Media Representations of the Nouveaux Riches and the Cultural Constitution of the Global Middle Class

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Abstract
The article offers a distinctive account of how the nouveaux riches serve as an anchor for a range of upper middle class ambivalences and anxieties associated with transformations of capitalism and shifting global hierarchies. Reflecting the long-term association of middle class symbolic boundaries with notions of refinement and respectability, I examine how the discourse of civility shapes how the nouveaux riches are represented to the upper middle class, identifying a number of recurrent media frames and narrative tropes related to vulgarity, civility and order. I argue that these representations play a central role in the reproduction of the Western professional middle class, and in the cultural constitution of a *global* middle class—professional, affluent, urban and affiliated by an aesthetic regime of civility that transcends national borders. The findings underline the significance of representations of the new super rich as devices through which the media accomplish the global circulation of an upper-middle-class repertoire of cultural capital, which is used both to police shifting class boundaries and to establish a legitimate preserve for univorous snobbishness.

Keywords
Civility; media; middle class; nouveaux riches; vulgarity

Introduction

In dialogue with the special issue theme, this article examines the question—and, in turn, the response—that the *nouveau* super-rich pose for the identity of the professional middle class. As affluent and cosmopolitan as they may be, the professional class remains located as a middle class, between—and as—both labor and ownership, with their reproduction far from assured as their children must compete through education and occupation to maintain parental status. These structural conditions of existence are set against changing macro conditions of capitalism, which include not only new cadres of the super-rich but also new middle classes of emerging economies with whom the Western professional classes (and their children) now compete. Such large-scale processes have disrupted the context within which the upper middle classes experience their class position, unsettled their positionality vis-à-vis other groups, and laid the foundations for the emergence of a "global middle class" (Andreotti et al 2014; Koo 2016): professional, affluent, urban, and—as I argue in this article—affiliated through a discursive regime of civility that is deployed in relation to the nouveaux riches.

Specifically, the article presents an analysis of how the nouveaux riches are represented in media aimed at the Western professional middle class (US and UK quality/broadsheet newspapers). Reflecting the long-term association of middle class symbolic boundaries with notions of refinement and respectability (Freeman 2012; Liechty 2012), I explore how a discourse of civility shapes how the new rich are framed. Far from merely representing status anxiety and/or an alibi for the 'modest' wealth of the professional middle class (cf. Jaworksi and Thurlow 2017), the article offers a distinctive account of the role of representations of the nouveaux riches as anchors for a range of upper middle class ambivalences and anxieties associated with transformations of capitalism and shifting global hierarchies. I argue that representations of the nouveaux riches play a central role in the cultural constitution of the global middle class, serving as significant devices through which the media accomplish the global circulation of an upper-middle-class repertoire of cultural capital, which is used both to police shifting class boundaries and to establish a legitimate preserve for univorous snobbishness (Peterson 2005), if not also crude racism and colonial condescension. In so doing, I identify global commonalities within upper middle class discourse, addressing the lack of research thus far on the character and ideological dispositions of the global middle class, and its symbolic boundaries and strategies of class reproduction (Koo 2016: 444).

Class and civility

The middle class is a relational concept, defined as a social process of interrelations between groups structurally differentiated "crucially, but not exclusively" by productive relations (Thompson 1978: 149). My particular focus is the interrelationship and symbolic boundaries between the "established" upper middle class (Western, professional, affluent) and the nouveaux riches who—despite their superior economic power—are nevertheless positioned as "outsider" in the global world order (Elias 2012). Since the 1970s, a range of developments have been reshaping the constitution of these groups, and the "established/outsider relations" (Elias and Scotson 1994) between them. Developments within finance, banking, high tech industries and celebrity culture—and more generally the financialization of capitalism—have generated new tiers of wealth, exacerbating the income and education gaps between the wealthiest and the rest (e.g. Fischer and Mattson 2009;

Kendall 2011; Lapavitsas 2013). Furthermore, the occupational prospects, rewards and autonomy of the Western "professional-managerial class" have been sharply reconfigured through neo-liberalism and globalization (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979, 2013): the expanded demand for services has pulled their occupations into increasingly managerial and bureaucratic structures, and intensifying off-shoring of professional services has placed them in competition with emerging economies' middle classes. The elite "global middle class" (Andreotti et al 2014; Koo 2016) thus faces the challenge of making sense of itself in relation not only to its local class factions, but also, variously, to its global peers, as well as the global-scale middle classes (Heiman et al 2012), and the stratospheric rise of the nouveau super-rich.

Besides its relationality, middle classness is understood to "eventuate" through "regularities of response" in the ways that people behave (Thompson 1978: 147). A key characteristic of the middle classes' regularities of response—evidenced across time and space—has been respectability and refinement, typically played out through the sphere of consumption (e.g. Archer and Blau 1993; Mosse 1985; Schielke 2012; Skeggs 1997; Wilson 1973). On the one hand, middle class respectability is constructed in opposition to the (profligate, morally suspect) consumption habits of the working and upper classes (e.g. Freeman 2012; Liechty 2012). On the other, middle-brow, middle-class concerns with respectability are linked to excessive status-oriented consumption (e.g. Frank 2007, Koo 2016, Schor 1999). As Bourdieu (1984: 249) summarizes:

> Where the petit bourgeois or nouveau riche 'overdoes it', betraying his own insecurity, bourgeois discretion signals its presence by a sort of ostentatious discretion, sobriety and understatement, a refusal of everything which is 'showy', 'flashy' and pretentious, and which devalues itself by the very intention of distinction.

