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## The Social Register: Staying Relevant in the Post-Industrial Age

David Broad, *University of North Georgia*

**Abstract:** The *Social Register* has been since 1888 a defining feature of the American social upper class which has been argued by Baltzell, Domhoff and others as a governing class. From its beginnings in the flowering of the corporate oligarchy in the industrial age, the *Social Register* has changed relatively little in character or content. Recent journalistic and social scientific examinations of Social Registry have questioned its continuing relevance to the thesis that the social upper class is a governing class. This paper examines some of the foundational work of Domhoff and others and extends that examination to recent developments in the symbolic representations of Social Registry.

**Keywords:** Social register; Social upper-class; Recombinant appellation

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The *Social Register* was first published in 1888 during the "Gilded Age" and the ascendance of the American corporate oligarchy as industry bloomed. It was an attempt to codify the social standing of the newly-rich modeled after British aristocracy and its listing in *Burke's Peerage* published beginning in 1826. As Dixon Wecter wrote in 1937:

Here at last, unencumbered with advertisements of dressmakers and wine merchants, enhanced by large, clear type and a pleasant binding of orange and black – which if anything, suggested the colors of America's most elegant university – was a convenient listing of one's friends and potential friends. It was an immediate triumph (Wecter 1937:232).

The *Social Register* was originally published for New York in 1888, followed by Boston and Philadelphia (1890), Baltimore (1892), Chicago (1893, the year of the Columbian Exposition), Washington D.C. (1900), Buffalo and St. Louis (1903), Pittsburgh (1904), San Francisco (1906) and Cleveland and Cincinnati-Dayton (1910).

Those editions were published annually until the unified national edition debuted in 1977. Volumes for Providence, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Seattle-Portland, Pasadena-Los Angeles, Detroit and Richmond-Charleston-Savannah-Atlanta were published for periods between 1905 and 1927 but were "discontinued because of lack of interest" (Baltzell 1953:269). Each of the cities had a panel of social upper class matrons who determined the founding families of each edition and established norms of inclusion and nomination. Throughout the history of the *Social Register*, some form of nomination by those already listed has been required. These were the families of the new industrial wealthy, who Warner and others (1963) referred to as the "lower-upper class."

In 1967 G. William Domhoff published a widely read and heuristic book, *Who Rules America?* (Domhoff 1967) The thesis of that book was that the social upper class, which was described as being personified by listing in the *Social Register*, was a governing class. Later investigators have posited other criteria for membership in a governing or ruling class in America, but the argument made by Domhoff and in the present reported research is that the persistence of names and

families in the *Social Register* itself suggests a level of relevance to Social Registry. This was in opposition to the widely-subscribed-to theory of C. Wright Mills that a power elite had formed that was a much more meritocratically produced social entity than the family-based social upper class. The influential book by C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956) had framed much of the critical sociological discussion of the structure of U.S. societal governance. Although Mills did examine the role of such social entities as the Ivy League and certain of its fraternities, senior societies and eating clubs in the construction of the national elite class, his emphasis was more on the recruitment of the talented middle-class students at the Ivies for fast-track executive positions. Mills downplays, primarily by omission, the enduring central role of the social upper class in shaping societal governance. So Domhoff instigated a new wave of social science research aimed at the role of the social upper class that at first found publication opportunities limited to second-and-lower tiered academic outlets, such as *The Insurgent Sociologist*. The 1975 Special Issue of that critically-oriented journal contained empirically-impeccable articles on the connections between the social upper class and many of the institutions and organizations that Mills had identified as central to *The Power Elite*. Eventually, and largely through applying rigorous quantitative analysis to the upper-class/governing-class thesis, the idea gained credence in the more mainstream and top-tier journals.

Domhoff followed *Who Rules America?* with several other books and numerous articles further detailing the persistence of data supporting his thesis that the social upperclass is a governing class. Domhoff's second book on the social upper class and its position in governance was *The Higher Circles* (1970). One of the most convincing of his contributions to that thesis was *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats: A Study in Ruling-Class Cohesiveness* (1974). In that work, Domhoff describes the direct role of the social upper class club, the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, in providing a secure and upper-class-toned gathering place for the political and economic elites of the globalized world. Domhoff's publications included six

additional editions of *Who Rules America?* (Domhoff 1983, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014).

