The materiality and *semiosis* of inequality and class struggle and warfare

The case of home-evictions in Spain

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**Introduction**

A woman died Friday in the outlying Malagan neighborhood of *Los Corazones* after leaping from the balcony of her flat situated on the fourth floor. Earlier this week, she allegedly received an eviction notice for non-payment of her mortgage.

*(La Vanguardia 2012)*

Suicides due to inability to pay mortgages, as described here, are fortunately not an everyday occurrence in Spain, although they have been more common in recent years than was previously the case. And when they do occur, they bring to the fore general issues around growing inequality in Spanish society beyond the family tragedy that they represent. As in many parts of the world, inequality in Spain has risen markedly since the beginning of the economic recession of 2007–2008, and one aspect of this state of affairs is the crude reality of many individuals and families who cannot pay their mortgages or rents and are therefore evicted from their homes. And as we see in this newspaper excerpt, in extreme cases, the victims of eviction are pushed to a sense of despair that makes life too hard to bear and ultimately not worth living.

This chapter is about inequality and class struggle and warfare, which both engender and are engendered by events such as home-evictions. It begins with an attempt to make clear what is meant by inequality and class struggle, drawing on a range of work: from Plato’s (2007 [380]) and Rousseau’s (2004 [1754]) early reflections on the topic to more current scholarship (e.g. Atkinson 2015; Dorling 2011, 2014a; Duménil & Lévy 2011, 2014; Harvey 2014; Piketty 2014). There is then a discussion of how inequality and class struggle and warfare are made in context, both materially and via *semiosis*, or multimodal meaning making (Fairclough 2010). The chapter then moves on to the concrete example of home-evictions and examines how inequality and class struggle and warfare come together around them.
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**Inequality and class struggle and warfare**

References to inequality can be found as far back as the fourth century BC, when Plato discussed both the inevitability and danger of inequality. In book IV of *The Republic*, he wrote that a state ‘always contains at least two states, the rich and the poor, at enmity with each other’ (Plato 2007, p. 124), and in Book V of *The Laws*, he wrote that ‘[i]n a state which is desirous of being saved from the greatest of all plagues … there should exist among the citizens neither extreme poverty nor, again, excessive wealth, for both are productive of great evil’ (Plato 2014 [360]). The early philosophy of Plato is alive and well in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s (2004) oft-cited essay *Discourse on the origin of inequality*, first published some twenty centuries after Plato in 1754. Rousseau’s starting point is the existence of ‘two species of inequality’: *physical* inequality, which is about *natural* differences between individuals in terms of body, mind and health; and *moral* or *political* inequality, which is based on convention, is established, accepted and authorised by society, and leads to differences in wealth and power in society. Controversially, Rousseau developed the idea that existing stratification in society is not just about the natural abilities and propensities of individuals; rather, there are social conditions, human-made certainly, which create, strengthen and maintain existing political, economic and social orders. Significantly, Rousseau positions the ownership of property as what Marx (1990, p. 873) would later call the ‘original sin’ of political economy, and as the wellspring of inequality:

> The first man who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, “This is mine”, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, who pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditch should have cried to his fellows: Be sure not to listen to this impostor; you are lost, if you forget that that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody!  
>  
> (Rousseau 2004, p. 27)

More recently, Göran Therborn (2006) further develops the notion of inequality as a moral concern, arguing that it is inevitably about qualifying differences between individuals and collectives as good/right and bad/wrong. For Therborn, inequality itself is based on difference, but it is not just a matter of dissimilarity between and among individuals. First, it is about difference that limits the life possibilities of the disadvantaged: either directly, by concentrating resources among the privileged; or indirectly, via social, psychological mechanisms of humiliating signals of superiority and inferiority. Second, as a difference, inequality is too large and harsh for it to be accepted by a substantial proportion of society, even those who might benefit from it. Third and finally, inequality goes against notions of fairness in society, giving underserved, unfair advantages to people on the basis of power, rather than work and sacrifice. Of course, such notions of fairness have not always been in operation, as we see in recent surveys of inequality (Milanovic 2011; Piketty 2014).