Respectability and refinement thus underpin divisions within the middle classes, and between those "below" and "above" them.

Refinement and respectability are nested within the much larger, longer-term legitimacy framework of the discourse of civility. Codes of conduct (associated with self-restraint, foresight, deferred gratification, elaborated manners and so forth) have developed from the Middle Ages under the banner of "civility," first within the upper classes and then spreading from the 19th century onwards "across the rising lower classes of Western society and over the various classes in the colonies" (Elias 2012: 470). Over time, established groups (those with greater capacity to claim group status and ascribe inferior positions to "outsiders") have repeatedly colonized outsiders via these codes of conduct and notions of civility (imposed by the established; copied by the outsiders), and then, finding their position of dominance subject to unwanted challenges, have sought to consolidate barriers between groups through more elaborated codes of conduct.

These patterns of assimilation and differentiation—repeated across the long history of modernity—attest to the importance of a strict code of manners:

> It is an instrument of prestige, but it is also—in a certain phase—an instrument of power. It is not a little characteristic of the structure of Western society that the watchword of its colonising movement is 'civilisation.' (Elias 2012: 474)

The concern in this article is with how that discourse of civility continues in the present day to shape the symbolic boundaries around the upper middle class and—more generally—

constitutes an aesthetic regime through which a *global* middle class constructs its sense of self.

Media representations of the nouveaux riches

Class reproduction hinges not only on modes of economic organization and productive relations, but also on the classed institutions that reproduce the logics, dispositions and peculiar combinations of cultural and social capital that underpin class subjectivities (Bourdieu 1984; Heiman et al 2012; Savage et al 2015; Thompson 1978). Media representations are significant mechanisms of class reproduction, implicated in the codification and circulation of middle-class norms, values and lifestyles (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Kendall 2011; Jaworksi and Thurlow 2017; Wood and Skeggs 2011). The article thus draws on an analysis of how the nouveaux riches are represented in media aimed at the professional middle class.

The media sample consisted of items (n=157) featuring the phrases *nouveau riche* or *new rich* from the following UK, US and international quality/broadsheet newspapers: *The Daily Telegraph* (hereafter, *DT*), *The Times* (*ThT*), *The Independent* (*Ind*), *New York Times* (*NYT*), *Financial Times* (*FT*), *Associate Press* (*AP*) and *China Daily* (*CD*).[1] These titles are primarily focused on the middle class, as suggested by readership statistics.[2] Middle class (higher, intermediate and junior professional/managerial/administrative: ABC1) readers make up 77% of the 2017 print and online audience for *Ind*, 79% for *DT* and 84% for *ThT.* Moreover—as per the article's focus—the titles attract a predominantly professional middle class readership. Higher and intermediate professional/managerial/administrative (AB) readers make up 56% and 63% respectively of the (print) audiences of *DT* and *ThT*; similarly, *NYT* readers' median household income is $189,000 (USD) and *FT* readers (18% of whom are millionaires) have a mean annual income of $270,000 (USD).

A thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) began with descriptive, deductive coding of each media item as to *who* was being discussed as a member of the nouveaux riches, and *what* they were doing. This coding provided an overview, not to the contemporary new rich themselves (whose lived experiences and attitudes cannot be deduced from these representations), but to the cultural imaginary of the contemporary nouveaux riches as it is articulated by and for the professional middle classes.

First: who are the nouveaux riches? There was one dominant country of origin in the media sample, 33% of which focused exclusively or primarily on the Chinese new rich.[3] (The next most prominent group, the Russian new rich, were the focus of only 5% of the sample.) The Chinese nouveaux riches also appeared frequently within articles on the new rich from multiple countries, as in the following account (Murphy 2016)[4] of Paris Fashion Week:

> On the front row at one show: three Chinese women in their twenties, dressed to the nines, with matching nose jobs, jotting down their orders on their phones, only slightly impeded by the diamond gobstoppers on their fingers. On a second front row: an Arab woman in a headscarf watches the princess dresses from behind her invite. Leaving a third show: a woman bitching in Russian-accented English, to a man who may or may not be her husband, about another nameless woman: 'She can't even afford ready-to-wear so why is she at couture?' In the loos at the Plaza Athénée hotel's restaurant, a favourite with the couture set: a young Indian woman shakes her wrists, each freighted

with a giant jewel-encrusted cuff that wouldn't look out of place in the Tower of London. 'From my mother-in-law,' she says to her friend, sounding bored. (*ThT* 3 Feb 2016)

While frequently included, China was not always featured in such lists. Other examples included: "Russian oligarchs, Middle Eastern royalty and the families of African dictators," (*Ind* 22 Jan 2014) and "the new rich from places like the Middle East, Russia, Brazil and Azerbaijan" (*NYT* 4 Nov 2012).

