

# New Wealth in the New World: The “Nouveau Riche,” Temporality, and Social Order in the United States from the 1860s to the 1920s

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## Abstract

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the figure of the “nouveau riche” and the struggle between old money and new money populated novels, newspaper articles, theater plays, and gossip columns in the United States as well as many European countries. By drawing on the work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian, this article argues that it is the temporal dimension inherent to the figure of the “nouveau riche” that made it a powerful weapon in struggles over social order in Gilded Age America, a time during which economic developments challenged previous hierarchies. The categorial shift from wealth to descent, however, proved to be problematic because it challenged the narrative (and promise of) the American Dream and the figure of the “self-made man.”

**Keywords:** nouveau riche; Gilded Age; time; social order; millionaires

How much is a million dollars worth? In the New York City of the Gilded Age such a fortune was not worth very much, if Ward McAllister, a prominent member of the city’s upper society, is to be believed. In an 1888 *New York Tribune* interview about the “Secrets of Ball-Giving,” he declared that “with the rapid growth of riches, millionaires are too common to receive much deference; a fortune of a million is only respectable poverty. So we have to draw social boundaries on another basis: old connections, gentle breeding, perfection in all the requisite accomplishments of a gentleman, elegant leisure and an unstained private reputation count for more than newly gotten riches” (McAllister). The interview received much attention. A few sentences earlier, McAllister

had declared there were “only about 400 people in fashionable New York society.” Once this number was published, people all over New York and beyond were eager to learn who these 400 fashionable people were and who had not made it onto the list of the “New York Four Hundred,” as they soon came to be called.

In the Gilded Age, the term “millionaire” was a relatively new one. It had only spread in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the number of millionaires was still relatively small (Samuel 97–98; Süß 36). By the time McAllister gave his interview, however, their number had increased rapidly. In New York alone there lived more than 1,200 millionaires—roughly one third of all the millionaires in the United States (Hood 191). However, as McAllister had pointed out, being a millionaire did not buy entrance into New York’s most exclusive upper class. The “self-designed arbiter of New York City’s high society” (Hood 227) instead stressed characteristics such as gentle breeding and old connections, criteria that could not be fulfilled as easily as wealth.

Much has been written about the struggles between old money and new money in the United States (Hood; Beckert; Maggor; Foote; Jacob, *Capital*). Starting in the postbellum years, novels, musicals, and newspaper articles as well as historians discussed the search for distinction, the attempts of the nouveau riche to gain the respect of the old elite and access to their exclusive circles, and the defense battles of these established elites against the newcomers. The conflicts over distinction and belonging, status and identity are usually interpreted as “a new form of class-struggle” at a time in which economic developments challenged previous social orders (Inglis 115).

Constant references to ancestry and old connections were an often-used weapon in this battle over social hierarchies and dominance. Most of the texts that discuss high society during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era adopt without further comment the then-common distinction between old and new money, between families of “gentle breeding” and newcomers with no distinguishable family background. The category of the nouveau riche, however, is not so much a description but a deliberately employed, powerful weapon in the struggle over social order. Its regulatory power derived from the temporal order inherent in the distinction between old and new money.

Although this inherent temporal dimension is usually neglected, I argue that taking it seriously opens up new perspectives on the formation and legitimization of the social order in the American context. It is a prime example of how conceptions of time and temporality function as “regulatory device[s] with a very strong compelling force,” as sociologist Norbert Elias has put it (45).<sup>1</sup> In this perspective, time and temporal orders do not so much exist as they are “made,” which is why Elias puts emphasis on the verb “to time” rather than on “time” as a noun, thus stressing the constructedness of such orders. By taking time and temporal relations as “means of orientation in the social realm” and

<sup>1</sup> The quote refers primarily to human attempts to measure and synchronize time. As an example of the regulatory and disciplinary power of such attempts at timing, Elias mentions the tension one feels if “one is late for an important appointment” and thus violates social conventions regulated through “timing” (45). Similar regulatory mechanisms can be observed, I would argue, in the distinction between old and new as a particular way of distinguishing between entities (such as a sum of money), which usually carries a normative dimension.

as mechanisms “for regulating social co-existence” (Landwehr 19–20; my trans.), the interconnectedness between temporal and social orders becomes obvious.

The United States seems a rather unlikely case for employing the category of the “nouveau riche.” After all, the United States was, both in its self-perception and from foreign perspectives, the “new world,” which was distinctly different from “old Europe,” where social hierarchies had been based on lineage and inherited titles since medieval times (Paul 1–2, 19, 141; Nau 1–2). The newly adapted social figure of “the nouveau riche,” however, quickly spread throughout the United States and was understood everywhere. The distinction between old and new money, to be sure, was most prevalent in “old” American cities such as Boston and New York. These east coast quarrels over social ascendancy received nationwide attention in the press, however, and the terminology proved to be useful for distinguishing between long-established and more recent members of society in other parts of the country as well. A wide array of source materials documents the prevalence of the term throughout the United States, from the old east-coast cities to the newly settled Western territories and from highbrow to lowbrow circles. The material assessed for this article, therefore, includes national and local press publications, novels from renowned writers, cartoons, musical lyrics, and contemporary scholarly texts.

The article starts with a brief reflection on the social figure of “the nouveau riche” in transatlantic context since the discourses that surround social figures allow for deeper insights into contemporary perceptions of and visions for social, economic, cultural, and political orders and developments. In a second step, I draw on the theoretical work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian in order to explore the analytical benefits (and risks) that come with identifying a particular group of people as nouveau riche. Fabian calls attention to the way anthropologists have “made” their objects of investigation by “banishing the Other” to a “stage of lesser development,” thus denying them “coevalness” (Bunzl x-xi; Fabian). While contemporaries engaged in the nineteenth-century discourse about the “nouveau riche” were not anthropologists, their use of temporal categories to create social hierarchies had a very similar function. The article concludes with the re-evaluation of practices that came with the categorial shift from wealth to descent. The particular practices that spread with the rise of a group identified as nouveau riche are usually described in terms of inclusion and exclusion. While this is certainly the case, I suggest that such practices should be interpreted as means of deferring and of catching up, and thus as practices of timing that were intended to set the pace of social mobility. The article therefore is less about the real life of those labeled “nouveau riche” by their contemporaries or about a particular city. Instead, it analyzes the topos itself and asks about the particular ramifications of its adoption to the American context from a historiographical perspective.

