Elites Without Hierarchies:
Intermediaries, 'Agency' and the Super-rich

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Abstract

The super-rich today represent a challenge to sociological enquiry, seeing as their principle characteristic would appear to be strategies for divorcing themselves from the constraints of public institutions, discourses, identities and legal constraints. It is not clear that conventional theories of class or elites adequately capture the way in which wealth is insulated from political or public interference. Inspired by Simmel's account of money as a type of teleological vacuum - a sheer absence of any fixed purpose - this chapter considers an alternative way of conceiving of the super-rich, in terms of networks of 'agents' or intermediaries. It is argued that 'agents' represent an important constituent in the contemporary political economy of the super-rich, because they act on behalf of the very wealthy, so as to prevent wealth from becoming imbroiled in political or cultural controversies.

Who are the super-rich, and what do they want? Are they a new class, and if so, what type of class are they? One of the few things we know about them, by definition, is that they have very large amounts of money at their disposal, which, especially in the English-speaking world, has become more concentrated than at any time since the 1920s (Dorling, 2014; Piketty, 2014). Statistical knowledge of this trend has increased markedly since the global financial crisis which began in 2007, thanks especially to work of Piketty. But this highlights some troublesome gaps in our sociological understanding, which opens up a host of new empirical and theoretical questions. If Piketty's work leaves a great deal unexplained, one might argue that this is an opportunity for sociology, rather than a limitation of that particular work (Savage, 2014a).

What do they want to *do* with all that money, other than protect it, grow it and pass it on to their children? Do they want political power, and if so, of what kind and to what end? Or do they employ it culturally, to achieve their own modes of Bourdieusian distinction from the other 99.9%? Classical theories of elites stress the overlapping nature of different types of power and capital, that is, the capacity to convert money into political power, or political power into money, or cultural capital into income (Mills, 1999; Savage & Williams, 2008). If the super-rich are an 'elite' in that Millsian sense, then we should be asking what institutions they are seeking to infiltrate, be they political, cultural or military. According to such a notion of elites, they will gravitate ultimately towards the state in some way, in search of power. Or if they are a 'class' in a classically Marxian sense, then we should be asking which other class they sit in relation *to*, who they are exploiting, and with what tools. This requires them to develop some reflexive, collective self-consciousness, to act in defense of their shared interests.

Mike Savage has recently urged sociologists to avoid resorting to some of their favourite tropes when exploring and explaining the super-rich (Savage, 2014b). He notes that one of the few things we *do* know about the super-rich is that they like to reside and keep their wealth in a small number of urban alpha territories, dotted around the world. But beyond that, there are unanswered questions that should provide pause for thought, both methodologically and theoretically.

Firstly, Savage suggests that we need to try and take money seriously *as money*, that is, we shouldn't automatically view it as something to be converted into power. We need, he suggests, to avoid the Weberian temptation to treat elites as fundamentally political, which Mills is symptomatic of. To do this, we need to draw on the sociology of money, to get a handle on what wealth and income of this magnitude might mean and do. Secondly, we should accept the need for descriptive methods (such as Piketty's, or digital data-mining), rather than immediately dig in search of an underlying causal substrate. This means avoiding the Marxian temptation to theorise capital before we have adequately described it, something Piketty manifestly succeeds in doing, to the chagrin of some Marxist critics (Kunkel, 2014).

Savage also identifies a couple of fresh theoretical challenges for sociology. One of these is to adequately *name* this class, if indeed it is a class (given that '1%' is somewhat misleading). If it is not a class, then we need to classify it in some other way, on the basis of description. Another challenge is to theorise what form of openness this 'class' has: it seems neither closed like an aristocracy, nor 'open' like a meritocracy.

To these challenges, we might also add another one, which is familiar to the study of elites. This is the need to avoid wholesale methodological individualism, while recognising the deeply personal and individualised nature of the relationships and strategies that appear to structure the lives of the super-rich. Another of Piketty's challenges to sociology, Savage suggests, is to turn the focus of political economy upon the family, and away from the labour market. But this is tricky, methodologically and epistemologically. Knowledge of elites is at best partial, and therefore requires certain measured acts of extrapolation (Bowman et al, 2013), however the case of the super-rich adds further difficulties, in being actively secretive in certain respects. There is a risk of conspiracy theory, although there is an equal and opposite risk of ignoring the possibility of conspiracies.