Therborn also outlines three general types of inequality. First, there is *vital inequality*, which is about basic life-and-death chances, and individuals and collectives’ relative exposure to life-threatening natural phenomena, such as disease, famine, flooding and drought; self-inflicted human conditions, such as violence, alcoholism, and obesity; and larger human-made disasters, such as war, pollution and the inability to reach and use vital natural resources. Second, there is *existential inequality*, which is about systems of
oppression that deny individuals and collectives what are understood today to be basic human rights. Social structures such as patriarchy, slavery, caste systems, racism, religious persecution, homophobia and other forms of social ostracism, or attacks on ways of being, fall into this category. Third, there is *resource inequality*, which refers to the variable access that individuals and collectives have to material and symbolic resources, from property to money to culture; contacts and social networks; and recognised legitimacy and respect (see Bourdieu’s capital metaphors).

As many authors such as Duménil and Lévy (2011, 2014) and Piketty (2014) have noted, from roughly the late 1940s to the mid 1970s, the economies of the wealthy countries of Western Europe, North America and elsewhere operated according to a dominant Keynesian social-democratic consensus (*de facto* or conscious), and during this period, inequality was reduced. However, since the mid 1970s, there has been a considerable increase in Therborn’s *resource inequality*, especially material inequality, as this Keynesian consensus was first of all discredited and then effectively dismantled to a great extent. This turnaround came about as neo-liberal economic policies and practices rose to prominence, albeit in different ways across different geographical locations (Mirowski 2013; Peck 2010). These policies and practices have generated social and political changes that have brought with them greater differences between the rich and the poor, and the weakening and diminishing of the traditional middle class, not only in economic and material terms (around the ownership of assets, the relative stability of employment and the amount of income), but also in terms of the status and legitimacy that accompany it. In addition, and to make matters worse, this inequality has increased even more rapidly in the years since the current economic crisis first began to emerge in 2007–2008 (Piketty 2014). In the midst of this situation, it is worthwhile noting how – among the populations of those countries most affected by the crisis, such as the southern-most states of the EU – there is a growing realisation that the persistence and growth of *resource inequality* lead inevitably to a rise in another of Therborn’s categories. In this sense, there is a concomitant increase in *vital inequality*, the collateral negative effects that come with society-wide impoverishment, such as ill-health (both physical and psychological) and a decrease in the quality of social services and publicly available resources (Dorling 2011, 2014a).

Of course, in order to study inequality and social stratification and/or do something about it, it is necessary to elaborate some sort of descriptive framework, which informs both researchers and lay people about what it is that they are challenging and trying to overturn. Grusky and Ku (2008) have elaborated a typology of eight key ‘assets’ around which groups and individuals may be considered stratified, and hence advantaged and disadvantaged. Assets here are understood as the resources that individuals struggle over in societies, or the social realities according to which they can be classified and ultimately stratified. Grusky and Ku’s assets, which may be seen as transcending Therborn’s *vital, existential and resource* inequalities, are outlined in Table 43.1.

Grusky and Ku’s list might be expanded somewhat to include overt reference to the continuing deficits in recognition of, and respect for, difference in contemporary societies, that is, enduring discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion and disability. In addition, a more material domain – housing and shelter – deserves a separate mention, even if this aspect is perhaps implied in Grusky and Ku’s ‘economic’ category. Indeed, whether we frame housing in terms of its use value (a roof over our head), or its exchange value, as an asset generating greater wealth, there is little doubt that it marks divisions in society (see Bourdieu 2005, for an examination of the housing market in 1990s France and Dorling 2014b, for a more recent discussion of the UK).
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Table 43.1 Typology of assets related to inequality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asset</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Relative wealth, income, ownership of consumer goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Relative political power, workplace authority, household authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Relative knowledge, digital culture, ‘good’ manners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Membership in social clubs, workplace associations, informal networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorific</td>
<td>Relative respect received based on merit, social status, age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>Relative rights to work, to vote, to legal processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Relative education and training: on-the-job, general schooling, vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Relative fitness, illness, disease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Based on Grusky & Ku 2008)