## “The Nouveau Riche” as a Social Figure

Gilded Age Americans were neither the first nor the only ones to joke or complain about, and sometimes admire, the “nouveau riche.” For over two thousand years, from Roman writer Petronius Arbiter to F. Scott Fitzgerald and to today’s tech billionaires of Silicon Valley, people have carefully observed newcomers to the moneyed elites and their behavior. There is little indication, however, that many of these observers were aware of the long history of the figure of the nouveau riche. One of the exceptions is Fitzgerald, who first wanted to name his famous novel *The Great Gatsby* after Trimalchio, a former slave in Arbiter’s satirical novel *Satyricon*, who had become fabulously rich through shady practices (West xvii). In a time of great social mobility, the Romans called uncultivated social climbers like Trimalchio (but also a renowned scholar like Cicero, for that matter) *homines novi*—“new men,” who had gained riches or influential positions but came from humble backgrounds. Likewise, the ancient Greeks discussed the (un)worthiness of the nouveau riche social climbers who confounded established social orders (Filser 21–22, 44–45, 62–64).

In more recent centuries, the French have provided other languages with a terminology for social climbers. *Nouveau riche* and related characterizations such as *parvenu* and *arriviste* have been adopted in English and German. The figure of the nouveau riche social climber was highly prominent in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France (DeJean 184, 223, 254), and at the end of the eighteenth century, Germans began to translate the French term *parvenu* as *Emporkömmling*, “social climber” (Ramler 81). In Britain, the term has presumably been used since the Napoleonic Wars (Crook 7). Both English and German allow for the use of French terms as well as translated terms such as newly rich or *Neureiche*.

While terms such as social climber and *parvenu* (from the Latin word *pervenire*, “to reach something”)<sup>2</sup> have a spatial dimension and refer to overcoming distance, the term nouveau riche or newly rich, which was much more common in nineteenth-century Europe and America, focuses on the date of someone’s wealth and therefore on temporal order. To be sure, climbing toward or reaching a certain status have a temporal dimension as well, as it takes time to cover a distance. However, the focus is clearly on the process of working one’s way forward, whereas terms such as newly rich or new money lack any hint of spatial process and instead emphasize a particular feature.

The phenomenon of the newly rich again gained great attention during the nineteenth century, when fortunes hitherto undreamt of were made. In the United States and in several European countries, industrialization transformed economic and social orders profoundly. When newly gained riches threatened to inflate the previously exclusive American elites, the latter changed the criteria for access to their circles from

<sup>2</sup> On the distinct figure of the Jewish *parvenu* in nineteenth-century literature and the underlying anti-Semitic stereotypes, see Sasson.

wealth to the number of generations since this wealth had been gained. The circumstances in which the attempt to establish this way of thinking in the United States took place differed considerably from previous and contemporary European cases. Ancient Rome, as well as early modern and later industrialized Europe, were, or had been, aristocratic societies where social rank depended on birth. The aristocratic structures allowed for social mobility to a greater or lesser extent, but birth and birthright played a decisive role in determining one's rank. The United States, on the contrary, claimed to have done away with such privileges and to have implemented a republican and egalitarian system. To be sure, influential families and political dynasties obviously emerged in the United States as well, but they did not possess a privileged legal status as they did in Europe.

Still, Americans, too, started to construct identities and to label others based on categories of old and new money, thus choosing temporality—at which point in time someone had become wealthy—over other possible categories. Obvious alternatives could have been the distinction between business branches (more traditional branches vs. new industries), between places of origin (e. g., East vs. West), or between honorable and dishonorable businessmen, as the omnipresent category of the robber baron would suggest. The decades between the Civil War and World War I, however, saw major transformations in all areas of life, which raised awareness of the differences between “then” and “now.” The economy skyrocketed and new industries such as oil, steel, coal, meat, railways, and sugar changed the face of the economy and the world of labor, creating enormous wealth on the one hand and poverty on the other. The spread of infrastructures such as railways, the telegraph, and gas and water supplies connected households and regions, and in 1869 the first transcontinental railway linked the east and west coasts. During the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, Americans were faced with the challenge of reconciling North and South, dealing with the heritage of slavery, and re-organizing economic structures in the Southern states. The structure of society changed further with a new wave of immigration that brought approximately twelve million people to the United States between the 1870s and the 1900s, many of whom dreamt the American Dream of finding freedom and wealth. The United States was a society in transition on multiple levels and in search of structuring principles. The newly established category of “the nouveau riche,” which distinguished between the speeds of economic success, on the one hand, and upward social mobility, on the other, was one such principle.

The new riches of industrialists, financiers, speculators, and other profiteers who rose to the top with the emergence of industrial capitalism attracted the attention of contemporary onlookers on various levels. Journalists and writers, but also scholars, identified “the nouveau riche” as such and as worthwhile objects of reflection, and they devoted thousands and thousands of pages to their characterization. Renowned writ-

ers such as Edith Wharton, Henry James, and William Dean Howells in the United States, Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens in England, Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann in Germany, and Guy de Maupassant and Marcel Proust in France devoted many novels and stories to the conflicts between old money and new money and gained a wide readership. In a more popular context, nouveau-riche characters populated serial novels, musicals, and short stories in newspapers and magazines. An academic readership could finally read about upward mobility and the shifting dynamics between new money and old money in scholarly (yet often also entertaining) studies by sociologists and economists, such as Werner Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism* (1913), in which he described the rise of the nouveau riche in various European countries from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. A few years earlier, in 1899, Thorstein Veblen had unfolded his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, using among others the example of nouveau-riche styles of consumption. Observing and describing mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, these texts both reproduced and revealed these very mechanisms.

