeners and agricultural labourers, while family and kinship ties extended across town walls. In another sense, too, there was no distinction between city and country in early modern Iberia, or rather, it was not a distinction of quality, but status and associated privileges (Herzog 2010). One essential difference was between those who were incorporated in a community, regardless of its specific charters and privileges, and those who were not; those who claimed the rights, and accepted the obligations, of citizens, and those who were free of the latter but also denied the former. The difference between vecinos and forasteros was one of the basic structuring principles of Iberian society, which—at least in theory—spoke of neither birth nor wealth, but one’s demonstrable commitment to a locality. It is therefore inaccurate to speak of urban and rural worlds as such, but rather a hierarchy of communities enjoying different corporate privileges.

The sixteenth century was a period of demographic expansion in both Portugal and the Spanish kingdoms, and this was most obvious in the cities. Lisbon and Seville were the great crucibles of fortunes, truly global cities that ranked among the largest and most dynamic in Europe (Lowe and Jordan-Gschwend 2015). They were soon joined by Madrid, after 1561 the capital of the Spanish monarchy, which from 1580 to 1640 also included Portugal and its overseas empire. This vertiginous growth, the dizzying extremes of opulence and misery, the constant flux and social heterogeneity of the two Iberian capitals, and of the great trading entrepôts like Seville, were a source of endless fascination and anxiety for poets and magistrates. Yet it was the protagonism of the smaller towns and cities that has been singled out as a distinctive feature of Iberian social, economic, and political reality.
Iberian cities were prizes of the Reconquest, that drawn-out and rarely single-minded struggle against the Muslim kingdoms in the south. In this process the cities served as frontier strongholds as well as exercising control over an extensive surrounding countryside and smaller towns—the rough equivalent of an Italian city-state’s contado. The Iberian monarchs’ continued reliance on cities for local administration, tax collection, and military recruitment, which extended into the period of the fifteenth-century civil wars, accounts for the special character they had acquired by the close of the Middle Ages—neither independent city-states nor simply creatures of the monarchy, but quasi-autonomous urban republics. One of the distinguishing features of the Portuguese and Castilian landscape in particular was the proliferation of chartered towns, most of them small to middling, which exercised lordship over their hinterlands—a privilege that in Castile, like titles of nobility and offices, was sold by an indigent crown (Nader 1993). In the long term this process helped bind individual communities directly to the monarchy, but also contributed to the consolidation of local elites, who profited most from the quasi-feudal power of the urban corporations they governed, ostensibly in the common interest. However, the price of autonomy proved too high for many smaller communities from the 1580s onward, assailed more or less simultaneously by bouts of plague and famine, as well as war and fiscal exactions—the wages of empire.

Spanish and Portuguese transoceanic voyages and conquests, which had, to paraphrase Pérez de Oliva, so dramatically and suddenly thrust the Iberian kingdoms from the edges to the very centre of the known world—and its networks of trade and credit—enabled the consolidation of an enterprising mercantile bourgeoisie. In Portugal, the merchants of Lisbon took the lead in imperial expansion, but many of the smaller urban centres played a part. In the Crown of Aragon, the cities of Valencia and Barcelona, which had been vibrant commercial centres in the Middle Ages, would begin to recover some of their former lustre in the second half of the seventeenth century—and even the reports of their intervening demise seem to have been somewhat exaggerated. In Castile, the suppression of the Comunero Revolt (1519–1521) did not sound the death knell of the bourgeoisie; rather, the sixteenth century brought prosperity to the wool merchants of Burgos and Segovia, the silk merchants of Toledo and Granada, and the great Cargadores a Indias of Seville who were the lynchpin of the American trade. Even the royal capital, Madrid, may not have been the parasitic consumer of resources and luxuries as some historians have previously argued (Nieto Sánchez 2006).

Prominent among the merchant and banking dynasties were foreigners and New Christians—Spanish and Portuguese converts from Judaism, referred to as conversos or marranos. Among the former, the Genoese were the first to settle in the Iberian Atlantic ports, followed by numbers of Flemish, French, and other European traders—groups that became more or less integrated into local society over the course of the sixteenth century (Crailsheim 2016; Herrero Sánchez 2014). The New Christians, like the foreigners, could draw upon a mercantile tradition that predated the late medieval transformation of Spain and Portugal from predominantly frontier warrior societies into vital conduits of world trade, as well as extensive networks of contacts and clients across the widening and increasingly polycentric Iberian world. The conversos and marranos however also bore the stigma of impure blood, and many were driven out and resettled in other parts of Europe and beyond.
as the persecuting zeal waxed and waned in the two kingdoms. The Iberian Jewish and converso or marrano diaspora, perhaps paradoxically, also had the effect of strengthening links between the Iberian lands and the rest of the world.