My starting point for exploring how stratification and inequality are *made* in the ongoing flux-and-flow social events, activity and communication is the premise that we are living in times of class *struggle* as class *warfare*, where class is understood in terms of a *constellation of dimensions* model (Block 2014, 2015, 2016). This model draws on the foundational political economic work of Marx (1990); the later, more sociocultural models of class elaborated by Durkheim (1984) and above all, Weber (1968); and the more recent work of Bourdieu (1984), Wright (2005) and Savage et al. (2013). It frames class in terms of a long list of factors, including property owned, material possessions (e.g. electronic goods, clothing, books, art, etc.), income, occupation, education, social networking, consumption patterns, symbolic behaviour, pastimes, mobility, neighbourhood and type of dwelling inhabited. These dimensions of class cluster together and index points of contrast between and among individuals in class-based societies where class struggle and class conflict are a part of daily life, albeit in ways that are often subtle, and equally often, go unnoticed.

Eric Olin Wright defines class struggle as:

> Conflicts between the practices of individuals and collectivities in pursuit of opposing class interests. These conflicts range from the strategies of individual workers within the labour process to reduce their level of toil, to conflicts between highly organized collectivities of workers and capitalists over the distribution of rights and powers within production.

(Wright 2005, pp. 20–21)

Class warfare is a more vivid term that I will use here to capture how the neo-liberal policies adopted over the past four decades have constituted not only a point of conflict and struggle, but an actual attack on the well-being and even survival of the popular class in countries around the world across the dimensions outlined above. Nowhere has such an attack been more evident than in the transfer of capital assets from the less wealthy in society to the wealthiest since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2007. To capture this trend, David Harvey (2010, 2014) updates Marx’s notion of ‘primitive accumulation’, discussing what he calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Primitive accumulation was Marx’s term for the ‘historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production’ (Marx 1990, p. 875), which began with waves of land expropriations going back as far as the late fifteenth century in England. These expropriations, which ranged from the feudal lords being...
dispossessed of land by the emerging industrial capitalist class to the reformation-era spoliation of land held by the Catholic Church, had the common effect of divesting the peasant class of access to a livelihood as they were driven towards their historical destiny as the industrial proletariat.

Moving to more recent times, Harvey sees a new form of accumulation at work – accumulation by dispossession – in the range of activities and practices carried out by governments and financial institutions, which have the function of transferring wealth from the less well-off to the wealthy. First, there is the privatisation of state-owned and operated industries and services, which began in earnest some four decades ago, and more recently, there is the sale of state-owned assets – which, in theory, belong to ‘the people’ – to private investors eager to pick up architectural jewels and prime property at knock-down prices. Second, there are activities in the financial sector such as Ponzi schemes (Frankel 2012), in which unassuming investors, often of modest incomes, are cheated out of their savings. Finally, and most relevant to this chapter, there are the massive defaults on mortgages and subsequent home-evictions that have come with the current economic crisis. In this case, the executors are banks, aided and abetted by governments serving the interests of capital over citizens at large, an alignment of interests denounced long ago by Marx (1973; 1990; see also Marx & Engels 1998).

Given the discussion above, in which we have moved from inequality to class struggle and warfare fairly rapidly, there is the key issue of how to operationalise these constructs in empirical research, or perhaps it would be better to say, how to document how these phenomena are constituted in, and indeed how they emerge from, the social world of events, activity and communication. I turn to this issue in the next section.

Exploring the material and the discursive construction of inequality and class struggle and warfare: Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to explore the issues just identified, I draw on the work of Norman Fairclough over recent decades (Fairclough 2006, 2010; see also Wodak & Meyer 2012). Central to Fairclough’s approach is the study of *semiosis*, or the making of meaning via the use of semiotic resources (speech, written script, visuals, body movement, gaze, etc.) as a way of understanding how power relationships are symbolically established and reproduced in society. Fairclough defines discourse as:

>a complex set of relations including relations of communication between people who talk, write and in other ways communicate with each other, but also, for example, describe relations between concrete communicative events (conversations, newspaper articles, etc.) and more abstract and enduring complex discourses and genres.  