Ranging between ridicule, refusal, admiration, and scholarly analysis, countless cartoons, newspaper articles, theater plays, novels, and academic texts updated and created the social figure of the nouveau riche. Social figures transcend and exaggerate reality. Like stereotypes, they embody the (assumed) quintessence of a particular type, and are often portrayed through comic relief, or as a fascinating spectacle. Associated with specific characteristics, they function as means to order and renegotiate the social, as they allow the observer to either distance themselves from or identify themselves with the portrayed figure (Moebius and Schroer; Stein; Frevert and Haupt). It is no coincidence, then, that up until today the social figure of the nouveau riche has always gained popularity in times of social and economic change, when increased social mobility produces social climbers in considerable numbers and thus challenges established hierarchies.<sup>3</sup>

The numerous jokes, stories, and theater plays that presented a Mr. or Mrs. "Nouveau Riche" or "Newly Rich" during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era indicate that "the" nouveau riche were indeed a social figure that could be easily decoded by readers and spectators because they knew what appearance, behavior, language, and interests were to be expected from such people. Sometimes, however much less frequently, the alleged counterparts of the nouveau riche were depicted in a similar way, for example the proverbial New York Knickerbockers or the Boston Brahmins who epitomize old east-coast wealth. Newspaper articles juxtaposed old and new money in stereotypical characterizations and thus helped to create the very categories they allegedly found in real life. At times, these descriptions were favorable to neither side. The typical *parvenu* pretended not to care about the snobbish Knickerbockers and their manners, but rather showed off his wealth, as a *New York Times* article declared: "He will explain to you where each

<sup>3</sup> More recent examples include references to the nouveau riche from Russia and Eastern Europe during the 1990s and 2000s after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union, and of the Chinese nouveau riche in the twenty-first century (Sampson; Fan). The HBO series *Silicon Valley* revolves around the nouveau riche of the internet era. I thank Regina Schober for introducing me to the series.

dish came from and what it cost. [...] He defines as a snob one who would rather take chances to injure a new plated shirt than pin a napkin around his neck.” The article went on: “To the true old Knickerbocker,” by contrast, “all the modern world is a sham and a froth. For them there is no United States west of Buffalo,” and the “van’s” and “de’s” in their last names were a source of constant pride for the “fossils” (“Social”). More telling terms came up as well. M. E. W. Sherwood, for example, in her 1884 manual on *Etiquette: The American Code of Manners*, has her Mrs. Nouveau Riche meet with a Mrs. Oldbones, and the author advised the latter to be a good hostess and not look down on those who were new to society (173). The French and German counterparts of Mr. and Mrs. Nouveau Riche—*Monsieur et Madame Nouveau Riche, Herr und Frau Neureich*—populated the funny pages and other contemporary publications of their respective nations.

What, then, were the most common associations with the nouveau riche? As much as the depictions and intentions behind the presentations differed in detail, over time, and between societies, they shared basic characteristics. First, and most obviously, their wealth was only recently acquired. In order to be perceived as nouveau riche, one had to rise very quickly from an ordinary or poor background to impressive wealth, preferably within one generation. Second, the figure of the nouveau riche required a social counterpart, a group that came to be described as old money or old wealth in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. They usually felt threatened, challenged, and disturbed by those who had gained riches only recently, and particularly so if it were not a single individual but an entire group of wealthy newcomers who knocked at the doors of established institutions and circles. Third, the nouveau riche were depicted as being unfamiliar, and therefore uncomfortable, with the new social environment they found themselves in after they had become wealthy. They were “*the figure of the social misfit*,” as Sarah Juliette Sasson puts it with respect to the figure of “the parvenu” in nineteenth-century literature (2; emphasis in original).

The uneasiness of the nouveau riche affected matters of taste and behavior in different scenarios from dinner invitations to visits to the opera and to restaurants, from dress codes to manners and ways of speaking, from the building and furnishing of houses to vacationing. The nouveau riche were not familiar with prevailing norms and tastes, and, wittingly or unwittingly, frequently offended these often unspoken rules. It was on the observer to choose what tone to use for portraying the nouveau riche. Their infringements provided ample opportunity for jokes and ridicule that drew their entertainment value from the ignorance of the newly rich trying to find their ways in a new environment. Many texts on the nouveau riche exploited the inherent potential for derision; others, however, were more sympathetic and left room for ambiguity (e. g., William Dean Howells’s novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* [1885]) or, like

M. E. W. Sherwood in her etiquette manual, even criticized the lack of tact in the behavior of Mrs. Oldbones.

The distinction between old and new money usually referred to specific families and to social hierarchies within specific cities. More broadly, however, a similar terminology was used to describe the challenge posed to east-coast elites by the rise of new commercial centers in the Midwest and the western parts of the United States. In his 1893 realist novel *The Cliff Dwellers*, for example, Henry Blake Fuller has a young New England businessman struggle with finding his place in Chicago, a city that is depicted as the epitome of “the West” and as a place in which “quality seemed to count for less than quantity” (205), where everything was new and where east-coast refinement did not translate into social respect and success.

Viewed from abroad, such inner-American distinctions between families and regions did not carry much weight. European societies in Britain, France, and Germany were busy dealing with social and economic changes in their own countries, yet still closely observed the emergence of a new, immensely rich class in the United States—not least because many of these newly rich Americans traveled to Europe (Montgomery). From the European perspective, however, Americans, the inhabitants of the new world, in general counted as *nouveau riche*, and the media propagated the social figure of the “rich American” just as much as the “*nouveau riche* American” without making much of a difference (30).

### Temporal Narratives of Social Order

If one ignores the often condescending and mocking tone, some of the careful and detailed descriptions of the *nouveau riche* and their alleged behavior remind one of the attention scientists give to an interesting new species. In this case, it was not so much a newly discovered species that had been around for a long time without anyone knowing about it but one that had come into existence only recently and therefore was new to a much older surrounding. According to such depictions, the members of the new group did not have a history; and while they were rich, they were not as developed as older species—in this case, the old elites—and thus less evolved.