Rising prosperity, the influence of humanist culture, the bureaucratisation of government, and the institutionalisation of the law in the long sixteenth century also contributed to the greater social prominence of university-educated letrados. Yet the men of letters did not form a separate social group. They included the increasingly ubiquitous public notaries and scribes—classed among the lowly “mechanical” occupations by their social superiors—reviled lawyers and respected judges, dramatists and chroniclers, minor officials, churchmen and professional petitioners (arbitristas), as well as municipal and royal councillors putting on aristocratic airs. Their influence and status waned somewhat in the new economic, cultural, and political climate of the seventeenth century, as economic pressures restricted opportunities for legal professionals, the vestiges of humanism dissipated, and central government ceded authority to local bodies and institutions. But the letrado elite had long since been integrated into the transformed ruling classes.

A new urban patrician elite emerged in the sixteenth century as an amalgamation of the old urban nobility and the upwardly mobile “new men”, mainly bureaucrats and merchants. These employed a range of commercial and political strategies over several generations in the pursuit of economic and political power, heavily reliant on family and kinship networks (Martz 1995). The newcomers had to make themselves socially acceptable through marriage or purchases of land, and the cultivation of the public image of honourable citizens, distinguished from mere shopkeepers and mechanicals. The subsequent conversion of this elite into a “late feudal” urban nobility occurred in partnership with the crown, which exchanged patronage for the support of a local “network of known lineages” (Casey 2007, 80). The new elites for their part consolidated their hold on local power through mechanisms identical to those used by the nobility, such as primogeniture and marriage alliances, as well as new forms of social disciplining not far removed from those observed in Protestant regions of northern Europe (e.g., division between a “godly” laity and sinners). Family was a key institution in this process as the basis of individual social status, and as such it was promoted in public religious rites, often centred around common urban spaces.

The greater social mobility into the upper social ranks in the sixteenth century was not without its tensions. Perhaps above all, the question of blood purity (limpieza de sangre) assumed a central importance in the perennial power struggles between urban factions, as wealthy converso families vied with Old Christians for local influence. These contests often left deep scars, but a recognition of mutual interests eventually resulted in a new consensus and elite consolidation (Contreras Contreras 2013). The extent to which this urban aristocracy remained open or closed to new members, and how much its cultural and social outlooks owed something to their mercantile or professional backgrounds, varied between Iberian regions. In contrast to the Castilian cities, whose oligarchies largely endorsed the dominant aristocratic notions of status and identity, the formerly bourgeois ciutadans honrats of Barcelona redefined elite culture as much as they adapted to it, emphasising the importance of personal virtue and education over birth. Barcelona’s patrician elite also remained relatively open (Amelang 1986). Even in Castile, however, the aristocratising
tendencies among the bourgeois, although unmistakable, may have been somewhat misinterpreted by older scholarship.

The seventeenth century was a period of economic decline and retrenchment, the causes and ramifications of which were many and complex, but a major recent shift has seen historians abandon the longstanding notion of a “betrayal of the bourgeoisie”. Commerce, above all long-distance trade, was not necessarily prejudicial to one’s social status, or no more so than elsewhere in Europe. Many ennobled bourgeois continued to trade, as did many noblemen, and if some of the former settled into a rentier lifestyle, this was partly because investment in land, or in bonds and annuities (censos and juros), offered a greater yield, and was therefore a sensible response to the difficult economic conditions of the early seventeenth century. Rather than driven by a peculiarly Spanish mentality, the transformation of the Castilian bourgeoisie into a rentier class was the product of a complex economic, political, as well as a social calculus.