These lists are not disconnected from the actual distribution of ultra high net worth (UHNW) individuals, as mapped by a proliferation of "rich lists." However, the relative mismatch between distribution of wealth and representations is notable: 13% of global billionaires in 2016 were from China and Hong Kong (more generally: 25% from Asia), whereas 33% of the media sample focused on China (and 51% on Asia); the largest real concentration of the UHNW is in the United States and Western Europe (41%), whereas these countries of origin featured in only 14% of the representations.[5] The analysis suggests that the representations are less about the nouveaux riches *per se* than the preoccupations of those whose place in the established global order is challenged; they chart not the uneven global distribution of wealth, but the uneven distribution of sources of global middle class readers' anxieties about their place in the world.

Second: what are they doing? The vast majority of media items included reference to specific objects and practices of consumption. Most frequently represented were the expected hallmarks of bourgeois discerning lifestyles: 23% of the sample mentioned art, music, wine and food. Also frequently mentioned were transport (prestige cars, jets, yachts)—15% of the sample; personal services (e.g. nannies, butlers, bespoke personal financial and wealth management services)—12%; residential properties (as investments and aesthetic statements)—10%; elite locations and events—8%. Other notable accoutrements included watches, well-toned bodies, philanthropic activities, prestige pets and well-spoken English as a second language. Such categories of consumption, divorced from their representational context, might suggest that the nouveaux riches know what they are doing in deploying the expected positional signifiers of wealth and power (e.g. Budd 2016; Spence 2016; Wealth-X 2017b). However, nouveau riche was typically framed not as a legitimate, insider's pursuit or a sincere appreciation of legitimate culture but as a crass display of wealth. As in the report on Paris Fashion week quoted above (Murphy 2016), media representations seem to be less about illustrating the global diaspora of the new rich (China, the Middle East, Russia, India meeting on the front row, no less) than about evidencing novice knowledge of *what* to buy and *where* to be seen, but not *how* to behave. That is, the objects and practices of nouveau riche consumption were framed in ways that converted them into positional signifiers of outsider status—as the remainder of the findings will explore.

Framing the nouveaux riches

Building on these insights, a theoretically-informed analysis examined the dominant frames for the nouveaux riches. Frames—in the form of durable category labels, narrative structures, repertoires of expression—organize experiences and perceptions, selectively prioritizing information such that some understandings, behaviors and judgements come to seem right and taken-for-granted (e.g. Goffman 1974; Humphreys and Latour 2013). In light

of the long-term association of the middle class with respectability and refinement, I examined how these themes reverberated in the representations in relation to two frames:

- Vulgarity (lacking decorum, refinement, self-control and otherwise morally or aesthetically illegitimate vis-à-vis conventions of the Western bourgeois cultural canon);
- Civility (demonstrating refinement, restraint, foresight, and otherwise discernment and performances in line with the established cultural canon).

Inductive coding within those frames was linked to conceptualizing relationships between vulgarity and civility; this resulted in a further, emergent frame:

- Order (making sense of relative group positions, interrelations and transitions between vulgarity and civility).

These three frames and their supporting exemplar stories are detailed below.

Vulgarity

Given the predominantly pejorative use of the term 'nouveau riche' in popular discourse, "vulgarity" was unsurprisingly the dominant frame. Coding found evidence of the vulgarity frame in 75% of the sample. This reflected the broadest sense of lacking the attributes of civilized conduct and discerning consumption, which variously took the form of populist consumption (e.g. buying something just because it was a high-status brand), functional consumption (e.g. taking part in an activity to achieve the instrumental end of showing off), failed discerning consumption (e.g. inappropriate behaviour in the context of established elite culture), and other forms of coarse or illicit behaviour (cf. Smith Maguire and Lim 2015).

In 39% of the sample, ascriptions of vulgarity were evident via language that specifically conveyed a lack of self-control or propriety. The new rich (in the following examples, Chinese) were described as "hungrily acquisitive…ambitious and rapacious" (*FT* 12 Nov 2015) and "unscrupulous" (*CD* 1 Sept 2014), with "voracious appetites" (*NYT* 24 Apr 2013), "garish and excessive" (*NYT* 15 Oct 2013) and "extravagant" (*CD* 9 Mar 2015) tastes, and "gaudy and ludicrous" cities (*FT* 29 Nov 2013). The new rich of North Korea were described as "indulging" (*ThT* 18 Apr 2015), the Americans as "missing…gentility" (*ThT* 20 Jul 2015) and "adolescent" in their interests (*Ind* 19 May 2013), the Iranians as "showing off" and "crav[ing] attention" (*NYT* 1 May 2015). Indeed, showing off was a hallmark of representations of the new rich, invoked through various references: "golden iPhones [with] a bejewelled microphone" in Nigeria (*FT* 5 May 2014); walls decorated with "wings of thousands of exotic butterflies" in Brazil (*Ind* 1 June 2016); and for the Chinese new rich, wildlife hunting served as a "naked display of wealth" (*CD* 14 Aug 2014), along with Steinway pianos "outfitted with diamonds and wood from Africa and India" (*NYT* 10 Jul 2016) and Rolls-Royce saloons personalized with "gold, glitter and horse badges [to celebrate the Year of the Horse]…or 400 diamonds encrusted in the car" (*Ind* 9 Jan 2014).