In the first edition of *Who Rules*, Domhoff posited that several features of the listings in the *Social Register* support his thesis that the social upper class is a governing class. Those features were (1) that members of the boards of directors of enterprises such as The Fortune 500 and their families are listed, (2) that listing required letters of nomination from current listees therefore insuring continuity, and (3) that members of the social upper class had been found in studies published in the 1920s and 1950s as regarding listing in the *Social Register* as significant (Domhoff 1967:13). Following the theme of continuity, Broad began in 1977, and followed up in 1996 and 2013 a quantitative study of the continuity of *Social Register* families' lineages as they persist in *Social Register* listing. The names used in that analysis were drawn from the works of Gustavus Myers (1936) and Ferdinand Lundberg (1937) which are regarded as seminal in the study of the social upper and governing class. In addition to documenting the persistence of family surnames, that three-tiered study also noted the use of naming patterns including the re-use of names with Jr. or numbered full names, such as John Doe III. Also examined in those studies was a pattern of naming that includes the use of lineage surnames including matrilineages as given and middle names, which is referred to as "recombinant appellation" (Broad 1996:175). The conclusions of the 1996 phase of that research on listings in the *Social Register* included that the persistence of surnames, the use of numerical serialization, and the phenomenon of recombinant appellation support the thesis that the social upper class continues to be invested in the continuity of their lineages (Broad 1996). That research is cited in the last five editions of *Who Rules America?* (Domhoff 1998 – 2014). Tables 1 and 2 are the findings from the three examinations of the names in the *Social Register* following names cited by Myers (1936) and Lundberg (1937) and appearing in the 1940 *Social Register* as reported in Broad (2013) which supports Domhoff's and Broad's thesis that the social upper class embodies their investment in continuity of lineage in the naming practices and listing in the *Social Register* in general.

**Table 1. Continuities of *Social Register* Names: 1940, 1977, 1995 and 2013**

Individuals with Descendants in 1940 <i>Register</i>	Name matches (M), recombinants (R), and numbered (3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , ...) in		
	1977 Register	1995 Register	2013 Register
Adams, Charles F.	M,R,4	M,R,4	M,R,3
Aldrich, Nelson	M,R,2	M,R	M,R
Ames, Oakes	R,3	R,3	R
Armour, J. Ogden	R,4	4	R,4
Astor, J.J.	(name in)	(name in)	R,4
Baer, George F.	R,3	R,3	R,3
Baker, George F.	M,R,3	M,R,3	M,R,5
Beekman, Henry	R	(name in)	(name in)
Belmont, August	M	M	M,R
Biddle, Nicholas	M,R,4	M,R,4	M,R,Jr,2
Blair, John I.	R,3	R,3	R
Brevoort, Henry			
Brooks, Peter C.	R,3	R,3	R
Brown, Alexander	M,R,3	M,R,3	M,R,4
Cabot, George	R	R,3	M,R,3
Carnegie, Andrew	M,3		R
Cassatt, A.J.	M,R	(name in)	M
Choate, Joseph	M,5	M	M,R,6
Clews, Henry	M	R	M,R
Cope, Thomas Pym	M	R	(name in)
Cravath, Paul			
Crocker, Charles	M,R,3	M,R	M,R,Jr
Cromwell, W. Nelson	3	4	R,2
Derby, Elias	(name in)	(name in)	Jr
Dodge, Cleveland	M,R,3	M	M
Dolan, Thomas	M,5	M,4	M,4
Drexel, Anthony	3	4	M,4
Duke, James B.	R,3	R,3	R,3
Du Pont, Coleman	5	R,5	R,4
Elkins, Stephen B.	M,4	M,4	M,4
Field, Marshall	M,R,5	M,R,6	M,R,6
Flagler, H.M.			
Ford, Henry	M,R,4	R,4	R,4
Frick, Henry Clay	M,3	M,3	M,2
Garrett, John W.	M,2	M,3	M,4