Below the patrician elites—often indistinguishable from the nobility—the greater if not quite all the lesser merchants, and the letrado officeholders, were the so-called mechanical professions. In many Iberian towns and cities, artisans made up a substantial part of the population, yet to a far larger extent than even those immediately above them in the social hierarchy, they remain a great unknown. To be sure, the dividing line between petty merchants and artisans was often blurred in practice, and certain crafts were more successful than others in casting off the common prejudice against manual labour. A loose occupational hierarchy developed, with some artisans claiming that based on the clientele they served, the precious nature of the worked raw materials, or the high value the finished products, theirs was a noble craft. This was true everywhere of silver and goldsmiths, silk weavers, and a few other luxury trades, although many more aspired to certain privileges and exemptions based on their importance to the local economy. Moreover, although the prejudice against mechanical work was even stronger than that which proscribed many forms of commerce, it was not shared by artisans themselves. Nor was it universal or unchanging. By the seventeenth century the tendency among theorists and the authorities alike was to recognise work as beneficial to the commonwealth, and even as a redemptive activity, the obverse of the associated evils of idleness and poverty (MacKay 2006). This was true even in Castile, whose productive energies were supposedly hamstrung by the uncontested dominance of the aristocratic ethos and a general disdain for work.

Artisans, like all other social groups, nobility and clergy included, sought higher social status, as well as material and spiritual security, in corporate structures, guilds, and confraternities. Incorporation into craft guilds in the Iberian peninsula, and especially in Castile, did not become a generalised phenomenon until the sixteenth century, and thus later than in Italy and northern Europe. However, in the major cities of Portugal and the Crown of Aragon, the artisan guilds had, in the late Middle Ages, secured a measure of formal political representation that endured into the early modern period. Thus, from 1383 in Portugal the representatives (mesteres) of the most powerful craft guilds had a voice in the government of the cities and the kingdom through the institution of the Casas do Vinte e Quatro, but their heyday was in the seventeenth century (Beirante 2014). In Catalonia, a more inclusive idea of citizenship extended to plebeians, and master craftsmen in particular, which in
turn buttressed a more robust constitutionalism, and the sense of a shared “national” identity (Amelang 1986). Artisans in Castile were excluded from politics, but the guilds nevertheless gradually carved out a measure of independence, especially in the seventeenth century when their bargaining power was enhanced greatly by their role in tax collection and military recruitment. Within guilds however, following the pattern of other corporate bodies, a period of relative openness in the sixteenth century gave way to ossification, and the increasing domination by an elite of wealthier master artisans—a process that once again had social, cultural, and economic roots.

Virtually every adult, male and female, was a member of at least one—and often more than one—lay religious confraternity. Confraternities and brotherhoods fulfilled a number of religious, social, and even political functions in early modern society. Some were exclusive, drawing their membership from the noble estate, and adopted purity-of-blood statutes, but many more were open to all who could afford the membership fees—and exceptions were made even in this regard. For the popular classes, they were particularly important as a form of religious expression, a guarantee of mutual aid, a means of social affirmation, a space of sociability and diversion. They embodied the contradictory principles inherent in the corporatist image of society as a whole, the egalitarian and the hierarchical. Like guilds, confraternities also provided a means for the articulation and defence of common interests, for as incorporated institutions they possessed legal personhood, the statutes and approbations, and the funds to engage in litigation in defence or realisation of rights and privileges. Both guilds and confraternities also afforded the lower orders a unique opportunity to play a significant role in public life through urban ritual.

The organic conception of society, of hierarchically disposed but nevertheless complementary parts, like the language of estates, was meant to convey an image of order and cohesion, and yet it also contained the seeds of disharmony and conflict. In the first place, the bodily metaphor could be turned on its head by those below by invoking the principle of interdependence between parts, so that if artisans were the belly of the republic, and the poor were its feet, they also had their rights as well as obligations. After all, “when the head aches, all the other members ache, too”—and vice versa (Cervantes Saavedra 2005, 470). Second, every community was in its turn made up of various corporations, or “mystical bodies,” each committed to its own version of the common good, the succour, protection, and salvation of its members. Lay confraternities and guilds were formally constituted as such, but urban neighbourhoods could also acquire many of the characteristics of a city within a city (Rí o Barredo 2002). The quotidian reality in Spanish and Portuguese cities was a more or less constant struggle of various corporate entities—and of the preponderant groups within them—for autonomy, freedom of action, and precedence, even as they served to reinforce the overarching principle of order and hierarchy.