Similarly, engagement with established cultural fields was represented as functional and lacking in an appropriately discerning orientation: wine buyers who "don't really give a damn about what's inside the bottle" were characterised as "splashing out or speculating" (*DT* 19 NOV 2012); art buyers were drawn to "obvious images by blue chip artists" (*NYT* 4 Nov 2012) or to achieving an instrumental aim to "telegraph their wealth and taste" (*NYT* 3 May 2013). In all of these ways, the new economic capital of the nouveaux riches was framed as illegitimate by virtue of how it was (mis)translated into cultural practices.

Lack of propriety also took the form of corruption. On the one hand, 11 items referenced corruption within business practices (e.g. tax evasion, infringement on others' intellectual property, bribes, nepotism and inside connections to secure deals). For example, the Chinese new rich were characterised by their "lack of integrity in business" (*CD* 1 Sept 2014); Iraqi new rich secured "lucrative government contracts through connections and corruption" (*AP* 28 Apr 2014), while Russia was described as "in the grip of a kleptocracy" (*ThT* 24 Nov 2012). On the other hand, nine items explicitly framed membership of the new rich as morally corrosive in itself, as evidenced through car crashes, out-of-control youth and other destructive side-effects of nouveau riche lifestyles (e.g. in Iran *NYT* 1 May 2015; Brazil *ThT* 16 Jul 2016; China *CD* 21 May 2015). The implied associations between vulgarity, corruption and new wealth were further reinforced through reference to Chinese President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign (launched in 2012), both in the media sample and far more widely in reports on the luxury goods sector, which has been significantly impacted by the campaign. Thus, the new riches were framed as ill-gotten gains, and not to be necessarily envied by the reader: what Kendall (2011) refers to as "sour grapes" and "rotten apples" framings of the wealthy.

The dominant narrative trope were stories of nouveau riche "vulgarians," spoiled by their new money and despoiling the established cultural fields into which they stumble. The following description of elite art auctions in China (Bowley and Barboza 2013) was one example:

> The culture of bidding is still novel, newly wealthy buyers are inexperienced, and the auction houses themselves are figuring things out as they go along. …At auctions here, despite the presence of well-trained, white-gloved attendants, casually dressed buyers munch on snacks from paper bags and chat on cellphones, creating a low-level din throughout the bidding. Purchasers of expensive paintings have been known to roll up their canvas, tuck it under an arm and stroll out into the night air. (*NYT* 16 Dec 2013)

Contrasting this behaviour with their counterparts in the West (where auctions are "discreet, air-kissing affairs" and buyers are "veteran, elegantly dressed collectors who know one another" and conduct their bids with subtle gestures and hushed tones), the account categorized nouveau riche performances and appearances—and the nouveaux riches themselves—as illegitimate.

Similarly, an item on Royal Ascot (Brown 2013) recounted the established class's dismay at various changes they saw as debasing the event, such as the inability of the strict clothing rules to veil (if not curtail) the current popularity of tattoos, or the decision to sell places in the Royal Enclosure:

> Pander any further to populism, or so the aficionados cry, and you threaten to let every vulgarian this side of Reading in. This is meant to be a week about selectiveness, about exclusivity, not about opening the floodgates to the nouveaux riches. (*DT* 20 Jun 2013)

While the journalist's tongue was at least partially in his cheek, the choice of term "floodgates" is telling, speaking to the perceived lack of order that erupts around the new rich. In this cultural imaginary, the nouveaux riches are not only individually out of control, but are part of a process run amok that threatens to overwhelm and wipe out the

established upper middle class group. This discourse is reminiscent of late 19th and early 20th century anxieties about public order (in Britain, related especially to class; in the US, to ethnicity and immigration), directed at the "horny handed," "the great unwashed" and the fecundity of foreigners (e.g. Ewen and Ewen 2006; Pearson 1983). Reference was made to the "swelling" ranks of nouveaux riches (*CD* 3 Jan 2013, 18 Apr 2014, 1 Jun 2016; *NYT* 30 Dec 2015, 10 July 2016) and the "flooding" of markets with nouveau riche money and demands (*FT* 12 Nov 2015, 19 May 2017). Other references were made to the number of billionaires "made" per week, both suggesting the flood of new money and denuding the newly rich actor of her/his agency, perseverance or prudence and instead attributing credit to the (out-of-control) system of value creation. Financialized capitalism and its multiplier effect for the ill-gotten gains from illegitimate means (e.g. bribes, nepotism) and non-legitimate fields (e.g. tetra paks and construction: *NYT* 20 Oct 2013; *ThT* 24 Nov 2012) was thus positioned as a threat to the established upper-middle-class order, undermining hard work as the legitimate discursive bedrock of wealth (Sherman 2017) and, more insidiously, facilitating a rising tide of newcomers.

Civility

Less prevalent than the vulgarity frame, the civility frame was evident in 27% of the sample. Such representations positioned nouveau riche tastes and practices as legitimate or becoming legitimate when they closely aligned with the established repertoire of bourgeois "good taste." For example, Seoul's Gangnam district was described as "elegant" and the locals' style as "sophisticated" (*AP* 13 Aug 2013), the Chinese new rich as "increasingly worldly and sophisticated" (*FT* 17 Nov 2015), and the new rich generally as moving "away from show for its own sake towards knowledge, appreciation, craft and heritage—something with a story" (*Ind* 9 Jan 2015), with the new "keywords" of the global "One Percent" being "unostentatious, calm and discreet" (*NYT* 18 Jan 2016).