Anthropologist Johannes Fabian has described such attempts to place social groups in different time spheres between “primitive” and “advanced” as the “denial of coevalness” (31). In his groundbreaking study *Time and the Other*, Fabian explained how anthropologists “othered” their objects of study and placed them at a distant time. By describing themselves (and White Europeans or Americans in general) as civilized and their objects of study as savages, uncivilized, or primitive, they distanced themselves from the “other,” suggesting that they lived in a different time and had “not yet” arrived at civilization (26–27, 30). Although Fabian



wrote about the methods of anthropologists, members of an academic discipline that established itself during the second half of the nineteenth century, his observations can help in analyzing any ideas of social order that rest on ideas of progress, development, and advancement, all of which stress the factor of time (Flynn 3-4). By the same token, families of new and old money obviously coexisted in time, as did the anthropologists who lived at the same time as the Indigenous cultures they observed in their field studies. Much like Fabian's anthropologists, however, old families and other observers of Gilded Age America described the nouveau riche as if they were a strange species. They, too, used "various devices of temporal distancing, [thus] negating the coeval existence of the object and the subject of its discourse" (Fabian 50).

The terminology of Gilded Age public discourse reflected a worldview similar to the "savage-civilized continuum" (Flynn 2). Members of the society, as well as many observers of social developments, resorted to specific phrases to describe what distinguished old and new money. Apart from the concept of the nouveau riche itself, terms such as "refinement" and "breeding" were omnipresent (Grier 143-75). They emphasized the amount of time it took to develop "refined taste" and "refined manners." The New York Four Hundred, a defender of Ward McAllister's demarcation policy stated to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, were "refined men and women who abhor coarse notoriety and ostentatious display of wealth. [...] Today one sees fortunes made in a year, a month, and even in a few days," she continued. "This is often done by the quick-witted American who leaves himself no time for study and culture. So he is debarred from that class of men and women who have either inherited from their forefathers the manners of the truly highbred or have educated themselves to this point" ("Champion"). Likewise, Veblen explained to his contemporaries that "[r]efined tastes, manners, and habits of life are a useful evidence of gentility, because good breeding requires time" (48-49). Such remarks left no doubt that there was no way around a considerable investment of time in the building of cultural capital, yet they gave hope. Refinement and thus access to the upper crust could be reached; it only took time. Whereas the European system of social hierarchies, based on birth and the ability to distinguish between social groups through titles (whether gained through inheritance or purchase), hampered social mobility, Americans had better chances to harmonize financial, cultural, and social capital over time.

While the speed with which wealth was acquired was constrained neither by biological nor technical limits, the speed of social advancement followed other rules, at least according to those already on top of society. Similar to contemporary debates about how the introduction of trains and telegraphs rattled previous experiences of time, tempo and mobility, families who considered themselves old money aimed at keeping processes of acculturation to what was considered "normal" speed by stressing temporal categories.

The perception of different paces leading to imbalances between social spheres was quite common. The newly rich, the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out, “are expected to take their place in the social world” and to “behave according to a rigid standard [...]. Think of what they have to learn! Think of all the hundreds of petty tyrannies they immediately become subjected to!” The etiquette of the table alone was full of pitfalls. “It takes them years to acquire a natural habit of eating their meals, and not until the second or third generation can they arrive at the delicious grace of manner that can use the wrong cutlery with impunity—the blueblooded poise that can break the rules of etiquette and remain blue” (Whitaker). Two to three generations was the estimated time necessary to be able to meet the requirements imposed on them “immediately” after they had become rich. Nebraska’s *The Conservative* even warned that “[u]nhappy wealth is more common and noticeable perhaps, in California than elsewhere, because suddenly acquired riches are the ones which oftenest bring discontent. The accumulations which come slowly are those most prolific in human satisfactions” (“Unhappy”). Similar arguments could be found in academic publications. H. O. Meredith, professor of Economics in Belfast, concluded in an article on class distinctions that was published in a U.S. periodical that

[a] class, or a race, needs time. [...] The thing may be seen on a small scale in the traditional vulgarity of the *nouveau riche*. A man who has been educated to living on a certain scale [...] finds his income suddenly enlarged; the tastes and habits he has acquired do not fit with the new scale [...] but give a family an enlargement of income continued through several generations and you will find it gradually acquiring by experience the art of living well on the larger scale. (50-51; emphasis in original)

Such statements did not necessarily support efforts to shield old families from newcomers, but instead addressed the topic of the *nouveau riche* for other reasons. J. Sterling Morton, for example, a Nebraskan politician and founding editor of *The Conservative*, perceived himself as a Jeffersonian Democrat who strongly advocated values such as individual freedom and self-reliance (Lora and Longton 26-27). When his newspaper contrasted the “idiotic” educational style of newly rich parents who raised their kids to “extreme and accentuated idleness” with the rough childhood of the “Nebraska frontier” which taught children that “they must rely for fortune and fame entirely on themselves,” he worried about character traits and manliness rather than the privileges of older elites (“Self-Reliance”). Los Angeles, similarly, was an unlikely place for the veneration of old wealth. As an up-and-coming city without a long-established elite of Anglo-American descent, it was no surprise that the *Los Angeles Times* correspondent wrote in “defense of the nouveaux riches.” Yet, even where they defended the newly rich, these articles, too, agreed that it took time to grow into the world of wealth.

These examples hint at the fact that the change of criteria from wealth to descent was not unproblematic in the context of late-nine-

teenth-century American culture. The proposed social order, based on the distinction between old and new money, conflicted with already existing social concepts that were also linked to notions of temporality, such as the self-made man, the rags-to-riches myth, and the idea of America being the new world.

The new-world discourse is part of the narrative of American exceptionalism, according to which the United States is not only different, but also better than other nations. James Madison's rejection of the European's "blind veneration of antiquity, for customs and names to overrule the suggestion of our own good sense" speaks for this self-perception (qtd. in Abbott 32). In general, the positive perception of newness in American society was one of the key features of identities shaped by the idea of American exceptionalism (Abbott 5). Embracing and, in fact, searching for the new did not make the old, or oldness, a bad thing, but it was newness Americans stressed in the shaping of their society. If being a new and better nation was considered something to be proud of, why the condescending look at the *nouveau riche*, one could ask.