But the associational life of early modern Spaniards and Portuguese was even more dynamic and complex. Individuals identified with not one but multiple communities, formal and informal, based on stronger or weaker social bonds, and which attained greater importance in different contexts. These might be based on kinship and patronage, but also occupation, neighbourhood, and the wider urban or rural community. Moreover, this network of horizontal and vertical social ties extended not only across various internal boundaries, of parish, neighbourhood, guild, confraternity, but also stretched to family and kin, patrons and clients, or trading partners
in other villages, towns, regions, and even other countries and continents. The
seventeenth-century Portuguese *marrano* merchant and *arbitrista*, Duarte Gomes
Solis, even conceived of the world of trade, with its internal rules, norms, and
networks or associations based on trust and credit, as a “mystical body” that linked
Portugal—then part of the Spanish monarchy—with its colonies but also with parts
of the wider world of commerce. Admittedly, Solis was an outlier, but his example
shows how far the corporate metaphor could be extended (Wachtel 2011, 178–179).
It also reveals the complexity of social networks, and the variety of goals, strategies,
and contingencies that must be taken into account. Solis, for instance, was writing as
a Portuguese subject of the Habsburg king, whose court was in Madrid, a city where
Solis himself was a *vecino*—having previously made his fortune in Lisbon—but his
treatises were ultimately a defence of what he called a “Hebrew nation”, made up
of New Christians like himself as well as Jews, many of them Portuguese-speaking,
and scattered from Livorno to Amsterdam, via Lisbon and Seville to Brazil and Goa.

As Solis’ struggles to extend the boundaries of his community suggest, all cor-
porate identities implied exclusion at the same time as inclusion. Various groups
experienced different forms and degrees of marginalisation, including religious
minorities (*conversos* and *moriscos*), the poor and destitute, and the enslaved men
and women. As a percentage of the total population, slaves represented around 1%
in Spain and less than 7% in Portugal, certainly far below their numbers in Iberian
colonial societies in Brazil or the Caribbean. They were unevenly distributed how-
ever, less numerous in the north and relatively more abundant in the south and
east of the peninsula, making up as much as 10% of the population of port cities
such as Seville and Lisbon, or Barcelona and Valencia (Phillips 2014, 10–11). Slave
ownership was primarily a sign of status in Iberia, and not an essential element of
economic production, and slaves in Spain and Portugal were mainly employed as
domestic servants, artisans, or farmers. Some but not all lived with their masters and
the latter especially enjoyed a greater freedom of action in their daily lives. On the
other hand, historians have shed any illusions regarding the harshness of slavery in
the Iberian world in general, or the limited avenues for escape from servitude, and
in both these senses Spanish and Portuguese societies are no longer seen as relatively
benevolent outliers. What is more, the growing association between slavery and skin
colour, in conjunction with existing prejudices, meant that the stigma of slavery
impeded the social integration of freed blacks (Martín Casares 2005).

As in the rest of Europe, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witnessed
changing attitudes to poverty and attempts to rationalise public welfare in the
cities of the Iberian peninsula. Although the traditional concept of private charity
as a salutary act survived, the tendency was to distinguish between the so-called
deserving and undeserving poor, the respectable and the disreputable, the genuine
and the false. It was yet another form of social exclusion in a society increasingly
preoccupied with distinction and privilege. Portugal in particular was in the vanguard
in putting into practice the precepts of Christian humanists, and in the ambition
and scope of the royal government’s intervention (Abreu 2016). The cities of the
Crown of Aragon also kept pace with the restructuring of public welfare provision,
although the initiative there was in the hands of the major cities. In Portugal and
in the Crown of Aragon, the consolidation of confraternities, their hospitals and
endowments, was under way by the late fifteenth century, more or less at the same
time as in the northern Italian cities that were in the forefront of public welfare reform (López Terrada 1999). In Portugal, the turning point was the foundation of the Hospital of All Saints in Lisbon, and the city’s *Misericórdia* confraternity (1498), whose replicas proliferated throughout the Portuguese-speaking world (Sá 1997). Although they enjoyed royal support and special privileges, and despite the similarities in their objectives and statutes, the Portuguese *misericórdias* were markedly local and autonomous institutions (Sá 2001). Neither the Portuguese *misericórdias* nor Spanish charitable confraternities, dominated by the nobility or urban elites, had as their goal the eradication of poverty, but—apart from the salvation of their own members—were meant to buttress the existing social order by institutionalising its social and economic inequalities (Callahan 1980).