This paper responds to these challenges, and seeks to reorient elite studies in view of the particular problems posed by the super-rich in the early 21st century. It does so by foregrounding the question of *intermediaries*, that is, commercial agents who work on behalf of clients, so as to represent their public, political, cultural and geographic interests. As I have previously explored, intermediaries - such as consultants, fund managers, credit-raters and auditors - have been at the heart of the crisis of financial capitalism, a crisis that is as much normative (specifically, the normalisation of 'fraudulent' activity) as economic (deflation) (Davies, 2014a). The power and wealth of such intermediaries has grown substantially over recent decades. They carry vast responsibility for the very possibility of economic knowledge and regulation, inasmuch as they perform critical work of evaluation and translation within highly complex spheres of financial and contractual activity. And yet, despite this, they have also come to be viewed in reductively economic terms, as private sector actors like any others, hence with less and less sense of 'vocation' towards the general socio-economic good. This is a dangerous situation.

This chapter is in three parts. Firstly, responding partly to Savage's incitement to take money seriously, I put forward the hypothesis, drawing on Simmel, that the super-rich dwell in a *teleological vacuum*. That is, we might want to consider that their lack of political project is one of their central characteristics. They desire the 'negative liberty' that money offers, but to a degree that goes well beyond the guarantees of political liberalism or neoliberalism. Hence their retreat into private space. Secondly, I suggest that one way we *can* understand this politically is via the concept of 'agency', as it derives from game theory and neo-classical economics. Agency is the phenomenon of one person being contracted to represent the interests of another, arising as a 'problem' with the birth of professional management in the late 19th century. By focusing on 'agency' as a pivotal institution or problem, we can begin to respond to some of the challenges that Savage outlines, without simply collapsing everything back into Weberian or Marxian explanations. A key reason for this is that 'agency' relations are political, without being exploitative or hierarchical. Thirdly, I explore how we might view the super-rich today on this basis, and what the key forms of agency might be. I argue that traditional sociological classifications and presuppositions - such as those of 'elites' or 'class' - are not adequate for understanding the highly privatised, individualised types of power which agents facilitate. The chapter concludes by exploring the nature of the challenge this poses to social science today.

Taking the teleological vacuum seriously

What do the super-rich want? This is clearly an empirical question, which shouldn't be determined too soon. But what if, as a hypothesis, it turns out they simply want to be and remain *super-rich*? What if their identity is simply provided by their very wealth, rather than their capacity to convert that into power or cultural capital, or their capacity to accumulate it through productive exploitation? It is worth exploring the implications of this in terms of the nihilistic, a-teleological nature of devotion to money itself.

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel marvels at the bizarre nature of paper money, both as means of exchange and as wealth. Money, as various anthropologists have commented, has a dual character, as both everything and nothing. It "means more to us than any other object of possession because it obeys us without reservation – and it means less to us because it lacks any content that might be appropriated beyond the mere form of possession" (Simmel, 2004: 325). By possessing no telos of its own, it is the abstract idea of all possible teleologies. It is perfectly designed to be so useless in itself, as to serve all other uses. Simmel argues:

> *Money in its perfected forms is an absolute means because, on the one hand, it is completely teleologically determined and is not influenced by any determination from a different series, while on the other hand it is restricted to being a pure means and tool in relation to a give end, has no purpose of its own and functions impartially as an intermediary in the series of purposes.* (Simmel, 2004: 211)

To value money in itself is to value as-yet unspecified, and therefore infinite, possibilities. The truth of money is not revealed in how it is earned or spent empirically, but in the having of it as such. Those who desire money itself (what he terms "the purest form of avarice") and live off money are in touch with its metaphysical quality, "namely, to extend beyond every particular use and, since it is the ultimate means, to realise the possibility of all values as the value of all possibilities" (Simmel, 2004: 221). Financial culture, Simmel suggests, is "characterless" (2004: 216).