**Table 1. (Continued)**

Individuals with Descendants in 1940 <i>Register</i>	Name matches (M), recombinants (R), and numbered (3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , ...) in		
	1977 Register	1995 Register	2013 Register
Goelet, Peter	(name in)		(name in)
Gould, Jay	R,3	M,R,3	M,R,3
Griswold (family)	4	3	3
Harriman, E.H.	3	(name in)	(name in)
Havemeyer, H.O.	M,3	M,3	M,3
Hill, J.J.	R,4	M,R,5	M,5
Hopkins, Johns	M,3	R	(name in)
James, D. Willis	M,R,3	4	4
Knox, Philander	R,4	R,4	R,4
Ledyard, L. Cass	M	M	M
Lee, Ivy	R,3	R,4	R,5
Leiter, Levi			
Livingston, Robert	M,R	M,R,3	M
Longworth, Nicholas	M		
Lorillard, Pierre	R	R	R
McCormick, Cyrus	M,R,3	R,3	R,3
Mellon, Andrew	4	R,3	R,3
Mills, D.O.	R,3	R	R,Jr
Morgan, J.P.	M,4	M,5	M,4
Palmer, Potter	M,3	M	M,3
Patterson, Joseph M.	R,3	R,3	M,4
Payne, O.H.	3	(name in)	(name in)
Peabody, Joseph	R,3	R,3	R,Jr
Penrose, Boies	M,3	(name in)	R,Jr
Perkins, George	M,4	M,R,3	M,R,3
Perkins, Thomas	M,3	M	M
Phelps, John T.	M,R,3	R	R
Phillips, Adolphus	3	3	4
Pulitzer, Joseph	M,4	M,4	M,5
Rhineland, William C.	R	(name in)	(name in)
Ridgeway, Jacob			
Rockefeller, John D.	M,R,4	R	R
Rogers, H.H.	R,3	R,3	(name in)
Roosevelt, James	M,R,4	M,R,4	M,R,5
Ryan, T. Fortune	M,R,3	M,R,3	M,R,4
Schermerhorn, Peter	(name in)	4	4

**Table 1. (Continued)**

Individuals with Descendants in 1940 <i>Register</i>	Name matches (M), recombinants (R), and numbered (3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , ...) in		
	1977 Register	1995 Register	2013 Register
Schiff, Jacob			(name in)
Schley, Grant B.	M,R,3	R,3	R,3
Schuyler, Peter	M	M	M
Scott, Thomas	M,R,4	4	M,R,5
Stettinius, Edward R.	R	M	R,Jr
Stillman, James	M,3	R,3	R,3
Stokes, Thomas	M,R,3	M,R,4	M,R,3
Taylor, Moses	M,R,4	R,4	R,4
Thorndike, Israel	3	(name in)	3
Vanderbilt, Cornelius	(name in)	(name in)	R
Van Rensselaer, K.	R	(name in)	M,R
Villard, Henry	M	M	M
Wanamaker, John	M	M	M
Whitney, William C.	R,4	R,3	R,4
Widener, P.A.B.			(name in)

All the while that the new directions in power structure research were gaining a foothold in social science, the social upper class as identified by Domhoff was listed in 13 city editions of the Social Register. So the social networks that could be mobilized in the interests of the social upper class were communities, or networks of friends who socialized with one another, attended each other's children's debutante balls and weddings. They established and maintained the very private clubs in their cities that were modeled, as their class was modeled after the British aristocracy, on the gentlemen's clubs of their dear mother country. Probably with the exception of the New York Registerites, the families listed in the 12 to 25 city editions from 1910 onward knew each other personally. As Cleveland Amory, a southern socialite who gently broke the code of silence of the class, opined in 1960, "In Richmond we don't need a book to tell us who is in society" (Amory 1960:123). The New York listees were just too numerous, and too, the New York Social

Register had the role of listing families that were not primarily residents of any other Register city. But even in New York, there were the clubs that broke the size of the city's upper class down to sociable scale: The Union Club, The Union League, The Century Association, The Metropolitan Club, The Cosmopolitan Club, Harmonie, University Club and The Knickerbocker. Then, after 89 years of the Social Register's existence as city editions, a sea change occurred – the 1977 unified national Social Register.

Exactly how the decision was arrived at to publish a national Social Register has not been revealed publicly. Stephen Higley (1995) cited society insider Nan Birmingham with the 1978 observation that it was "...a reflection of the national solidarity of the upper class and also of cost considerations" (Higley 1995:28). From 1977 to 1994, the Social Register continued to publish the national volume in the well-established format. The main body of the book included the family entries listed