This fascination with newness and novelties is also prominently reflected in the emerging American consumer society. Earlier and to a greater extent than their European contemporaries, they were ready to exchange old for new things. With capitalism turning into "fast capitalism" in the late nineteenth century, new technologies, new ways of packaging, and new marketing strategies "accelerated the pace of novelty" and changed consumer experiences and expectations dramatically (Cross 48). Consumers came to "expect a continuous onslaught of novelty" and a rapid change of models, fashions, and techniques (52; Cross and Proctor).

Most importantly, however, American culture held a peculiar set of social figures and narratives, all of which emphasized the possibility of rapid economic success and social mobility; in short, the American Dream (Jillson). The figure of the self-made man and the phrase "from rags to riches," in particular, promised, and in fact promoted, the idea that economic and social success could be won within one generation if only one worked hard enough. To be sure, financial success was only one of many varieties of the American Dream (Cullen 7-9), and both the American Dream and the rags-to-riches narrative imagined social respectability and decent wealth rather than incredible fortunes. However, in order to rise from poverty to middle-class standing one had to overcome social barriers, too, and while splendid fortunes might not have been at the heart of the American Dream, they were definitely not excluded from it. Despite the fact that self-made men often described their success as singular and exceptional (and as based on their exceptional capabilities), the idea of an American Dream that could come true for anyone flourished (Hood 224). Making something of oneself was both a chance and a demand. Despite Veblen's observation that, faced with the competition of self-made millionaires, established elites

declared inherited wealth to be “even more honorific than wealth acquired by the possessor’s own effort,” being a self-made man and first-generation wealth were considered reputable and were respected by most Americans (29).

The high esteem in which successful self-made men and their fortunes were generally held stood in contradiction with efforts to ridicule and debar them. In addition to parallels between the anthropological gaze on “others” and the American discourse on the newly rich, casting social order in temporal terms had strong ties to the concept of social Darwinism, which fascinated Gilded Age Americans. Only partly based on Charles Darwin’s seminal study *The Origin of Species* (1859), social Darwinism conceived of human society as determined by the laws of evolution, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest (Hawkins). As a point of reference, social Darwinist ideas appealed to both newly rich and established elites because representatives of either group could claim that their possession of wealth and position was due to belonging to “the fittest.” New millionaires like Andrew Carnegie (most famously in his article “Wealth”) and John D. Rockefeller, in particular, imagined themselves as winners in a Darwinian race for dominance, and concluded that their wealth entitled them to powerful positions because it was proof of their abilities (Jillson 131–33; Beckert 212). From this perspective, the older elites, too, could legitimately claim that their position was due to a long process of selection and refinement that left them at the top of society.

Both the category of the nouveau riche and the theory of social Darwinism offered compelling interpretations of what determined social order. Both perspectives originated in the observation of rapid change in many fields of life, the swift rise of nobodies to wealth and influence, and the challenge their rise presented to established elites. In light of the experience of speed and change, questions of temporality played an important role in legitimizing social hierarchies. Whether one celebrated the dynamism of the new or the refinement of the old often depended on one’s personal position. Both perspectives informed distinct practices, which either aimed at creating distance or at catching up.

### **Distancing and Catching Up: Temporal Practices and Struggles over Social Order**

The struggle over social hierarchies, of which the terminology of old money and new money was a part, did not exhaust itself in verbal pronouncements. Starting in the 1860s, a whole set of practices accompanied the conflict: some were new practices, others were simply intensified, and still others changed their meaning when adapted to the particular context of social advancement. The goals behind the application of such practices were quite obvious. Through their money, the newly rich had gained access to spaces previously foreclosed to them—

rich neighborhoods, expensive restaurants, the opera, exclusive holiday destinations—and now commenced to conquer territories secluded by means other than money: memberships in traditional gentlemen’s clubs, invitations to private balls and other social events of the upper crust, private boxes in the opera house, and the like. The hitherto unquestioned social elite tried to preserve their exclusiveness, albeit not without heated disputes over how far the policy of access restriction should go.

While the dynamics of this constellation can be described in the terminology of inclusion and exclusion, the methods applied share a time-oriented dimension and can, in fact, be summarized as tactics of acceleration, on the one hand, and of delay, on the other. This is at least the narrative that is presented in countless magazine reports, newspaper articles, jokes, novels, and theater plays. The source material, however, is distributed unevenly. We know much more about how established elites, journalists, and writers perceived those whom they called the *nouveau riche*, and about their discussions on how to deal with the arrivistes, than we know about the thoughts and experiences of those who had come to riches and now tried to establish their social position. To a certain extent, characterizations of new money, old money, and their behavior have to be seen as part of a conflict in which narratives served as a means of substantiating one’s claim to social position. As the plethora of gossip columns, novels, and musicals illustrates, the juxtaposition of new money and old money had high entertainment value, which is why it was in the interest of writers of all sorts to fuel the contest.

According to this narrative, newly rich people often imitated the styles and behaviors of older, established elites despite the fact that they did not always understand the meaning or sense behind them. An 1895 newspaper article in the *Norfolk Virginian*, for example, observed “a tendency on the part of the newly rich to imitate liveries adopted by the first families [...] a most annoying practice to the Vanderbilts and the Astors” (Tyrell). Naturally, the *nouveau riche* got it all wrong and, for example, equipped their servants with ridiculous liveries. Although the headline stated tongue-in-cheek that the article was on the “Blunders of the Newly Rich Pityingly Proclaimed by an Expert in the Lore of Snobbery,” it took up a common image, that of the *nouveau riche* as fatuous imitators. Another example is Edith Wharton’s character Undine Spragg, who, in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), is depicted as engaging in some kind of mimicry. Like many other *nouveau-riche* characters in turn-of-the-century novels, Undine tries to play it safe and to imitate the ways of those whose world she would like to belong to (Rahr 2; Sasson 16). An article in the *Boston Daily Globe* even went so far as to call imitators “apes” who “imitate the follies and the customs” of others without any reflection, in this case, the customs of the English nobility. The article concluded that “we are living, so far as the second generation of wealth is concerned” (which was still considered *nouveau riche*), “in an Era of Sham, of Pretenses, of affection of hypocrisy, striving to

appear what we are not," a behavior which the author found deeply "un-American" ("Howard's").