(Fairclough 2010, p. 3)

Crucially, he sees ‘relations between discourse and other such complex “objects” … in the physical world, persons, power relations and institutions, which are interconnected elements in social activity …’ (Fairclough 2010, p. 3). It is also worth noting that discourses, as defined above, are always ‘positioned’ ways of presenting social practices, and the world and life in general, which means that they are not casual, but always *come from somewhere*. In addition, discourses about social events and phenomena do not normally exist in isolation; indeed, the norm, as Weedon (1997) notes, is for there to be multiple discourses around a same social reality, and for these to be contested and in conflict with each other. Thus, at the
time of writing, the Spanish central government is engaged in a continuous campaign to convince a progressively demoralised and sceptical public that the economy is going well. However, their efforts are constantly contested by academics, journalists and lay people who simply do not trust the official version of events, and based on study, experience, or both, have developed their own counter-discourses.

A final point about discourses is that they often exist as integral historical artefacts, which means that they are potential resources for communication in the present. In different ways, both Bakhtin (1981) and Kristeva (1986) capture this general notion in their respective work on ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘intertextuality’. For his part, Fairclough makes the point that it is often possible to find that the producer of a text brings forward to the present elements found in communication in the past. This can mean, for example, a mixing of genres (e.g. personalising a formal speech with anecdotes), or the adoption of a variety of recognisable social voices in the telling of story (often the choice of voices tells us great deal about the person producing them), or the use of simplified versions of material and discursive realities from the past (as we shall see below, all too often, references to Hitler and the Nazis are used as a quick and easy way to discredit an interlocutor or political opponent).

Exploring the material and the discursive construction of inequality, and class struggle and warfare

In this discussion of inequality and class warfare, there are two key participating collectives. First, there is the Partido Popular (PP), the Spanish conservative party, which governed Spain with an absolute majority from 2011 to 2015. From early 2012, the PP began to apply extreme austerity measures according to the dictates of the ‘troika’, composed of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund. The measures taken by PP, which included across-the-board (and ongoing) pay cuts for civil servants, as well as cutbacks in funding for essential services (e.g. universal health care, education) had begun to produce a slight amelioration of the profound economic crisis in Spain in macro-economic terms by the end of 2014, although the PP tended to exaggerate such developments while the ‘troika’ continued to show a degree of scepticism. However, even if the Spanish government could claim that at the macro-level the economy was emerging from the recession by late 2014, the majority of the Spanish people were not feeling the effects and this, coupled with massive corruption scandals (the majority of which involved prominent past and present members of the PP) had served to submerge the population in despair. One key development from 2011 onwards was the increase in home-evictions, a phenomenon that led directly to the formation and rise to media prominence of the second key participating collective in this discussion, the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform for those Affected by Mortgages; PAH).

The PAH is a grass-roots organisation that campaigns on behalf of individuals and families who, because of unemployment or other events, find that they are unable to make mortgage or rent payments and therefore are either threatened with eviction from their homes or are actually evicted. Evictions normally occur with no provision whatsoever of alternative accommodation, and as we observed in the newspaper excerpt with which this chapter began, they can be extremely traumatic experiences for those who are evicted. On PAH’s web site, the following explanation of the campaign it organised appears under the heading, ‘Origin and justification’:

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The PAH is a grass-roots organisation that campaigns on behalf of individuals and families who, because of unemployment or other events, find that they are unable to make mortgage or rent payments and therefore are either threatened with eviction from their homes or are actually evicted. Evictions normally occur with no provision whatsoever of alternative accommodation, and as we observed in the newspaper excerpt with which this chapter began, they can be extremely traumatic experiences for those who are evicted. On PAH’s web site, the following explanation of the campaign it organised appears under the heading, ‘Origin and justification’:

The PAH is a grass-roots organisation that campaigns on behalf of individuals and families who, because of unemployment or other events, find that they are unable to make mortgage or rent payments and therefore are either threatened with eviction from their homes or are actually evicted. Evictions normally occur with no provision whatsoever of alternative accommodation, and as we observed in the newspaper excerpt with which this chapter began, they can be extremely traumatic experiences for those who are evicted. On PAH’s web site, the following explanation of the campaign it organised appears under the heading, ‘Origin and justification’:

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Text 1: PAH: Origin and justification

This campaign was born in September 2011 in the street … The motives behind the campaign are simple: they steal our homes and condemn us to continue paying for them. We are left in the street without any housing alternative. Banks, including those which were rescued, continue to display an antisocial attitude, evicting families and accumulating a huge stock of empty houses disregarding the social function of housing. The government protects such actions: it neither stops them nor offers solutions such as social rent, putting a halt to evictions or waiver of payment. PAH’s social project consists of a campaign of occupations and the recovery of the right to housing in response to a generalized state of housing emergency generated artificially and intentionally by banks and the government. To address this situation, we propose the recovery of empty housing held by banks for the homeless and our main demand is a social rent for families, in accordance with their income. The social project connects seamlessly with the trajectory of the PAH: the defense of the population when their rights are amputated, disobedience to recover these rights and in this way drive solutions.