In Castile, the growing problem of urban poverty and vagrancy was the subject of major debates in the 1540s, and over the course of the sixteenth century various proposals were advanced to deal with the problem, which proved to be either ineffective, impractical, or unsustainable in the long term—if they were implemented at all. Unlike in Portugal, where the state gradually assumed control—direct or indirect—over the provision of public welfare, the Spanish monarchs largely left the issue of poor relief and the control of idlers and vagabonds in the hands of the municipal authorities. In the first part of the sixteenth century, Castilian cities like Zamora were even proactive in their reformism and did not lag behind their counterparts in northern Europe (Flynn 1989). However, the impetus waned with the gradual depletion of municipal treasuries, and the general economic crisis. By the seventeenth century, whenever the issue of vagabondage came to the fore, the authorities routinely reiterated the same precepts and increasingly half-heartedly resorted to inspections and the issuing of licenses, revealing the apathy and disinterest of magistrates in dealing with the problem. The only effective material support for the growing legions of the poor came as a result of independent efforts of religious institutions and private charity—albeit dealing only with the symptoms. Meanwhile the problem only became worse, and the numbers of the poor grew to truly unmanageable proportions by the end of the Habsburg era (Carmona 2012).

The hospitals, prisons, brothels, and city streets were also the abode of a parallel, fictional “antisociety”, a testament to the fascination and anxiety provoked by the swelling ranks of the marginalised or the deviant, above all in the great cities like Seville and Madrid that seemed to contain the whole world in its infinite and often menacing variety. The literature of what came to be seen as a Golden Age, with its cast of crafty street urchins, criminals, and vagabonds, has been read as a kind of vicarious “thick description” of urban reality, and thus a means to fill in the gaps in the archival record. Yet *picaresque* literature was not a mirror of society, not least because it was the product of an “age of theatre and illusion” and a society that found pleasure in the dissonance between image and reality (Elliott 2009). If we were to take these literary works and treatises at face value, our image of Spanish towns and cities would be brimming with “legions of vegetating bodies, children going hungry as listless parents ignored them, artisans in a drunken stupor unable to pick up their rusting tools, confidence men roaming city streets in search of dupes” (Mackay 2006, 93).

Widespread pauperisation was certainly real, but the image of disorder, subversion, fraud, and general moral breakdown is a rather better reflection of the
anxieties of the authors of these tales and, more importantly, of their social milieu. A measure of this anxiety is the apparent shift from the more benign wit and guile of beggars and vagabonds in the sixteenth century to the greater prominence of crime and violence of the seventeenth (Brioso Santos 1998). The *picaresque* novels, as catalogues of idealised social types, and an image of early modern Spanish society as the proverbial society of contrasts, of have and have nots, and of social chasms bridgeable only by illicit means, through cunning, trickery, and deception by members of a teeming *demimonde*, are yet another tendentious representation of society, a medium through which dominant social discourses were elaborated. Fictional representations of the socially marginalised, the thieves, beggars, were another form of social exclusion, by “reorganising” fragments of reality into shifting, yet generative representations (Chartier 2002–2003).

Among historians today there is a far more profound understanding of the role of agency—of groups and individuals, including the some of the most disadvantaged, marginalised or excluded. Wealth, social capital, and literacy were all unequally distributed and were a real constraint on the vast majority, as was the weight of prevailing social prejudices and ideals, suffused with an aristocratic ethos and religious orthodoxy. Yet to speak of constraints is not the same as to claim that the actions of historical actors were determined, whether by material and social realities or discourses. Research in local archives, inclusion of a much wider range of sources, as well as new historiographical perspectives and methods, such as microhistory—and, generally speaking, a focus on social practices over prescribed norms—has given us a far more dynamic sense of social life and beliefs in early modern Spain and Portugal. Among other things it has allowed historians to leave behind some hoary essentialist myths.

Honour, for instance, was not a particular obsession, “a trap that forced early modern Spaniards to act in certain tragic and bloodthirsty ways” (Taylor 2008, 7). Rather than a compelling force, it was strategically invoked in all sorts of everyday contexts and disputes by a range of social actors, including the humblest. There was honour even among “mechanical workers”, derived from more plebeian virtues such as creditworthiness, good citizenship, and sober life. Indeed, despite the prejudice against manual labour, and the exclusion of artisans from politics in Castile—if not Portugal or the Crown of Aragon—work itself was seen as a source of honour and the basis of citizenship. Artisans, in other words, did not simply accept the dominant discourse, and they and their advocates, especially in the troubled seventeenth century, found justification in Christian doctrine as well as the new science of political economy (Mackay 2006).