**Table 2. Summary of Matches, Recombinants, and Numbered**

	1940		1977		1995		2013	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Name in	87	100.0	80	92.0	77	87.0	82	94.3
Matches			45	51.7	30	34.5	34	39.1
Recombinants			42	48.3	40	46.0	41	47.1
Numbered			58	66.7	46	52.9	47	54.0

alphabetically by the name of the male-head-of-household, and also including the maiden name of the wife and mother of the family, the colleges and clubs of the adult members, the names and schools of “juniors and misses” of prep school age, and addresses and phone numbers. All germane information for identifying, locating and contacting members of the social upper class listed. Other sections of the Register included The Clubs, The Colleges, Married Maidens, and the names of the officers of The Clubs. In addition, supplemental publications were sent to subscribers, including The Summer Register which included the summer residences of Register families, their yachts’ names, home ports, lengths, beams, tonnage and builders, and a section mysteriously headed “Dilatory Domiciles” which included recent relocations, births, deaths and other changes in information. But the national Social Register, while it may have reflected national upper class solidarity, it did not reflect the idea that while we may think globally, that we act locally. Then in 1994, the Register Association tried something new – The Social Register Observer.

Issue I of The Social Register Observer was a slender magazine of 34 pages, that brought the lifestyle of the social upper class to visual life. The Introduction to that publication reveals something of the motivation of the Register Association:

For more than 100 years, the Social Register has provided those listed with current residential and club information as well as announcements of marriages and deaths. Earlier issues contained information on engagements to marry, visiting days, European arrivals and departures, wartime military service, and certain social events.

It is in this tradition of service that the Association herewith introduces the Social Register Observer. This publication will offer coverage of material which may no longer be readily available from other sources and which has relevance for subscribers. Written comments and inquiries will be welcomed and considered for publication in future issues.

Beginning with this, the summer 1994 number, the Social Register Observer will be published concurrently with both the winter and summer volumes of each year’s edition. This first issue is being sent to those listed. Future issues will be included with annual subscriptions. (Social Register Observer 1994:4)

Issue I of The Observer had as its first content after the Introduction a full page photo of a definitively upper class wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Porter Farrar Fleming which cited their perfect class credentials including addresses, schools and that they were wed at St. James Church in New York. This was followed by additional wedding and engagement announcements with bride and bride-to-be photos. Next was an interview with two New York society mavens about “The Old Days” followed by the well-photographically-documented reportage of a society birthday party at Burlingame Country Club, a Register club, two more historical articles, two obituaries, and pages of birth and marriage announcements. Thus The Observer seemingly fulfilled the promise in its Introduction that the “tradition of service” that the city editions had provided was being renewed by the Social Register Association.

Following the appearance in 1994 of the Social Register Observer as a separate publication, the

Register began including a glossy and colorful section titled Social Register Observer in its hardbound main winter edition and in the softbound summer editions. These sections contained the promised material such as wedding, engagements, debutantes, obituaries and articles by and about Registerites. And there was advertising. That there was no advertising had been a hallmark of the Social Register from its very beginning. The ads were typically of high-tone products in keeping with the tastes, proclivities and budgets of the upper class, but it was seen by some immediately as crass commercialism. The first ad ever, on page 3 of The Social Register Observer Number II was from Tiffany & Co. Nevertheless, the main thrust of the Observer has been to give real faces and real places affirmation that may have been lost in the nationalization of the class.

When the Register consisted of city editions, there was a glimpse of the awareness of the social upper class that they existed beyond the social confines of their city enclaves, and that was a volume called The Locator. In that volume one could find anyone listed in any of the 12 to 25 city editions. The Locator vanished with the single national edition in 1977, but reappeared in the Social Register Observer Winter 2016 edition, as a section entitled Social Register Locator Volume I. This section of the Observer listed Registerite families by state, city and ZIP Code. This gave listees the ability to see exactly who of their class they live nearby! It was a restoration of the recognition of the relevance of geographic location in producing community. The Social Register has come full-circle from its original understanding that they were based in actual communities, through the reflection of the “national solidarity of the upper class” (Higley 1995:28) to the provision of the ability to actually see who your local upper class peers are.

The trend toward the Social Register’s recognition of the importance of place continues. In May of 2019, the Social Register Observer was accompanied by a one-page Membership Report that enumerated 5 items of interest. Number 1 was titled “**EXCITING UPDATES**” in the distinctive font color of the cover of the Social Register itself. The subjects of these updates were “**8**

**celebrations...9 gatherings and one impromptu party in Paris,”** all emboldened as shown here. (Advisory Committee for the Social Register Association 2019) Several of those celebrations were the subjects of full-length articles in the Summer 2019 Observer. One was an event in San Francisco in which the Social Register co-hosted an evening with the Society of Colonial Wars. Another was a “Spirited Cocktail Party” held at the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston. A third was a story on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner of the City Tavern Club in Georgetown. All these articles included numerous photographs of participants and the physical settings. In addition, the Summer 2019 Observer promoted “Upcoming SR Happenings” in Chicago, Cincinnati and San Francisco.