(PAH 2014)

Importantly, this text traces clear lines of demarcation between the empowered capitalist class (backed by the government) and the relatively disempowered popular classes – the former ‘they’ against the interest of ‘we’ – and thus outlines a kind of class warfare (practised but denied by the government, and identified and felt by the popular classes). And it makes clear the inequality existing in contemporary Spanish society in the form of: (1) resource inequality (unequal access to wealth, property and housing); and (2) existential inequality (unequal access to political power and civil rights based on unequal access to the appropriate cultural and social assets).

It is worth noting at this stage that the Spanish mortgage law, which was passed in 1946 and remained unaltered through 30 years of the Franco regime and almost 40 years of democratic rule, was extremely biased in favour of the interests of banks. It left home-buyers and renters with few rights if they could not make mortgage payments or pay their rent. The most abusive – and as a result, controversial – section of this law was the impossibility of waiving the remainder of a mortgage, even after home-eviction for default and the permanent cession of the home to the lending bank. In essence, mortgage defaulters not only lost their homes, along with all of the money they had paid up to the time of default, but they were also still legally bound to paying off the remainder of their mortgage at such a point in time when it was deemed they were able to do so. A new law was passed in May 2013, with the sole support of the majority PP in parliament, which alleviated some of the more egregious and crueler aspects of the earlier law (preventing the eviction of families living in absolute destitution), but the obligation to pay off mortgages, even after home cession to a bank, remained. And as regards the prevention of evictions, the law seemed to have had little effect, as official statistics produced by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) for 2014 showed that there were 34,680 evictions, up 7.4% from the previous year.

In the midst of this drama, members of the PAH developed three types of activity. First, they held assemblies, during which information was shared about past or impending evictions, and victims were provided with legal, practical and emotional support. Second, they set up and maintained an active web site on which new and updated information was constantly posted on a range of topics, from Spanish law to strategies for dealing with
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eviction. Third, there was direct action, which included a physical presence at evictions, with the aim of stopping them, and participation in mass demonstrations. More controversially, in 2013, some members of the PAH began to engage in a form of direct action, called *escraches*, which were more focused demonstrations in which groups of activists protested outside the homes and/or workplaces of politicians. The objects of these *escraches* were individuals deemed to have decision-making capacity with regard to the legislation of banks and practices such as home-evictions (mainly PP members in the parliament). It is precisely these more ‘in-your-face’ demonstrations which led to a public discursive conflict with the PP in 2013.

Home-evictions and *escraches* are, without a doubt, material events involving the physical presence of actors (evictors, evictees, *escrache* protestors and the objects of *escraches*) and physical spaces (homes and streets). But what actually occurs in a home-eviction and an *escrache* when these events are framed as acts of semiosis that exemplify and structure inequality and class warfare? Lorenzo (2013) provides a vivid portrayal (via written text and a photograph) of a home-eviction in which we first note that there are two main actors: protestors and the police or military. There is a physical confrontation as police officers physically remove protestors from the entrance of a building in which evictees live, while the protestors do everything in their power to prevent this from happening. The use of violence by the police, provoked or not, is not uncommon in evictions, consisting of anything from the pulling of hair and pushing, to the use of batons to strike protestors. The corporality and positioning of the police officers during a home-eviction stands in contrast to those of the protestors: while the former are only focused on the removal of evictees, the protestors are engaged in a range of activities, which include attempts to talk to police officers, and outright physical resistance, such as hanging on to rails and other fixed objects to prevent physical removal from the scene. Protestors are likely to use phone technologies to contact associates or the press and above all to take photographs of unfolding events. There is, thus, a contrasted *semiosis* of the two groups in conflict. What this contrast means to those observing a home-eviction will no doubt depend on their views on a range of issues, from the morality of home-evictions to the role of the police in society (as guardians of security and order, or as the oppressive arm of the state ideological apparatuses and the interests of capital).