We know from Piketty's work that, as the ratio of public capital to private capital shifts further towards the latter, the role of unearned income in the economy grows. This raises the importance of inheritance as a source of wealth, and intergenerational inequalities grow more pronounced. Piketty has been accused of offering no actual *theory* of capital, nor any explanation of where it 'really' comes from; all he does is describe its distribution over time. But in doing so, he potentially brings Simmel's argument into sharper focus. Capital, defined by Piketty as *anything* (productive or otherwise) that pays a return, is a form of pure possibility, lacking any necessary relationship to technology, culture or politics. The vacuum at the heart of Piketty's work may be a representative one. This is partly what the concept of 'financialisation' also points towards, that financial capital has taken on a logic all of its own, which has (or, at the very least, seems to have) lost all connection with production (Lapavtisas, 2013). The only resource on which financialisation is necessarily dependent on is the future.

Likewise, Dorling argues that one of the most culturally and politically important implications of the rise of the '1%' in Britain is that traditional professional classes (doctors, teachers, civil servants, journalists) are no longer the beneficiaries of capitalist expansion, but are now becoming submerged within the rest of the '99%'. If, as per the Bourdieusian framework, professions are one important way in which capital is reproduced culturally and discursively, the fact that professional, upper middle class people are now experiencing economic stagnation or decline represents a further way in which financial capital has pulled away from everything but itself. Viewed more normatively, professions serve a valuable function in anchoring capital and knowledge in the public sphere (Perkin, 2003), hence the rise of the super-rich may represent a severing of capitalism's relationship to liberal, Habermasian ideals of inclusive public debate. Other than its relationship to urban residential property and the domestic sphere, money may be striving towards the Simmelian ideal, of being nothing but pure possibility.

This casts a different light on the politics of the super-rich, if indeed it can be described as 'politics' at all. What is their political telos? Perhaps it is to be completely left alone, to remain completely outside of the realm of politics and public sphere, conventionally understood. Safety for themselves, their families and their assets appears to be one of their over-arching concerns, hence the need for family offices and private fund managers to work constantly on their behalf (Glucksberg, 2014). To break free of the bounds of culture, politics or technological limits becomes a teleology in itself, the same anti-teleology that Simmel identified as the metaphysical nature of money.

As Simmel implies, and Friedrich Hayek later articulated, money offers an almost-perfect form of 'negative liberty', greater than anything that can be promised in the form of 'rights' (Hayek, 1944: 93). The paradox of neoliberalism, however, is that it has always had to promote this negative liberty through active political and legal means. Strict monetary policy has to become adopted by the state; markets must be defended and extended using sovereign powers; 'marketization' of public services is a policy strategy. The neoliberal can live neither with nor without the state (Peck, 2010; Blythe, 2012). In Harvey's Marxist formulation, there is a constant contradiction between the ideal and the reality of the neoliberal state, that purports to shrink, but in reality is required to propagate class interests, often using violence (Harvey, 2005: 77-80). Reconfiguring society in competitive, individualistic terms also requires a positive vision of how freedom should be used, in addition to a negative vision of which restraints and soldarities need abandoning (cf. Dardot & Laval, 2014). One possible way of understanding the gambit of the super-rich is to overcome this paradox, to live wholly within the negative liberty of money, without even depending on the active, modernising state that has always been an indispensable tool of neoliberalism. If the emergence of neoliberalism was characterised by a new fusion of corporate and state interests, a key trait of the super-rich is to reduce their intimacy with the state or other public/political actors.

This is not to deny that hedge fund managers and oligarchs donate to political parties, purchase art, or set up businesses. The Millsian vision of "overlapping cliques" is not entirely moribund (Mills, 2004: 18). The question is, what could the super-rich demand or ask of the state, other than *even more* negative liberty: less tax, less regulation, less attention from the tax collectors, fewer barriers to the movement of high-net-worth individuals and their assets. Neoliberalism itself has never been a laissez-faire ideology (Mirowski, 2009, 2013), but it is possible that the super-rich have now outgrown neoliberalism as a set of embedded regulatory techniques, at least in any public sense.