Civility was associated with self-restraint and understatement: a shift from bling to bespoke, from objects to experiences. Wealthy Chinese consumers, for example, were noted for increasingly valuing "experiences rather than expensive products…[and] specifications and value rather than mere status symbols" (*FT* 12 Sept 2016). Craftsmanship, heritage, bespoke construction, elegance and subtlety were presented not only as qualities of interest to a growing number of nouveau riche consumers, but also as the readers' taken-for-granted criteria for legitimate, discerning consumption. The legitimation of nouveau riche economic capital was thus restricted to its transformation into the established group's forms of civilised conduct and cultural capital.

The dominant narrative trope were stories of the "new aesthetes" who have seized the opportunities afforded by their wealth to emulate the aesthetic habitus of the professional middle class. This was typically carried out within established cultural fields such as art collecting. For instance, an American billionaire (whose new wealth derived from the science and technology sector) was credited as being a "serious" and "thorough" art collector (Vogel 2013, *NYT* 21 Apr 2013): these benedictions were delivered by the chief executive of the J. Paul Getty Trust (bearing the mantle of old money), and by a respected Chelsea art dealer (wielding the imprimatur of the established group by virtue of having "worked with many of today's biggest collectors"). In another example, a "former taxi driver turned billionaire" and his wife are among China's small group of major art collectors; their

collecting is similarly legitimated by the president of Christie's China (the established auction house), who is quoted (Qin 2015, *NYT* 18 Nov 2015) as describing the couple as the

> 'best example' of this generation of Chinese art collectors. 'They started with collecting what they know, Chinese art, then broadened to Asian art, and are now embracing Western art.'

Similarly, approving note was taken of those in Brazil who align with "an older tradition of wealth" (*Ind* 1 Jun 2016) and of the "superrich from China and other emerging markets" who are "joining their *fellow elites* at events in Europe and the United States" (emphasis added; *NYT* 21 Jun 2015). Ascriptions of civility and legitimacy were thus dispensed in terms of acceptance *of* the new rich *by* the established elite and professional middle class.

Thorough absorption into the codes of civility extended from the obvious fields such as art and fashion to the quotidian matters of dress and appearance. For example, a young Chinese tech entrepreneur whose "rectangular black glasses, slim build, and red sweater seem inspired by the hipsters of Silicon Valley" was positioned (Xu 2016, *CD* 18 Apr 2016) as an exemplar of the

> new entrepreneurial class amassing great wealth at a younger age… These risk-takers are sophisticated, often Western-educated, and comfortable working with foreign banks at home and dabbling in investments abroad.

The new aesthetes thus become indistinguishable from the established group. Rather than being framed as a further "swelling" of the ranks of the new rich (or as an anxiety about the new rich using appearances to trick their way into acceptance, as was the discourse in the 19th century in relation to cosmetics; Peiss 1998), this transformation (of "them" into "us") was framed as a positive bolstering of the established group.

Despite the "success stories," the extension of legitimacy to the nouveaux riches was dampened by echoes of colonial snobbishness (e.g. as per the president of Christie's China, whose comments imply Western art is the apogee of a global hierarchy of cultural capital). Such representations suggest how tightly bound the discourse of civility is to notions of "the West," which have been constructed through an othering of "the rest" over the very long-term history of colonial and global expansion from the fifteenth century onwards (Hall 1996). Similarly, media accounts of the new aesthetes were accompanied by parallel, de-legitimizing associations. For example, a report on the new rich in Vietnam (Cohen 2014, *NYT* 13 May 2014) approvingly noted their increasing emphasis on hand-crafted, distinctive goods with provenance and their desire "to demonstrate their knowledge." However, this "progress" was undercut by a story of a vulgarian:

> A successful Vietnamese businessman confided to me that when he receives a gift of a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label (surely one of the world's great blended whiskies) he sends it back because it is insultingly ordinary.

A shift from bling to subtlety was likewise framed as vulgar for the Chinese new rich: instead of showing off their wealth, they now "want to show off their good taste, their personal choice" (*CD* 31 Oct 2015). Be it through an instrumental orientation to taste or their hyper compliance with (and thus lack of aesthetic distance from) established aesthetic norms, such representations framed the nouveaux riches as de-legitimizing themselves (thereby preserving the liberal values of the professional middle class, who are positioned as mere witnesses rather than agents of the stigmatization of others).

Order

The vulgarity and civility frames offered professional middle class readers a sense of order for the turmoil of shifting concentrations of influence and capital, placing various new rich groups into a legible framework of relative positions: the illegitimate parvenus whose economic power may dwarf the readers', but who are nonetheless vulgar in their tastes; the legitimate apprentice connoisseurs whose dispositions bolster the established group by reaffirming the currency of their cultural capital and rituals. At the same time, the tales of legitimate aesthetic discernment and consumption within the new rich—exemplified by the new aesthetes—make clear that nouveau riche membership is neither static nor immutable. For example, an item on China (Perrottet 2016, *NYT* 11 Dec 2016) notes that the

> Chinese nouveaux riches—until recently renowned for their awkward manners—already qualify as 'old money;' they're now comfortable in French restaurants, fluent in English and expert in vintage Chiantis.