Applying the parameters of inequality outlined above to the home-eviction as event, we see that it is an instance of Therborn’s *vital inequality* and an instance of unequal allocation of physical assets in Grusky and Ku’s model. Evictees in effect have their physical integrity compromised in that they are at risk of not having access to basic shelter. The eviction also raises issues around Therborn’s *existential inequality*, and Grusky and Lu’s *civic inequality* as it may be seen as an act of denial and withdrawal of the evictees’ basic human rights (the right to housing). Of course, the root of the problem is the evictees’ lack of economic and political assets in contrast with the substantial economic and political assets possessed by banks as the ultimate instigators of eviction for mortgage default. And further to this, there is the state as guarantor of the banks’ interests. However, the PAH enters the conflict, providing cultural and social assets to the victims of eviction to counteract the cultural and social assets held by the banks and the state. In effect, members of the PAH are well informed about the legality and procedure of home-evictions, and they are well organised, with well-established networks. Importantly, in this battle of assets, it is sometimes the PAH that wins, as they are often able to stop an eviction and/or to rehouse a family.

Meanwhile, the *escrache* shows us a different *semiosis* from the home-eviction, even if the same two parties – members of the PAH and police officers – are involved. However, the
two groups’ behaviour differs here, as we move from evictees as the focal point of the activity to politicians. In *escraches*, the objects of the activity are seldom seen, except when rushing from their home or office to an official car to avoid contact with protestors and the press. By far the most interesting contrast between an eviction and an *escrache* is the behaviour of the police officers: while they are active in home-evictions, executing eviction orders, in an *escrache*, they are relatively static as they stand, wait and contain. Indeed, for most *escraches*, the police only intervene when the target appears, ostensibly to prevent any possible physical contact between the latter and the protestors. Meanwhile, the PAH has always maintained that it neither engages in physical attacks on targets nor uses abusive and insulting language towards them, and there has never been any reliable evidence to suggest the contrary, despite uncorroborated claims by some members of the PP. At most, there have been instances in which PAH demonstrators have shouted phrases such as ‘*sin vergüenza*’ (shameless) at their targets. Threats against life and harsh language do not seem to be part of the normal repertoire of those participating in *escraches*, and the PAH has publicly expressed low tolerance for such extremism. More typically, protestors hold placards with slogans, such as ‘*no criminalización*’ (no criminalisation), in reference to the way that from 2012 onwards, parts of the media and the PP began a campaign to frame many forms of public protest as illegal.2

As a political party with strong survival instincts, the PP could not be expected to stand idly by while the PAH’s discourses around the unfairness of home-evictions, the unethical and uncaring actions of banks, and the inactivity and insensitivity of the government gained traction in the press and among the wider public. However, PP politicians were finding it difficult to defend their position in public, given that in the run-up to the passing of the 2013 mortgage law, it had become clear that they would be offering only minor palliatives to the rising number of people affected by mortgage default and inability to pay rent. Above all, they made clear that they would not be changing the most controversial aspect of the 1946 law, whereby mortgage defaulters not only lose their home, but are still liable to pay off the remainder of the mortgage.

The arrival of *escraches* changed matters substantially for the PP. For many people in Spain, moving protests outside people’s homes, and therefore close to the border between the public and the private, was a questionable tactic. Perhaps seeing this, the PP embarked on a frontal attack on the PAH and attempted to shift public opinion, such that its members were no longer seen as saints, rather as something akin to political thugs. On 13 April 2013, as the number of *escraches* was increasing in the run-up to the parliamentary vote on the new mortgage law, Maria Dolores de Cospedal, the General Secretary of the PP, made the following statement during a meeting of PP party members (see p. 657 for transcription conventions):

… we have in our memory/fortunately it is well documented/how in the 30s certain people were pointed out/for belonging to certain political/ethnic/cultural/or religious groups/and they said/there they are/and you have to go and attack them (1) but what is this attempt to violate the vote? (1) this is pure Nazism (1.5) I know they are going to criticize me for this (1.5) [smiling] but this is pure Nazism …

(Rachide 2013)

Cospedal’s words received a good deal of media attention, not least because of their incendiary content. However, they were not improvised or idiosyncratic; rather, they were integral to an organised campaign by the PP to get a particular message across about
escraches and, of course, about the PAH. Just one day later, Esperanza Aguirre, Head of the PP in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, wrote about members of the PAH in similar terms in a blog on her web site, referring to their ‘impudence’, ‘cockiness’ and ‘impunity’ while likening escraches to ‘the worst totalitarian tactics of the last century’ (with a reference to the Hitler Youth) and ‘the bullying tactics of … ETA in the Basque Country’ (Aguirre 2013).