The European nouveau riche behaved in a similar way. A study of the architectural choices made by British new millionaires between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found that they preferred conservative, conventional styles. They usually followed the tastes established by the old aristocratic families and built their country houses and, to a lesser extent, their London city houses in spatial proximity to the houses of the established elites (Crook 30-56, 161-76). Similar developments can be observed in Germany. While the thesis of a "refeudalization" of the wealthy German bourgeoisie that had long been prominent in historiography has been disproved, the German *Neureiche* indeed imitated aristocratic tastes and norms to a considerable extent (Wehler 718-26; Augustine 172-75, 244-47; Umbach 32, 108).

Practices of imitation have a distinctly temporal dimension. Imitators follow the example of those who have previously established particular practices, tastes, and norms. Whether framed as a learning process or as plain mimicry, the time lag between establishment and repetition remains (and only at some point might imitation turn into independent application of what has been learned). The temporal difference is the one between the original and the reproduction or imitation. Observing and identifying imitable entities and the imitation itself take time. Members of the established elites, as well as observers, tended to interpret such practices on the part of newcomers as unwelcome appropriation and as pretentious, and accused the nouveau riche of imitating the external characteristics without having internalized their meanings. Ironically, many of the distinguished spaces and habits of old-money families in the United States were themselves imitations. The elite gentlemen's clubs of east-coast cities, for example, were modeled after the British example before wealthy men—many of them newly rich—established exclusive clubs all over America in the Gilded Age (Kendall 12-22, 39). Despite the allegations of imitation, however, being the subject of imitation also stabilized existing hierarchies between those who originally practiced a certain habitus and those who aimed at being perceived as a part of that group. Being imitated potentially continued traditions, strengthened group identities, and caused reflections on what set one group apart from the other.

The strategies applied by the nouveau riche striving for access to the old elites included purchasing the visible trappings of elite status and thus constituted a distinct form of imitation. Family crests, for example, were in high demand. Older American families that, due to their lineage, held legitimate claims to such symbols had long gladly displayed them, and newly rich families were eager to follow (Adam, *Buying* 94). In 1901, the *Washington Post* mockingly demanded that "some darling professor of heraldry" be appointed to design "a coat of arms at a moment's notice [...] with a perfectly straight face." After all, the newspa-

per claimed, the capital's "nouveaux riches have every bit as much of a right to set up scutcheons, crests, and so forth as any of the same class in New York" ("Wanted"). Likewise, many stories about the nouveau riche mocked their aspiration for (and ignorance of) antique furniture and paintings when furnishing their houses or donating art to museums and other philanthropic endeavors (Haskin; Dalzell and Dalzell 71; Howells 115-16, 212). "[M]oney was more abundant than taste," the *Alto California* stated in an 1872 article that derided the efforts of rich families to turn San Francisco into a city of art (qtd. in Ott 41). And the *New York Times* scornfully stated that the ignorant nouveau riche had to believe whatever salesmen told them about the alleged antiques they bought, and often were fooled: "The stuff looks like early Pullman or late German Lloyd or medieval Grand Rapids" ("Social").

Others not only bought the palpable insignia of a long and rich family history but the family history itself. Between the Civil War and World War I, several hundred rich American heiresses married European aristocrats.<sup>4</sup> Such marriages were mocked as alliances between money and status, as many of the young male heirs to a title welcomed the cash injection from the United States. "You need a title and we need your gold," a line in the song "An American Heiress" from the musical *Miss Dolly Dollars* read (Smith). And when in a 1919 Ernst Lubitsch movie *Ossi*, the daughter of the American Oyster King, finds out that the Shoe Cream King's daughter had married a count, her father promises: "I'll buy you a prince" (*Die Austernprinzessin*).<sup>5</sup> The exchange of title and money inverted the usual standards applied to the choice of partners. An 1895 cartoon in the *Anthony Weekly Bulletin* depicted an "American Millionaire" who was about to finalize a wedding agreement between his daughter and a man labeled "Foreign Prince," who presented a certificate of nobility to the millionaire father. It is the grotesque criteria that the father establishes before handing over his daughter that generate a comic effect. "Have you scrofula? Are you dissipated? [...] have you all the contaminations common to noble blood?" he asks his future son-in-law (Miller 23). What would otherwise provoke serious doubts here serves as proof of the suitability of the gallant, as his shortcomings guarantee what the millionaire wants for his family: not a healthy husband but a long lineage and a title. The opened treasure chest overflowing with money on which he sits indicates that he is willing to pay for this goal.

While the European nouveau riche could often buy a title, or hope to be rewarded with ennoblement, marriage was the only way for rich Americans to link themselves to nobility. Unlike their European counterparts, who gained several privileges through ennoblement, it was not so much the title itself that counted for Americans as the social connections that came with marrying an aristocrat. A slightly less spectacular yet equally expedient strategy was marrying into one of the old American families. Such alliances, however, were rare and observed with suspicion (Jacob, *Capital* 180), and prominent novels such as *The Rise of Silas*

<sup>4</sup> Hood mentions 454 such marriages in the late nineteenth century (219); Cooper gives a higher number, stating that 588 American heiresses married English aristocrats between the Civil War and World War I (4).

<sup>5</sup> The entire film is available in German on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH-lqSrcFNo> (last accessed on 27 Aug. 2020).

*Lapham* or *The Great Gatsby* reminded their readers how difficult if not impossible it was to bridge the gap between old and new money.

The reason so many nouveau-riche families attempted so tirelessly to add borrowed years to their family history through imitation, marriage, and the purchase of antiques was the definition of elite established by the old elites. When newly rich families tried to hide their short histories and to surround themselves with things and people with a past longer than their own, it was a reaction to practices of timing employed by older families to keep the nouveau riche at arm's length.