Such a transition has been in a relatively short period of time; as one report suggests: "What would take 20 years in the West happens here in two to five years" (Armstrong 2012, *DT* 25 July 2012). This rate and scale of change inevitably creates tensions for those who find their place in the global hierarchy of power and esteem to have been diluted if not leap-frogged. As such, the media discourse of the nouveaux riches also served an ordering function, with regard to how the professional middle class readers were positioned within the changing global order, and encouraged to understand the dynamics of that new order. The seeming happenstance or injustice of movement (e.g. the "sudden" riches of some outsiders) was thus subject to ordering and order-imposing frames, which attempted to bring sense and stability to a ground that was simultaneously depicted as shifting beneath the readers' feet.

The dominant narrative tropes were cosmologies: stories that placed the universe (in this case, the earthly distribution of economic and cultural capital) in an ordered framework governed by general principles. Cosmologies were manifest in a number of ways including, first, various lists, lexicons and maps of the world's elite. These have multiplied since the 1970s as part of the discursive construction of the rich and super-rich (Koh et al 2016) and are often cited for corroboration and context in the media reports. A vocabulary of "the other" categorized the new rich into a legible taxonomy: e.g. Chinese *tuhao, fu'erdai* and *bao fa hu* (new rich, second generation and rags-to-riches households), Iranian *aghazadeh*, Brazillionaires and *novos ricos*, Russian oligarchs, North Korea *donju*, Middle East plutocrats and various other geographically situated clusters of tycoons, nabobs, magnates and moneybags (e.g. *CD* 30 Jan 2014; *FT* 19 May 2017, 26 Feb 2016; *Ind* 15 May 2016, 22 Jan 2014; *NYT* 2 Dec 2013, 4 Nov 2012; *ThT* 16 July 2016). Internally stratified, globally dispersed groups of economic elites with varied repertoires of cultural competences and dispositions were thereby essentialized for readers.

Second, quasi-ethnographic travelogues provided the intended reader with a touristic overview of social hierarchies from various locales and times. For example, the life stages of the new rich consumer were neatly summarized in a Shanghai travelogue (Armstrong 2012, *DT* 25 July 2012):

> First they go for the shiny, brash stuff. Then they progress to the more discreet emblems of consumption. Finally they graduate to bespoke. The Chinese have achieved maturity at break-neck speed. That doesn't mean there aren't molls with

> surgically rounded eyes and pumped-up lips wearing Cavalli - but not nearly as many as there were in Russia in the early oligarch years.

Stories of enhanced female companions in low-cut dresses, butterfly wing-decorated walls, diamond encrusted iPhones, and Maseratis crashed by spoiled children of the elite all provide grist for the vulgarization mill. However, such stories also fuel—sometimes quite explicitly—the anxiety of the reader, affirming that their place in the world is no longer to be taken for granted. For example, an Indonesian journalist quips at an elite event in China: "Europe is finished…Shanghai's the city of the 21st century" (*DT* 25 Jul 2012); nouveau riche Americans declare that "no one cares" about old money, which is "living on fumes" (*ThT* 20 Jul 2015). Meanwhile, an esteemed British financial journalist (McRae 2013, 2014) opines that the British "are making the luxury items that most of us can't afford" (*Ind* 10 July 2013) and wonders: "How will European attitudes to wealth shift when we realise that we are, in relative terms at least, not as rich as we used to be?" (*Ind* 11 Jun 2014). These accounts, from a bird's eye view, revealed overlapping, multi-scalar, multi-local established/outsider relations between old money, the new rich and the professional middle classes (and occasionally the lower-middle and working classes), within and across Western and emerging economies. Global, complex changes are thus reduced to a simplified story of change and the status quo (the outsiders become the established; *plus ça change*) within which readers may locate themselves (albeit with some trepidation).

Third, discrete devices imposed a sense of order on movements within cosmologies: progress between positions over time was attributed to particular strategies and was thereby rationalized, and—depending on the framing—rendered illegitimate or legitimate. On the one hand, some movements were delegitimized, and the acquisition devices and strategies framed as at least partially vulgar. In such cases, the pursuit of cultural capital was often framed as an instrumental (vulgar) pursuit of status, be that on the part of the state—for example, Chinese policy to support regional development through art, music, yachting (e.g. *NYT* 10 Jul 2016; *CD* 9 Jan 2014)—or individuals. Individual acquisition strategies were often oriented to removing the established group's habitus and language advantages, such as through private European or American education (e.g. *FT* 12 Sept 2016; *NYT* 2 Mar 2016; *AP* 9 Dec 2013; *ThT* 19 Feb 2015), hiring Filipino nannies who "often teach the children better English" (*FT* 1 Oct 2016), enrolling in finishing schools to learn such skills as "Western table manners, floral arrangement, table conversation, dress codes" (*CD* 25 Aug 2016), or, for those aspiring to middle class status within the outsider group, enrolling in butler school to learn a "whole range of Western etiquette and protocols, from personal grooming to laying tables and pouring wine" (*CD* 1 Feb 2016). For the seriously wealthy, acquisition strategies were oriented to joining, if not displacing, the established elite. For example, a Chinese art collector is quoted in regards to his rationale for paying a record-setting price at auction ($170.4 million with fees):

> Every museum dreams of having a Modigliani nude… Now, a Chinese museum has a globally recognized masterpiece …I feel very proud about that. …The message to the West is clear: We have bought their buildings, we have bought their companies, and now we are going to buy their art. (Qin 2015, *NYT* 18 Nov 2015)

The collector's motivation is framed as not only illegitimate—instrumental position seeking rather than sincere appreciation—but also menacing, suggesting the long-term and highly contentious cultural dynamics associated with decentering the West (Hall 1996).