Is this the end of the matter? Must we simply accept that the super-rich are a negative, a vacuum, some form of capitalist sublime, which wants nothing but to be detached from state, public and production, in accordance with the promise of money itself? There is a risk here of repeating some of the Hegelian exaggerations of globalisation theory, which suggested new entirely frictionless, 'virtual' forms of global space. One way of avoiding this is to recognise that, if it is to retain its negative character, money (and its owners) must be constantly *represented* via a range of intermediaries and agents, if it is to remain separate. Capital may no longer be necessarily related to the productive economy via hierarchical relations of exploitation, as in the Marxian framework; nor need it be embedded in political hierarchies of corporation and state, in a Weberian sense. But some relationship to the non-financial, public world is necessary, for insulation to remain intact. It is one thing to avoid collapsing the status of money into power, labour or culture (as Savage rightly warns us not to); it is quite another to suggest that capital lacks any relationship to these entities whatsoever. The job of keeping the super-rich insulated is itself constituted by power, labour and culture, which money must be spent on. But how might we conceive of this relation, in ways that avoids the various pitfalls of sociological reductionism?

Principle-agent problems

One way to avoid sociological reductionism is to opt for description over explanation. Related to this is another strategy: to view the socio-economic world as structured by the categories of those who inhabit it, rather than the critical realist who observes it (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). An example of the latter would be Callon's claim that economics 'performs' economic life, which has provided the premise for an entire new tradition of cultural-economic sociology (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie, et al, 2007). But arguably this is not so different from how Marx extrapolated from the categories of classical political economy, or how Simmel worked with the subjectivist grain of marginalism. Giving credence to particular elements of economics has some pragmatic benefits for sociological reorientation and refreshment.

In this spirit, I want to propose a theoretical device which may help to shape a sociological approach to the super-rich - principle-agent problems. In particular, I suggest that we can think of the relationship of the super-rich to domains of power, culture and production as a series of principle-agent problems, in which they seek a form of representation which absolves them of the need to become involved in matters of public concern or controversy. Rather than a democratic representation, which seeks the power of voice, it is a form of delegation which secures the power of exit (Hirschman, 1970). Equally, it is through this phenomenon of delegation (and chains of delegation) that extreme concentrations in income and wealth can be partly understood.

The notion of a principle-agent problem derives originally from game theory, with the paranoid methodological individualism which goes with that. Such problems arise where one actor (the 'principle') delegates the pursuit of their interests to another actor (the 'agent'). Hence, in contracting a lawyer to represent me, I am the 'principle' and the lawyer is the 'agent'. The primary challenge posed (at least for the game theorist) is how to ensure that the agent does not abuse their position to pursue their own private interests, which requires careful management of the agent's incentives (sanctions and rewards). One thing which we gain by adopting this methodologically individualistic framework is the ability to look beyond the relationship of capital to labour, towards capital's relationship to its various managerial, cultural and political delegates. The principle-agent relation is not one founded in exploitation or hierarchy, but a negotiation which is potentially a 'win-win', as long as such a settlement can be found. It is a problem of mutually beneficial contract under conditions of uncertainty, rather than a problem of hierarchy under conditions of opposing interests.

The area where principle-agent theory has been most influential over recent decades has been in corporate governance, where it has been intimately involved in the rise of 'shareholder value' as the organising purpose of business management (Lazonick & O'Sullivan, 2000). Viewed from a methodologically individualist perspective, corporate governance becomes a problem of how to ensure that senior managers act on behalf of shareholders, rather than in their own interests. The apparent solution is to reward managers in direct proportion to increases in stock price, in the hope that they then come to take decisions from the perspective of shareholders. In practice, executive remuneration has risen at a far greater pace than the stock market over the past 30 years, suggesting that the 'agency problem' of senior management is possibly exacerbated by viewing it via the lens of game theory, and that management has 'gamed' governance in their own interests.

Taking a longer-term historical view of this problem, it arises initially with the birth of professional management in the late 19th century, especially with the problem of corporate *executives* (Chandler, 1977) As the owners of corporations became separate from those controlling them, a disquieting question arises: who are these controllers, and what do they want? Whose interests do they serve? While most managers can be bracketed as Weberian bureaucrats, who rise up through the ranks by processing rules, very senior managers have always posed more of a sociological riddle. As Mills himself observed, they don't fit easily into sociological categories: they are neither entrepreneur, nor bureaucrat; neither private owner, nor public politician (Mills, 1999: 133). Ultimately, they are symptoms of the deep-lying ambiguity surrounding the corporate form generally, which is neither a piece of private property nor a political association, but flips from one to the other as it suits.