Many of the older elites who found themselves challenged by new arrivals attempted to hedge social mobility by including the factor of time. The late nineteenth century saw a sudden rise in genealogy and the active search for one's ancestors. The further back one could document one's lineage, the greater the cultural capital that could be derived from it. Being the descendant of the first settlers and Pilgrim Fathers of the seventeenth century was most prestigious, with family ties to passengers of the Mayflower ranking the highest. Starting in the New England states, genealogy spread all over America. Hitherto a monarchical and aristocratic endeavor, the obsession with lineage in Gilded Age America was highly influenced by the recent discoveries of evolutionary biology, reinforcing not only racism but also the use of time-related categories such as breeding (Morgan 135, 140-41; Hood 222-27). In many cities, predominantly on the East Coast, local organizations sprung up where membership depended on descent, for example the Holland Society in New York (est. 1885), the Huguenot Society in Charleston (1885), the Society of the Pioneers of Los Angeles County (1897), and several local Colonial Societies. Several national societies also evolved, the most famous of which were the Society of Mayflower Descendants (1897) and the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution (1889 and 1890, respectively) (Jacob, "To Gather" 13). Membership was restricted to those who were able to prove that they were descendants of Dutch settlers of the seventeenth century, of the Huguenots, or of a person involved in the efforts towards American independence.<sup>6</sup>

There was no way for the newly rich and their families to conjure up a Huguenot or a Pilgrim Father amongst their ancestors, no matter how desirable such relatives might have been. And desirable they were. When the *Boston Daily Globe* reported that Angora cats were the new fashion, the article gleefully mentioned that the cats had "pedigrees that make the nouveau riche blush for shame" ("Angora"). Time, or more precisely, refinement, breeding, and how far back one could trace one's family history, had become cultural capital, and the one sort of capital with which the nouveau riche could not keep up.

However, there was no fixed number of wealthy generations that determined whether one belonged to the old elite or not. The distinction between old and new money was inherently flexible, shifting, and relational. As time passed by, other wealthy businessmen would enter

<sup>6</sup> Morgan emphasizes that documented lineage was not always sufficient. She describes the practices of admittance as "selective readings of kinship" that excluded people whose values were not in accordance with those of the organizations and, most importantly, non-Whites (Morgan 142-43).



the arena and be declared *nouveau riche*, while those previously labeled as such would simply be considered rich. “Doing time” and the time-related practices of the established elites therefore should be seen as strategies of delaying and deceleration, not of final exclusion. The terminology of old and new money, the mocking of imitation, and the emphasis on refinement, breeding, and lineage all served to slow down processes of upward mobility that were allegedly happening too quickly.

In addition to decelerating an otherwise high-speed rise to the top, the idea of climbing the social ladder over an extended period of time and step-by-step was attractive because it would ideally leave social norms untouched. If the *nouveau riche* first had to refine their tastes and manners before being acceptable for the top of society, they would do so in accordance with the norms set by the established elites. It was hoped that using refinement, breeding, and lineage as criteria would leave hierarchies unviolated, whereas acceptance on the basis of wealth alone involved the danger of losing the upper hand and leaving the setting of standards to the newcomers. The slower pace would also guarantee that the *nouveau riche* would no longer practice a shallow and superficial imitation of elite norms but would internalize and understand the meaning of those conventions.

Of course, the reinforcing of social hierarchies depended on whether it remained attractive for the *nouveau riche* to belong to the established elites, or whether they would rather set up their own norms and rules instead. On several occasions, it became quite clear how easily the supremacy of the old-moneyed families could be challenged. The founding of the Metropolitan Opera in New York is a case in point. After the Knickerbocker families had repeatedly turned down attempts by William H. Vanderbilt, the richest American of his time, and other *nouveau-riche* families to obtain one of the prestigious eighteen private boxes at the New York Academy of Music, they, plus some members of the established elites, each contributed money to build the Metropolitan Opera, with 122 private boxes. Only a few years later, the Academy of Music, which had long been one of the most exclusive strongholds of New York’s upper class, had to close its doors after it very quickly passed into oblivion. The old elites had moved to the new opera as well, thus “symbolically acknowledging the new power relations” (Beckert 247; see also Hood 237). The same holds true for access to elite clubs (Hood 171-72, 203), and other exclusive circles. With regard to philanthropy, Thomas Adam has pointed out that “[p]hilanthropists founded museums, art galleries, and social housing projects not only to improve the general welfare but also to claim leadership positions in urban society” (“Philanthropy” 27). East-coast metropolises such as New York were only one among several sites where philanthropy served as a means to negotiate leadership and the ability to establish norms. Newly emerging midwestern and west-coast cities such as San Francisco challenged east-coast supremacy, and the wealthy classes of these young settlements

used philanthropy as both a way to show their refinement and to set up their own standards, independent from what old east-coast elites had established (Dewey 538). The battle between old and new money over social hierarchies was a two-way street. Old elites could never be sure whether their strategy of deceleration and separation would lead to exclusion, increased efforts to learn the ropes, or the establishment of competing institutions, norms, and criteria.

### **American Nouveau Riche or Nouveau-Riche Americans? Remarks on Time, Mobility, and American Identity**

To be sure, many contemporaries admired the success of the nouveau riche, thus lending the term a more positive connotation. From the early twentieth century onwards, in particular, after the Americans had had some time to settle in into the new economic and social circumstances, observers spoke more generously about the newly rich. Most notably, many Americans turned into defenders of the nouveau riche when foreign observers dared to ridicule the manners and ways of the new millionaires. Foreign critique of the American nouveau riche seems to have touched a raw nerve. All of a sudden, the often-mocked social climbers turned into “our nouveau riche,” of whom one could not be proud enough, and into epitomes of the unique chances of success that only America offered.