The Cospedal and Aguirre texts both contain an element of interdiscursivity as they involve ‘the insertion of history into a text and of this text into history’ (Kristeva 1986, p. 39). They also employ what Ruth Wodak et al. (1999, p. 85) have called the ‘topos of history as teacher’, and more specifically what Bernhard Forchtner (2014) has called the ‘rhetorics of judging’, a discursive strategy that ‘links the data (a past wrongdoing committed by an out-group) and the conclusion (that similar actions proposed today by others should be avoided)’ (Forchtner 2014, p. 26). In short, ‘[s]ince history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to’ (Forchtner 2014, p. 26).

Using wording such as ‘certain people were pointed out for belonging to certain political/ethnic/cultural/or religious groups’, and lexical items ranging from the bald ‘Nazism’ to ‘totalitarian tactics’, the two PP members draw on a discourse that frames the horrors of the Nazi era in Germany: PP party members, who are the object of escraches, are the persecuted Jews of our time, while PAH members (home evictees and those who help them) are Hitler’s henchmen. Apart from its outright crassness and insensitivity to the descendants of Holocaust victims, this intertextual twist is rather shaky for two reasons.

First, there is Spain’s well-documented contact with the Nazi regime both before and during the Second World War. From 1936 to 1939, Spain was occupied with the Spanish Civil War, during which Nazi Germany provided Franco’s insurrectionary fascist forces with valuable material and logistical support, among other things, bombing Spanish cities and transporting forces (Beevor 2006). After Franco’s victory in 1939, Spain was then officially ‘neutral’ during the Second World War, as Franco sought and achieved formal recognition of his regime by the allied powers after the war. Such historical events (and I apologise to readers for the elliptical nature of this foray into Spanish history) mean that references to the Nazis and Hitler in the Spanish public sphere often ring hollow, and they never have the kind of visceral value and impact among Spaniards that they would have with British or French audiences, to cite just two examples. Second, the PP itself has clear and unequivocal historical links to the Franco regime, as its earlier incarnation, the Alianza Popular (Popular Alliance), was founded in 1978 by a former Franco-era minister, Manuel Fraga. In addition, some of the policies and practices of the PP today – its close relationship with ultra-conservative elements in the Catholic Church, its latent authoritarianism (see endnote 2), its overt support for and celebration of ‘national symbols’ such as bull-fighting, and so on – are consistent with nacionalcatolicismo (national Catholicism), which was the ideological base of the Franco regime, dependent on the support of both Catholic fundamentalism and fascism. In sum, the PP arguably has far more links to the persecutors of Jews in 1930s Germany than the persecuted Jews themselves, and the PAH-as-Nazis intertextual turn therefore comes across as a cynical rhetorical ploy.

Nevertheless, members of the party, led by Cospedal and Aguirre, showed no sense of what Forchtner (2014, p. 28) calls the ‘self-critical narrative of our past failing’, and they went on to use the Nazi-based ‘topos of history as teacher’ (Ruth Wodak et al. 1999, p. 85) for a period of time in 2013. Ultimately, this was an attempt of Orwellian proportions to do what governments defending capital (in this case, the interests of banks) have always done:
turning reality on its head and then trying to convince the general public that it is true. In other words, the PP’s claim of victim status is a classic example of Marx and Engels’ (1998, p. 42) metaphor of ideology as a ‘camera obscura’ as ‘[actors] and their relations appear upside down’. But did this strategy work in the sense of allowing the PP to win the battle of ideas with the PAH (to win, in short, a symbolic victory over the PAH)?