There are solutions to the problem of executive management, which do not require them to be viewed narrowly as 'agents' of financial capital. They can be trained to conceive of themselves as professionals, serving the public interest in some diffuse sense. As Khurana has shown, the initial purpose of business schools was to grant corporate executives the same public legitimacy as was held by professions (Khurana, 2007). During the middle decades of the twentieth century (also the period of reduced inequality) this may have been achieved to some extent (Mizruchi, 2013). Yet corporate executives always face the problem that they lack any specific domain of knowledge to hold a monopoly over, which is the key characteristic of a profession (Abbott, 1988). Hence, professional public legitimacy may not even be available to them, and their connection to the 'public interest' is always open to renegotiation.

Governance therefore depends partly on additional forms of knowledge, which aim to produce trust. Techniques of audit and credit-rating were initially invented to deal with the appearance of limited liability corporations, as entities distinct from their shareholders (Power, 1997). However, the latter may introduce their own problems of 'agency', once the auditor or the rater is being paid by the company being evaluated. In the current climate, where accountants have been implicated in 'industrial scale' tax avoidance, auditors have been accused of covering up corporate fraud, credit-raters have been complicit with 'rating shopping' (in which investment banks get their financial products rated by whichever agency will judge them the most approvingly), principle-agent problems are multiplying all over the place. The problem underlying all of this is one of seeking to construct a socio-political form of justification ('the public interest', 'trust') using only the monetary logic of the market.

The point, then, is that the separation of business ownership and control in the late 19th century produced problems for sociological analysis which are arguably similar and related to those currently posed by the super-rich. At precisely the same time as paper money was entering circulation, to produce the giddying subjectivist nihilism explored by Simmel, a new stratum emerged with a parallel teleological vacuum at its heart. Corporate executives float in a space that cannot be easily classified as 'political', 'economic' or 'cultural'. They may sometimes seek public recognition, but are never successfully defined as a 'profession'. They act on behalf of others, and yet they are also arch delegators themselves. Mills observes that power and responsibility *within* the firm sit just *below* the senior executive, while the latter is more focused externally upon networks and other elites (1999: 135). Today, shareholder value commits CEOs to focus on the financial markets, which are the target of constant narrative manipulation and PR (Froud et al, 2006). The corporation, Deleuze notes, "is a spirit, a gas", without any tangible, temporal or spatial form (1992: 4). Similarly, those at the apex of corporations seem to defy formal categorisation.

Reconfigured in sociological terms, the principle-agent problem is a particular way of representing the interface of politics and economics. Considered in more substantive and historical terms (as opposed to the mathematical formalism of game theory), a principle-agent problem involves the use of money to *distance* oneself from political controversy, discourse, dispute and normativity. The 'principle' *pays* the 'agent', such that the former can remain in the private realm, while the latter enters the public realm on the principle's behalf. Agency is therefore a precondition of radicalised negative freedom. Negative freedom in Isiah Berlin's sense (of 'freedom from' rather than 'freedom to') has traditionally been associated with the liberal philosophical tradition, in which the individual is the holder of rights, which are protected by public law (Berlin, 2002). However, the agency relationship grants a higher order of negative freedom, in which money is used in pursuit of a frictionless existence, separate even from the liberal or neoliberal constitution which preserves economic freedom in the first place. Normative judgement is delegated to accountants, credit-raters and auditors; political control of labour is delegated to managers; political control over markets and currencies is delegated to policy-makers. In these ways, capital can float free of controversial situations, such as firms, critical deliberation and public policy.

In each case, for money tor remain *just money*, and not become embroiled in broader political or cultural disputes, a certain share of it must be syphoned off and paid to the delegate. Keeping finance separate involves 'agents' willing to act on its behalf. This is true with respect to corporate governance. But the very same mechanism is at work in, say, contemporary 'family offices' whose principle purpose is to save super-rich families from having to engage in public situations (getting a child into a school, handling tax, booking a restaurant table, managing property) which may involve any form of antagonism. Where traditional professions, such as accountancy and law, become reconceived in these terms, this represents a significant sociological transformation. No longer does the 'professional' serve to anchor capital in the public sphere (or tie it cultural capital), but becomes the *delegate* of capital, allowing capital to float free of public commitments.