On the other hand, movements were more likely to be framed as legitimate when attributable to the pedagogical interventions deployed by the established group to transfer their cultural capital and habitus to worthy outsiders (albeit arguably in pursuit of (vulgar) ends: the creation of new luxury goods consumers). Such "civilizing" interventions took the form of various immersive lifestyle lessons intended to serve as a transmission belt, pulling the new rich in to the established habitus of the elite and remaking them as the "branded gentry" (Vallance and Hopper 2013; Smith 2016). Examples from the sample include: Louis Vuitton experts teaching Shanghai customers the refined art of packing (*DT* 25 Jul 2012); London's Harrods and Selfridges finessing access to fashion shows and horse races for their Chinese shoppers so that they can "discover the British lifestyle, dressing codes and etiquette" (*CD* 31 Oct 2015); Rolls-Royce partnering with an eminent London tailor to create events that educate the young, British new rich in "the story of bespoke" (*ThT* 1 Oct 2016); the contemporary Istanbul art fair aiming to educate the Turkish new rich "in the culture of collecting art" (*NYT* 1 Dec 2012); private banks offering the nouveaux riches of Asia, Middle East, Eastern Europe and Latin America such perks as wine tastings with royalty, private seminars with prestigious thinkers, yachting classes, golf trips, and "mock art auctions to teach newly rich how to bid on expensive paintings" (*FT* 12 Sep 2016).

Within these stories of legitimate mobility, the place of the global middle class was often represented by a cast of "functional democratizers" (Smith Maguire 2017): Pygmalion heroes whose status rested in part on their ability to straddle worlds and bridge groups. Such heroes included the Chinese "heir" to a musical instrument company, educated in the US, who fine-tunes the Chinese mind set about quality craftsmanship and Steinway pianos (*NYT* 10 Jul 2016); the Dutch "veteran butler" and descendant of a "butlering family" who teaches the aspiring Chinese butlers how to embody and service cultural capital (*CD* 1 Feb 2016); the editor of Chinese Vogue, "daughter of a Chinese diplomat, married to an Englishman," who holidays in Britain and "speaks English like a BBC pro" (*DT* 15 Nov 2013); the Chinese-American couturier whose Shanghai flagship store in a 1920s heritage villa in the French Concession includes "a showroom, fitting salons, an art gallery, a library, a fashion lounge and a VIP suite" because she wants to offer "a sharing space for people who have the same tastes and ideas" (*CD* 22 Jul 2016).

Mobilities within hierarchies of wealth and power were thus represented as legitimate or illegitimate via intersections between a range of ordering lexicons, stories, devices and heroes, and vulgarity and civility frames. The cosmologies thus reproduce the currency of the established group's stocks of cultural capital as the legitimate basis of worthy entitlement (Fluck 2003; Sherman 2017). In turn, the professional middle class are offered an account that reassures them of their place—and competitive advantage—within new global hierarchies. Indeed, the very admission of movement within the cosmologies upholds established parables of meritocracy that underpin the legitimation of inequality (Littler 2018). These cosmological narratives thus impose a taxonomy of positions, simplify complex processes into a repeated, legible pattern of change, rationalize and (de)legitimate movement between positions, and reassure the global middle class that their status as bastions of respectability and civility remains largely unchallenged.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have been concerned with how the discourse of civility is implicated in the cultural constitution of the professional middle class, as effected through media representations of the nouveaux riches, and what that might suggest about the character of a global middle class. Underpinning the media representations are changing political, economic and cultural currents: emerging markets and their middle classes, a new Gilded Age of financialized capitalism with the super-rich 0.1% (and especially 0.01%) pulling away from the rest. These conditions challenge the professional middle classes' local identities and positions, and create the conditions for a transnational upper middle class to articulate its identity through the watchword of civility.

From the analysis there emerged an essentializing framing of the nouveaux riches through country of origin and a constellation of consumption performances that (despite being oriented to the ostensibly correct objects) signaled outsider status. The analysis further revealed a range of dominant frames and narrative tropes through which the nouveaux riches were positioned as illegitimate or legitimate, in turn rendering the upper-middle class readership legible to itself. On the one hand, undeserving vulgarians were stigmatized and positioned as emblematic of larger outsider groups (the new super rich and new middle classes of emerging economies) against whom the professional middle class was juxtaposed. On the other, new aesthetes were legitimated insofar as they reproduced the currency of established cultural capital, thereby bolstering the class identity of the professional middle class.