Women, too, used dominant social and religious discourses elaborated by theologians and moralists to defend themselves against accusations of intercourse with men outside marriage—by invoking, for example, fear (of men and relatives, and consequences of loss of reputation), their own supposed natural weakness, the importance of marriage, family and social harmony (Candau Chacón 2012). The same is true of other marginalised or excluded groups, such as the *conversos* and Moriscos, who either appropriated dominant discourses in their defence, or developed parallel ones. Blood and lineage for instance was open to all sorts of transmutations or inventions through the manipulation of written documents. Money, as ever, was a key element in this social alchemy, and lineage could be manufactured just as nobility
and offices could be bought (Crawford 2014; Pike 2000; Contreras Contreras 2013).

The general trend in recent scholarship is to emphasise the agency of an ever-greater variety of social actors, the role of contingency, and the contested nature of social beliefs and discourses.

Never far below the surface were latent tensions that not infrequently erupted in open conflict. It is a truism that violence was part of the fabric of everyday life in early modern Iberian societies (Peña 2012). Urban crime and rural banditry were certainly a major preoccupation of the authorities and of the social elites anxious about the maintenance of order (who were often one and the same), as well as being central to the sensationalist allure of Golden Age literature. But violence and other abuses of power were often perpetrated by the social elites and officials, especially in some of the more remote towns and villages where there was relatively little oversight, and the victims’ capacity to protest was more limited (Gamero Rojas 2012; Pascua Sánchez 2012). Overall, though, it seems that early modern Spanish society was not especially violent, but all forms of violence and crime need to be fully historicised, and their spikes and dips related to moments of acute social tension.

Collective forms of social protest were far more common in Portugal and the Crown of Aragon than in Castile, especially from the later sixteenth century onward. The conquest of Portugal by Philip II in 1580 seems to have unleashed simmering social and political tensions and ushered in a long period marked by intermittent popular disturbances (Valladares 2008; Bouza 1991, 210–213; Oliveira 2002). However Spanish Habsburg rule was rarely under serious threat until a disaffected nobility decided to join the fray in 1640. A similar pattern is discernible in Catalonia, although social unrest in the principality took the form of banditry in the decades leading up to the 1640 Catalan revolt, which also began as a popular uprising. Unlike the two peripheral kingdoms, Castile remained mostly quiescent during the same period despite growing social and political tensions. This has been attributed partly to the more mature civic politics in Catalonia, and the greater political participation of artisans which enabled the articulation of a collective identity around local traditions of self-government.

The period of Habsburg rule opened with major urban revolts in Castile and the kingdom of Valencia. Both the Comunero and the Germanías revolts (1519–1522) had social, political, and messianic elements, and in the end, it was the social radicalism of the popular classes that fatally split the rebel movements. What ensued—and has impressed historians about early modern Castile in particular—was a period of relative stability based on a renewed alliance between the urban elites and the crown. Various additional reasons have been put forward for the absence of revolt in Castile after 1521. The elimination of religious dissidence spared the Iberian peninsula the internecine violence that afflicted neighbouring France and other parts of Western and Central Europe. Some historians have suggested that decentralisation, achieved through the sale of municipal jurisdiction and creation of autonomous towns, strengthened bonds between the crown and the local communities of Castile (Nader 1993). Others, like Juan Gelabert, have pointed to the effective administration of justice as a key factor in maintaining social peace (Gelabert González 2002, 221–222). Less convincing are the arguments citing an alleged sense of impotence felt by the common people in the face of oligarchisation of local government (Lorenzo...
Cadarso 1996). What is certain is that the grievances of the lower orders could never be ignored, and the potential for disorder even in Castile was duly demonstrated in 1647–1652.

There has been a tendency to dismiss the Andalusian revolts of 1647–1652 as little more than hunger riots, and to discount their importance because they did not directly challenge royal authority or the hierarchical social order (Domínguez Ortiz 2000; Contreras Gay 2000). It is undoubtedly true that social revolution was not on the agenda of the rebels in Cordoba, Granada, and most notably Seville in the mid-seventeenth century. But the absence of radical social movements should not obscure evidence of political awareness among artisans, who were very much a part of the ideological debates and conflicts during this period (Jago 2001). The Andalusian uprisings of 1647–1652 have been studied recently from the perspective of popular reactions to royal fiscal policies, but they should also be seen in the context of artisan worldviews, notions of justice and the common good—and therefore not as simply reactive and ultimately futile acts of desperation, but part of a longer negotiation between the central and local authorities, and those excluded from formal politics (Gelabert González 2001).

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— Iberian society —