Piketty argues that the rise of the super-rich since the 1970s cannot be explained in terms of 'super stars' or celebrities (2014: 417). Instead, he suggests that it is explicable in terms of incomes of senior management, who are able to bargain endlessly upwards. One reason why higher marginal tax rates are deemed beneficial, cited by both Piketty and Dorling, is that they make this behavior less attractive, diverting time and competitive instincts elsewhere (such as the building of better companies). Incomes amongst executives are now so high, that income inequality is being converted directly into wealth inequality (i.e. surplus income is being turned into capital, to be passed onto children), whereas until the 1980s, inequalities in income and capital were divergent.

Piketty's argument clearly reflects something about the financialisation of corporations (and the rise of shareholder value) since the 1970s. And yet it doesn't reflect on the specific ways in which executives have come to view themselves as the delegates of the financial markets. Boyer argues, for instance, that a symptom of financialisation is that the self-understanding of CEOs shifts from that of 'most senior wage-earner' to 'in-house representative of finance' (Boyer, 2000). Equally, how does this relate to the vast salaries and bonuses paid to, say, hedge fund managers, corporate lawyers, partners in Big Four accounting firms, star traders in investment banks, and so on. Just before the financial crisis struck, the number of bankers and traders in London earning over £1m a year was five times higher than the number of CEOs earning that amount (Savage & Williams, 2008). Work by CRESC suggests that financial 'intermediaries' make up a far greater share of the super-rich than senior management (Folkman et al, 2007; Erturk et al, 2007).

So who is to be the central focus of sociological investigation into the super-rich - the corporate executive or the financial intermediary? Of course it must be both. Much more than that, it must include the various other intermediaries that act as 'agents' of capital, in its various guises. Corporate governance might be the exemplary principle-agent problem, but delegation and intermediation extends well beyond the relationship between shareholder and executive. 'Ownership' of financial capital is itself spread through lengthy chains of intermediation, providing countless opportunities for what CRESC term 'value skimming' and 'value surfing' (Erturk et al, 2007). Some forms of agency need to be considered as modes of cultural representation, rather than political. The agents who are discursively equipped to represent profits as zero, to render them untaxable; those who represent elite urban spaces in ways which reinforce their asset values; those who mediate between capital and elite restaurants, schools and art. Just as capital can employ political delegates to deal with hierachies, controversies and public disputes, it can employ cultural delegates to circumvent the friction of discovering or reproducing symbolic value. The capacity to control the public language of finance is arguably one of the main way in which dominant financial institutions currently resist reform or political intervention (Haldane et al, 2012; Davies, 2014a; Chang, 2014).

Beyond neoliberalism

Classical theories and critiques of liberalism have stressed that it is a political vision founded on *separation* of institutional spheres, in a public sense. Polanyi's critique of liberal political economy is that it imagines a separation between state and 'free market', which conceals the political relations that produce the latter (Polanyi, 1957). One way of understanding neoliberalism is in terms of its refusal of such rhetorics and techniques of separation. All action is fundamentally economic action, from a neoliberal perspective, therefore state and society need to be constantly audited using techniques borrowed from the market such as cost-benefit analysis, 'return on social investment' and competitiveness evaluation.

Yet neoliberalism's central paradox is that it remains a public, political project: an effort to reinvent the state using techniques and theories which have no concept of public, authority or sovereignty (Davies, 2014b). Harvey details the various authoritarian, punitive, regulatory and modernising activities that the neoliberal state has engaged in since the 1970s, to ensure that the balance of political power is tipped in favour and against labour (Harvey, 2005). This produces the contradiction between the rhetoric of 'freedom' and the practice of authoritarianism. Today, the neoliberal project continues to advance in some manifestly public, political ways, via corporate lobbying, discourses of the 'global race', continued dismantling of the welfare state and so on. But while the super-rich may benefit from such political agendas, it is questionable how active they are in supporting them.