When Marie Corelli, a then-famous English writer, complained about the allegedly “loud, bragging, unmannered, irrepressible American millionaire,” the *Chicago Daily Tribune* attempted to put her in her place. “[H]as anybody forgotten those horridly vulgar men who made fortunes out of new spinning machinery and other incidents of the industrial revolution? Who was Sir Robert Peel’s grandfather? [...] Is there no basis of fact in the joke about the peerage and the beerage?” the newspaper asked, with a dig at England, former Prime Minister Robert Peel, and the political influence of rich brewers. The English “have to put up with wealthy vulgarity, just as Americans sometimes have to put up with it, just as the ancient world put up with it, just as the world of the future will put up with it” (“Go”). Declaring the nouveau riche to be a common phenomenon in the history of humankind presented the newly rich Americans as the rule rather than the exception, thus calling the relevance of Corelli’s claim into question.

Despite this parallelization of American, English, and, in fact, human social developments, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* was also eager to highlight the specifics of the United States: “America is newer than any other continent. It has more newly rich men. It takes the consequences,” the author proudly stated, and added: “The English will notice, however, that the common American, having had the advantage of free public schools, is a more intelligent and more public spirited nouveau riche than the common Englishman has yet shown himself to be” (“Go”).

In the same vein, Alma Whitaker, an England-born columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, remarked that being newly rich was much harder in America than in Great Britain. In America, it was “one long uphill fight. [...] For my part I think they come out of the ordeal gloriously well and particularly in the case of women, the chief sufferers in the social arena,” Whitaker argued. “The fact of the matter is that there are very few women in America who have not the instincts of a lady, so that when riches come they have to learn but the surface frillings.” Even the *New York Times* refused the snobbery of an English lady who, shortly before her visit to New York, boasted that she would be able to tell apart on first sight the “old families,” the “rich,” and the “clever ones.” Amused and piqued at the same time, the article declared: “We have no provincial people in New York society of Lady Wolsey’s ‘old family’ type, who must spend all their lives in the country [...] dressed in painfully old-fashioned clothes and jewels. Our old family people are quite as up to date in such matters as the most new of the newly rich.” Even “[o]ur newly rich get accustomed to their wealth in so short a time that any tendency to an atrocious taste in dress is nipped in the bud, if it ever existed at all” (W. B. B.).

Attacks on the nouveau riche from outside the United States were apparently perceived as attacks on the United States in general. Americans could never be absolutely sure whether insults of this kind were directed at the proverbial American millionaire as nouveau riche or as an American and a citizen of the new world. They triggered a sense of national pride which led to statements that left no doubt about the advantages of American society—a society that included and facilitated the fast emergence of the nouveau riche. To be sure, leading journalists like Dorothy Dix needed no push from abroad to remind Americans of the core values their nation stood for. She stated that “[e]very new fortune, honestly won, is a new vindication of our democracy that gives opportunity to every one instead of privileges to the few. [...] For while any fool or weakling may inherit a fortune, it takes a man who has sense and grit and courage to make one.” Articles that reacted to a feeling of not being taken seriously by foreigners, however, usually included a comparative dimension when describing how things were done in America. Just as the article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* had pointed out the superiority of American education, the *New York Times* mocked Lady Wolsey and made clear who set the standards: “Oh, no, Lady Wolsey, we shall be very glad to have you come over here and take a look about, but if you want to have a good time and be thoroughly appreciated, leave all your theories [...] at home and take us as you find us, remembering at the same time that we are go-ahead and will not stand still to be examined” (W. B. B.). The pacemaker and trendsetter was America, not Great Britain.

Such attempts to put foreign observers and the societies they came from in their places clearly show America’s “longing to belong” (Sasson) in the international arena. Within the United States, however, notions

of time, and particularly the concepts of the *nouveau riche* and the self-made man, served the purpose of negotiating social order. Although the emphasis on duration, on the one hand, and speed, on the other hand, made it almost impossible to unite the competing narratives, they allowed for the re-negotiation of the criteria for claims to leadership and the channels of social mobility.

It was not only, and maybe not even so much, the established and the newly emerging elites who took part in this conflict. Rather, the public—newspapers, writers, scholars, and other observers—used and popularized the allegedly opposing social figures of new and old money. One reason for the popularity of narratives around the conflict between establishment and challengers was certainly the high entertainment value of stories about immensely rich rivals. At the same time, newspaper articles and novels spread the tale of old vs. new money to social spheres that were otherwise barely touched by the conflict. For it was a constellation that really affected only the wealthiest parts of the society, and the East Coast, with its century-long history of European immigration, was affected more than the Midwest or the West Coast, where no traditional elites such as the Knickerbocker families of New York or the Boston Brahmins existed. Stories, jokes, and songs spread the narrative and, at the same time, helped create social reality, and also allowed for intensive debate of competing notions of temporality in defining American cultural ideals and role models in a time of change.

When it comes to competing uses of temporality in the production of social norms, however, the concepts of the American Dream and the self-made man had several advantages over the derogative term *nouveau riche* and the establishment of breeding, lineage, and refinement as criteria for elite status. First, the motifs of the *nouveau riche* and a conflict between old and new money were themselves temporary. As in other regions and historical epochs, they indicated insecurities about change and a search for reliable criteria of social order. Because the distinction between old and new money never came with a fixed dividing line but only differentiated between older and newer wealth, it was only a matter of time until the formerly *nouveau riche* had been around long enough to be considered established elites who could no longer be depicted as a threat. As early as 1902, the *Savannah Morning Times* concluded that the old elites had given in to the pull of the *nouveau riche*, and that “after forty years of comradeship, there is no telling the one from the other” (“Plague”). Even if there had been a chance to stop the rise of the *nouveau riche*, setting a date after which wealth would be considered new wealth would have meant denying any possibility of upward mobility and would thus have been in sharp contrast with the core principles of the United States. The concepts of the American Dream and the self-made man, in comparison, were not limited to a certain time period and could serve as an attractive promise anytime and anywhere.

Second, the promise of the American Dream, the rise “from rags to riches,” and the ideal of the self-made man were distinctly American, while struggles between old and new wealth could be found in different regions and at many points in history. For a young nation imbued with the idea of an American exceptionalism and seeking to set itself apart from established nations, it was certainly more attractive to do so through independent norms and models. Third, the concept of the *nouveau riche* carried the promise of wealth. The mere existence of a group of people labeled as newly rich must have sounded promising, rather than embarrassing, to anyone who was pursuing the American Dream.

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