Number 2 was the announcement of “...our **first Reciprocal Club Agreement**” with the Explorer’s Club, which while not named in the Membership Report was identified on the Register website, and the benefits accruing to Registerites include invitation to events at the Explorer’s Club digs on the fashionable East Side of Manhattan.

The third item in the Report was the introduction of the **Social Register Foundation**, which was “...sponsoring its first activities and getting members involved with its cultural, educational and charitable missions.” (Social Register Association 2019) On page 43 of the Summer 2019 Observer, Registerites are invited to send the Foundation \$133 symbolizing the age of the Social Register Association, and in return they will receive a “subtle and attractive” Social Register pin – while subtle, it would be readily recognized by any Registerite by its orange-on-black logo.

Fourth in the Report is the boast that member contributions of material for the Observer are up four-fold! And Registerite authors are also on the rise. Fifth, the Report confirms what many authors have noted about the social upper class, (for example Broad 1996 and 2013) that they regard lineage, including length and continuity of family lineage, as of great value. Hence: “We celebrate the long multi-generational arc of old families returning to the Social Register and outstanding

new like-minded members welcomed into our 133-year-old Association. Criteria for membership remain high while the number of members is about the same as in 1934" (Advisory Committee for the Social Register Association 2019).

The Social Register Association has apparently come to the realization that the full meaning of the identity of the social upper class, and its sustainability are rooted in social place. Place was originally explicitly present in Social Registry as the city editions, and after some years of Registry being a national phenomenon, the Social Register through the Social Register Observer, has returned focus to the cities where the class culture ultimately resides.

In recent years the role of the Social Register as a vehicle of social upper class cohesion and the consolidation of the class's socio-political and economic power has been described as waning. By 1980, Registerites were telling New York Times reporter Carey Winfrey that "It was always overrated as a social book. It's just a convenience." (and) It's lost its influence...It isn't used so much anymore." (and) "I don't think its exclusive reputation is well founded. I have more friends out of it than in it." So Winfrey refers to it as "...that archaic anachronism that presumes to extract the socially prestigious from the rest of us." But others noted the perspective that "There is a certain additional confidence sent people when they're in it, particularly at certain social levels" (Winfrey 1980). In 1988, Nelson W. Aldrich Jr., great-grandson of the Aldrich Family founding oligarch who was a powerful U.S. Senator and architect of the Federal Reserve System, wrote an analysis of the decline of the social upper class as a governing class from his own personal perspective. Aldrich attributes much of that decline to the ascent of the new "can-do" entrepreneurs of the latter quarter of the twentieth century, and that was before the internet (Aldrich 1988). In a lengthy, literary review of the Aldrich work, Kurt Andersen described the role of popular culture in the transformation of the societal view of the social upper class, "Where once Cary Grant's characters embodied America's conception of aristocrats, by the late sixties it was Thurston Howell III, Jim Backus's over-the-top twit on Gilligan's Island, who defined Old Money character" (Andersen 1988). The novelist Tom

Wolfe opined in 2002 that the "world of social luster has been so overshadowed by celebrities that it doesn't have any kick anymore" (DiGiacomo 2002). The relative power of new money and new corporate leadership in the post-industrial age have cast a shadow over the historical significance of familial claims of status and its role in class hegemony. As Park Avenue socialite Nan Kempner said in a New York Times interview in 1997, "The Fortune 500 list is infinitely more valuable. The Social Register has never been on my mind" (Sargent 1997). It has been noted that some Registerites have let their subscriptions and listing lapse because of the perception that Registry has lost significance in comparison to say, the Fortune 500. In 1988 there were approximately 35,000 families listed in the Social Register (Winship 1988) and in 2014 that number was down to approximately 25,000 (Smith 2018). Some listees do not regard Registry as anachronism. Gustavus Ober is president of Ober, Onet and Associates, a public relations firm located in the socially acceptable East 90s of Manhattan, which advertises that they organize events of "particular distinction." (<http://www.oberonet.com>). According to Ober, "The Social Register gives a final symbol of authority, like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" (Sargent 1997). And there is evidence that the Social Register Association themselves will not go too gently into that good night of socio-economic irrelevance.

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