My reason for suggesting we focus on 'agency' (in the sense of principle-agent problem) is that this provides the template for exploring a different, micro-scale way in which the 'political' and the 'economic' become separated, in a way that the concept of 'neoliberalism' won't capture. As I've argued here, agency allows money to remain in its teleological vacuum, as pure possibility. It exploits the capacity of money to "obey us without reservation" (Simmel, 2004: 325). It is through operating via agents that the super-rich are able to *avoid* developing a public or political identity, and money can retain its abstract and liquid character. In a sense, it is thanks to agents that the super-rich can happily *avoid* becoming a class-for-itself, just as it is thanks to agents that finance can avoid becoming anchored in any form of productive infrastructure.

This is not necessarily to contradict accounts of neoliberalism as a class-based project such as Harvey's, but simply to specify the limits of Marxist and institutionalist accounts of the neoliberal state for understanding the super-rich. As a conscious, class-based project, neoliberalism required considerable solidarity and reflexive self-understanding on the part of capitalists and ideologues themselves, through think tanks, lobbying bodies, political parties, philanthropic networks. As Streeck argues, what was unexpected about the neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1970s was that capital had the capacity to mobilise in a class-based fashion (Streeck, 2014). Corporations and capital owners discovered a common political agenda, which they pursued with a solidarity traditionally associated with labour and the Left.

The super-rich may benefit from the politics of neoliberalism. But as private individuals, relying on money for the maximisation of their security, their access to elite spaces, their engagement with culture, their shared political agenda is not an explicit or express one. They may belong to a class-in-itself, but arguably it is not a class-for-itself. In the political conflicts between capital and labour, which the neoliberal state attempts to settle, the strategy of the super-rich is to become insulated from all conflict altogether. For Harvey, the enforcement of pro-capitalist public order is a key objective of the neoliberal state; the super-rich alternative is to retreat from such order, using private security and infrastructure. The principle-agent relation is an individualisation and privatisation of political interest, converting the use of symbolic and physical power into just another form of private contract.

In a simple case of this relationship, one party is the 'principle' and another is the 'agent'. For example, there is the individual shareholder who owns stock in a company, and the manager who runs the company to maximise dividends. Or there is the holder of some savings, and the private fund manager who looks after those savings. But in the messier reality of financialised capitalism, where there are chains of intermediaries and many activities within large banks which are unknown both to those banks' executives and to their shareholders, forms of delegation will be much more complex than this. The same individual or institution will be 'principle' in one set of relationships, and 'agent' in another. This is not one class contracting another class to act on its behalf. Rather these are webs of contract and negotiation, *between* the super-rich.

For those members of the traditional upper middle class who (as Dorling details) now find themselves excluded from economic growth, one of the easiest ways of entering the 1% or the 0.1% is not to seek out opportunities for exploitative relations, as Marx might have supposed. Rather it is to seek out new opportunities for mutually-advantageous service, contract and negotiation with the super-rich. Becoming an expert on high value property, moving into private money management, establishing a new school, specialising in ultra-high value interior decorating - these are activities which, in London, propel university graduates to levels of income and wealth that the traditional professions no longer can.

What this suggests is that super-rich studies need to recognise the importance of non-hierarchical, non-exploitative dyadic contractual relations, to the production and re-production of extreme wealth. The pairing of 'principle' and 'agent' is the critical relation and political-economic form. The critique of neoliberalism focuses often on how money pollutes politics and public life (e.g. Crouch, 2011). The critique of the super-rich might need to focus on the reverse, how wealth is kept entirely separate from politics and public life, through strategic acts of delegation, where the delegate is also a delegator.

In many situations, this may come to light as a form of apparent corruption or low-level fraud, as when professions such as accountancy become revealed as no less amenable to fee-chasing as anyone else, or CEOs are found to inflate their pay regardless of their performance. And yet, while these may attract ire on traditional liberal grounds (that the public is being harmed), these are entirely normal if viewed as principle-agent problems: unlike 'professionals', agents are assumed to be no less avaricious than the principles they contract with. Meanwhile, absenting capital from the evaluative public sphere is entirely the purpose of delegating power to agents. Part of what the contracted agent offers the principle is the ability to outsource moral accountability. Professional services firms command very large fees, in exchange for forms of moral under-writing - declaring that activities are transparent and trust-worthy, sometimes when they are not. One of the capacities of money when combined with agents is to move blame around at high speed, through dense networks that are immune to public or political gaze. The greatest form of negative liberty is the freedom even from the consequences and truth of one's own actions. In that sense, agents offer the owner of money the most euphoric nihilistic ideal: to be free not only from moral judgement, but also from one's own conscience.