This is a difficult question to address and answer because it is hard to find direct evidence in one direction or the other. Thus, while monthly reports provided by the official Spanish statistical office, the Sociological Research Centre (the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas; CIS), show that home-evictions are hardly ever cited as being among the top problems facing Spaniards on a day-to-day basis, this could hardly be expected in a country facing persistently high unemployment and a continuing parade of corruption scandals. Still, if we consider that the responsibility for economic problems, such as unemployment, are generally attributed to the government in power (the PP), and the fact that the PP is by far the political party most associated with corruption, then it seems that in both the short and long term, the effect of the attack on the PAH for escraches could only ever move the right-wing media and unconditional supporters of the PP cause. It seems then, that the obvious absurdity of the two-part equation – PAH = Nazis and PP members = persecuted Jews – has militated against the prospect of any kind of symbolic victory of the PP over the PAH with regard to escraches. Meanwhile, the material victories of the state and capital over evictees in the ongoing class war, exacerbated by the economic crisis, continue. To say the least, the materiality and semiosis of inequality and class struggle and warfare is complex and multi-levelled in its characteristics, a veritable moving object over time and space.

Conclusion

Inequality and class struggle and warfare are on the rise around the world, and in particular in countries such as Spain, where the recession has hit particularly hard. As noted above, inequality is multidimensional, existing, as it does, around and through unequal basic life-and-death chances (vital inequality), unequal human, civil and material rights (existential inequality) and unequal access to material and symbolic resources (resource inequality). And these dimensions mediate specific instances of class struggle and warfare, as defined and exemplified in this chapter, where I have provided a brief and admittedly limited analysis of how inequality and class struggle and warfare are constructed via processes of semiosis, focusing on the specific case of home-evictions in Spain.

From Rousseau to Marx, the ownership (or not) of property has been seen as a foundation of inequality in societies, and more recently, it is home ownership (or not), which has had a similar function (Piketty 2014; Durling 2014b). Grusky and Ku (2008) note how the different assets that mediate and index inequality are interrelated and tend to co-occur, or ‘crystallise’. For example, as we have seen in this chapter, control over housing by banks and the wealthy in society is interrelated with (and crystallises around) not only the latter’s extensive economic assets, but also with their political power, their social networking, their legal know-how and the human resources that they have at their disposal. The class warfare emergent in the clash between the PP and the PAH, in general over home-evictions and more specifically over escraches as a means of protest, shows how different access to crystallised assets comes to map inequality. Where the PAH has been able to match the PP – in terms of grass-roots political power, social networking, legal know-how and human resources – they have on occasion been victorious, and have therefore won a class battle, as
opposed to a war, by overthrowing housing equality, albeit momentarily. Such small-scale victories are encouraging and no doubt have made a big difference to the individuals and families involved. In addition, the Spanish municipal elections of May 2015 brought to power left-wing coalitions led by parties with a manifesto promise to stop home-evictions in most of the country’s largest cities, including Barcelona, where Ada Colau, one of the founding members of the PAH, was sworn in as mayor in June 2015. This development provides some hope and relief to those living in precarious conditions. However, as I somewhat pessimistically noted above, the ongoing historical process of the interests of capital over the interests of the majority, in more recent times framed as the 1 per cent over the 99 per cent, carries on inexorably, and it will surely take more than a mayor to overturn matters to a significant degree.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Slash (/) shows the end of a chunk of talk, normally paced. Pauses are timed to the nearest second, and the number of seconds is put in brackets: (.5). Question mark (?) indicates question intonation. Square brackets ([) are used for comments. Underlining indicates the adoption of a second-party voice as a rhetorical device.

Notes

1 All cited texts that originally appeared in Spanish have been translated into English by the author. The reader can find the original texts in the cited sources.
2 This campaign culminated in the passing of a new public order law in March 2015, the Ley Orgánica de Seguridad Ciudadana (Organic Law of Public Security), known to many as the Ley Mordaza (the gag law), with the sole support of the PP. This law severely limits the right to freedom of speech in Spain, affecting not only activities such as escraches, but also more traditional forms of protest.
4 Whether real and profound change will come with a new Spanish parliament, after the PP lost a third of its seats and came up short of a majority in the national elections of December 2015 and June 2016, remains to be seen at the time of writing.

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The materiality and *semiosis* of inequality