Several limitations of this analysis bear mention, indicating work still to be done to complement these insights. In focusing on representations in isolation from their production and reception, I have assumed that recurrent patterns in media frames and tropes are constitutive—and thus indicative—of class identities. In taking journalists as proxies for the larger professional middle class, I have side-stepped differences within their ranks vis-à-vis their professional orientation to the nouveaux riches (e.g. art critics, fashion reporters, financial journalists), and bracketed off questions of the journalists' habitus, thus ignoring differences in their class identities, stocks of cultural capital and so on. I have also had to overlook the role of occupational and genre conventions in shaping media representations. These shortcomings suggest the need for further explorations of the lived experience of professional middle class identities. Furthermore, in focusing on patterns shared across the seven media titles, I have ignored the distinct historical and contemporary contexts that shape national class identities (especially British and American). Nevertheless, the commonalities identified—spanning readerships and globally disparate nouveau riche objects—suggest the outlines of a global middle class identity, which demands further attention and cross-cultural investigation.

The intersections between ordering, vulgarity and civility frames speak to the interlinked spasms of attraction and repulsion, colonization and differentiation (Elias 2012) that continue to shape the group identity and symbolic boundaries of the middle classes. Framing nouveau riche consumption as crass excess and vulgar spectacle, or as legitimate apprenticeship in the class habitus of the upper middle class, can thus be understood as a strategy by which the established—and threatened—professional middle class attempts to defend their group identity in an age in which the relative dominance of the West has been

fundamentally challenged. Moreover, the findings suggest how the emergence and reproduction of local and global professional middle classes are deeply embedded within the long-held symbolic practices and narrative structures of civility. Civility operates as a global aesthetic regime that transcends national differences while allowing for local variations in how civility is performed: concerns with both manners and morals can be filtered through the lens of civility.

The cosmologies of civility that characterized the media representations underpin a naturalization of stratification and inequality as part of that global middle class mentality, without contravening middle-class democratic values. From ancient times, hierarchical cosmological metaphors—*scala naturae*—have reflected and shaped human thought about the categories of and relations between orders of being. Epitomized in the medieval "Great Chain of Being," these inventories of existence were often depicted as a multi-tiered tree, staircase or ladder culminating in God (Lovejoy 1936; Guyer 2010). Despite intervening scientific and philosophical developments—from rationalism to progressivism, natural selection, evolution, and critical theorizations of class reproduction and inequality—Western peoples, including the intelligentsia, "maintain a deep allegiance" to these medieval metaphors (Pavelka McDonald 2002; see also Guyer 2010) that naturalize the dominance of particular groups over others (e.g. humans over animals; kings over commoners). The frames and cosmologies of civility that emerged from the media analysis may be more complex than the medieval *scala naturae*, but the principles remain the same: a place for each group and each group to its place, with the stratification of positions consecrated by a higher order of legitimacy (the bourgeois cultural canon replacing Divine Will).

Such deep-seated narrative structures and aesthetic regimes are crucial for the reproduction of inequality, as they tend to elide contradictions between explicitly rejecting ideas of the natural superiority of some over others, while simultaneously holding—and acting on—biases that uphold those same ideas about relative worth. This helps to explain how the middle-class maintain implicit pro-wealth attitudes that grant greater leniency to those of higher socio-economic status, while also espousing egalitarian attitudes and even negative stereotypes about the rich (Horwitz and Dovidio 2017). The nouveau riche figure plays a central part in the articulation of these cosmologies of civility, through which upper-middle-class anxieties about out-of-control capitalism are placed within a coherent framework of civilized stratification. In this way, the discourse of civility allows snobbishness to "go underground" (Savage et al 2015): discussions of the nouveaux riches thus serve as a legitimate preserve for univorous (if not also colonialist) snobbishness within the wider culture of liberalism, meritocracy and tolerance.

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Endnotes

[1] The search utilized the Nexis database, with the search terms of "nouveau riche," "nouveaux riches" or "new rich" appearing anywhere in items from the last five years (July 6, 2012-2017). A preliminary search of *DT*, *Ind*, *FT, NYT* and *ThT* revealed a preponderance

of articles about the Chinese nouveaux riches; as such, *CD* and *AP* were added to ensure international readership, complementing the *FT* readership which is over two-thirds non-UK based (Beckett 2018). The search of the seven sources yielded a total of 508 hits; these were hand-sorted to include only those items with explicit mention of the contemporary nouveaux riches (individuals and/or generic references to the new rich as a group). The final sample consisted of 157 media items.

[2] Readership statistic sources: National Readership Survey October 2016-September 2017 readership data (www.nrs.co.uk); newsworks (www.newsworks.org.uk); New York Times media kit (nytmediakit.com/newspaper); Financial Times media kit (www.fttoolkit.co.uk/d/audience/consumer.php). NRS audience categories relating to the middle class: higher (A), intermediate (B), and junior (C1) managerial, administrative and professional occupations.

[3] To guard against inflation, this count excluded the 29 *CD* items, which all focused exclusively on Chinese new rich.

[4] Media items quoted at length are furnished with full citation information (note: page numbers are not available from Nexis searches); otherwise, items are identified with source and date.

[5] Data on top 30 countries of the 2016 distribution of billionaires from Wealth-X (2017a). It is also interesting to note that the same Wealth-X report suggests the divisions of old/new within the UHNW: the wealth of only 13% of billionaires is attributable to inherited wealth, and self-made billionaires outnumber those who are a combination of self-made and inherited wealth by about 1.75 to 1.