Sociological challenges

The reason for conceiving the higher reaches of capitalism in terms of 'principle agent problems' is not intended as a concession to the methdological individualism of game theory or economistic theories of governance, although there is a risk of reinforcing these. It is rather an attempt, as per the study of economics' 'performativity', to recognise that any social world is partly structured by the concepts and tools that are available to its inhabitants. Moreover, just as Simmel developed a sociology of money out of elements that were common to the marginalist economics of his time, perhaps we can develop a sociology of the super-rich by adopting elements of elites' own self-understanding.

Returning to the new challenges to sociology posed by Savage, studying relationships and contracts of agency has various advantages. Firstly, it allows us to take money seriously, without imposing a Weberian theory of power or a Marxian theory of class upon it. In this paper, I suggested, following Simmel, that to value money *as money* is to revel in a teleological vacuum, in which all future possibilities are kept open as much as possible. It is to live in a state of arbitrariness, where money can be experienced as perfect liquidity, without friction. As an affective, moral or psychological disposition, this is the opposite of debt and guilt (which, as is often remarked on, share the same German word, *Schuld*). Where debt/guilt involve inescapable forms of control and relationship to the past, the super-rich seek an extreme form of negative liberty that lacks all normative restraint and relationship only to the future.

But while a Simmelian approach to money may help to illuminate the liquid monetary fetishism of the super-rich, it is incomplete without some awareness of the institutions and relations which insulate this fantasy from public politics and culture. This would include the technological infrastructure (cables, data centres etc), while allows money to be *virtually* frictionless in its movements (MacKenzie, 2014). Then there are institutions which 'sell' national citizenship, supported by companies such as Henley and Partners (registered in Jersey, UK) which sell "citizenship solutions" to the super-rich (Milmo, 2014). Family offices, whose work includes removing all inconveniences associated with the trans-national lifestyles of the super-rich, are another case worth exploring (Glucksberg, 2014). Other agency services - body guards, private tutors, private transport, specialist real estate agents, private telecommunications, specialist art dealers - all do important work in facilitating the micro-cosmic disembedding of super-rich elites from politics, public space and public culture.

Secondly, the approach I am advocating here follows Savage's suggestion that we describe first, then explain (tentatively) second. This is especially important given the severe methodological problems posed to sociologists by the super-rich, where interview access and survey data are very hard to come by. Agents, of various kinds, serve like the tips of icebergs: they do not reveal what is below the surface, but they do at least confirm where the rest of the iceberg is located. Burrows has shown that agents can even be used as sources of quantitative data, if viewed inventively: Knight Frank estate agents, who broker a lot of very high value real estate in London, also serve as a source of data on where ultra-high-worth properties are located geographically (Burrows, 2013).

Finally, there are a couple of other challenges posed by Savage. One is to correctly name or identify this 'class'. My argument would suggest that we should avoid the term 'class', at least in any Marxian sense of a socio-economic group which sits in relation to another group. While Dorling gives plenty of worrying evidence that the '1%' is effectively exploiting the whole of the rest of society, it is difficult to conceive of this as a class relation. If the super-rich has a politics at all, perhaps it is to *avoid* becoming a class, precisely so as to avoid having any embedded relationship to public, state, society or productive economy.

The other challenge is how to account for the dynamics of openness and closure surrounding the super-rich. Clearly there are elements of competition involved here, and there are successful entrepreneurs and celebrities within this stratum. But by stressing the role of agency, we can understand this as neither an open competition, nor a closed aristocracy. Mills notes how corporations behave in a competitive-yet-monopolistic fashion, neither quite in the market, nor outside it either. This is the essence of strategy, to position oneself in a competitive game where one is immune to competition. It is this that agents offer: a degree of closure from the competitive market, although still a form of closure that is available to buy.

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