THE "NEW RUSSIAN" AS SOCIO-CULTURAL ARCHETYPE:
ITS FEATURES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper presents the archetype of the "New Russian" as a cultural image which summarizes, for many people, "what not to be." "New Russians" — the nouveaux riches — are seen as greedy, lazy, stupid, uneducated, and dishonest, and mocking references to them are made constantly in conversation and the media. The widespread ridiculing of the "New Russian" is a means through which cultural values are being reinforced. Many businesspeople strive to assert a positive identity for themselves which is the opposite of that of the cartoonish "New Russian," and this is arguably beneficial to the development of constructive business and social practices.

Two "New Russians" run into each other at a casino one night. One says to the other, "that’s a great tie, how much did you pay for it?" "Oh, it’s by a big Italian designer. I got it in Paris for $300." "Really? Well, I know where you could have bought the same tie for $500!"

In a bookstore, the clerk asks a "New Russian," "maybe you want something lighter?" "It’s all the same to me. I came by car."

Mephistopheles offers a "New Russian" anything he wants. "How about the biggest bank in Russia?" asks the "New Russian." "No problem," answers the Dark One. "What do I have to give you in return?" asks the "New Russian." "Just surrender your soul. Sign here on the dotted line," answers Mephistopheles. The "New Russian" frowns, and asks, skeptically, "Is that all you want, my soul? I don’t get it, what’s the catch?"

Anecdotes, such as these, about so-called "New Russians," are told at almost every dinner party or other casual gathering in Russia, and they appear constantly in newspapers and television stand-up comedy reviews; the image and foibles of "New Russians" is the dominant theme of current Russian humor. However, the image of "New Russian" is not merely a vehicle for humor; in this paper, I argue that this multi-faceted stereotype plays a crucial role in the collective negotiation of conceptions of wealth, business, and social class.

The stereotype can be summarized thus: "New Russians" are those who went from "dirt to prince" [griaz’ v kniaz’] overnight, who made stupendous fortunes in shady ways without effort. "New Russians" spend their money recklessly; they resent spending less for something than their acquaintances. They while away their nights at casinos, and their afternoons shopping in designer stores, buying Versace outfits by the dozens. They build vulgar red brick mansions on the outskirts

1The only other recurrent theme, significantly, centers on the unpaid salaries of workers.
of Russian cities, wantonly tearing down small forests and spoiling the local environment (both social and ecological) in the process.

"New Russians" are consistently represented as being utterly stupid and uncultured, as having no spiritual sensibility and no scruples. They converse in the slang of criminals, and otherwise mangle the Russian language. It is hard to discern "New Russians" from Russian bandits (mafiosi), because they are either one and the same, or they work so closely together that there is hardly any difference. The four items which symbolize the "New Russian" everybody knows: Maroon suit, Mercedes, cellular phone, and gold chain.

This stereotype, or "archetype" of the "New Russian" is important to examine as a cultural phenomenon from the standpoint of social group formation taking place in post-Soviet Russia. Of course, images of the unrefined "nouveau riche" exist in every society, but these images vary according to the cultural norms of specific societies. In addition, the intensity or ubiquity of the image of "nouveau riche" varies from society to society and from era to era. The fact that the image of the "New Russian" is so extensively deployed in Russia today, and is spoken or written of with such fervor, indicates its central importance as a cultural symbol.

As anthropologists have established, cultural symbols are not merely representations of existing realities, but serve as operative and complex tools in the construction and negotiation of cultural values (Geertz 1973, Ortner 1973, Turner 1974). The image of the "New Russian" is just such a tool, employed in a variety of complex ways in the ongoing collective construction or conceptualization of Russian society, social classes, and modes of behavior — both in the public sphere of economic activity, and in the private spheres of family and friendship. The image has multiple meanings and sometimes contradictory values, depending on context.

Perhaps most importantly, the image of the "New Russian" summarizes, for many people, "what not to be." It provides, in the condensed form of a cartoon-like image, a model of social behavior in opposition to which people may define themselves and their activities. In other words, an image of a "way to be" is implicitly cast via the reflection of its opposite. This is a common symbolic phenomenon: depictions of moral corruption or criminality are culturally more compelling than images of good and virtue; the latter is inscribed through enactments or depictions of the former.

Here I want to examine the stereotypic image of the "New Russian" more closely, to discern some of its particular features, and the conception of social value which emerges as its opposite. My portrayal of the stereotype is a composite based on depictions provided in ethnographic interviews,

3The portrait of social virtue which results is not particularly original or unique. In many ways, it has its roots in Soviet era value systems, while also reflecting fairly universal (if generalized) "middle class" values. It is, however, important in that it is being reified, restated, practiced, invested with new meaning and value in the post-soviet era.
comments collected less formally through conversations, media portrayals, and the analysis of anecdotes.

The first thing which nearly everyone notes as the key defining feature of "New Russians" is that they made money overnight, through some combination of speculation, banditism, swindle, theft, trade, connections, and luck: the central point is that "New Russians" are said to have invested neither real work nor thought nor talent into making their money. They are represented as both lazy and impatient: if they can't make piles of money instantly they won't put in the effort. Productive enterprise is too complicated and time-consuming; "New Russians" may engage in all kinds of trade activities but don't have the education, talent, or patience for manufacturing enterprises.

When asked to expand further on the implications of the nature of "New Russian" business practices, informants declare (fervently) that such people further Russia's economic decline, because they are speculating, rather than adding value or creating jobs; and furthermore, they spend all their money on imported goods, and hide their fortunes in overseas banks. As they do not reinvest any of their profits in production, "New Russians" are not considered capitalists, but merely "robbers." This is an interesting point in that it clearly demonstrates a valorization of capitalist modes of production. It might be argued that the negative image of the "New Russian" abets the development of capitalist ideologies and practices. Through laments about the laziness of "New Russians" — their absolute lack of a desire to work, the social value of "honest labor" is also stressed.

Informants invariably invoke a comparison between "New Russians" and "real businessmen" — those who reinvest their profits and attempt to expand productive enterprises. Here it must be noted, however, that virtually everyone declares the near impossibility of doing "honest business" given the absurd tax structure and the total corruption within government bureaucracies, where bribe-taking is the order of the day. The practices of "New Russians" are thus presented as being a natural outcome of the absence of legal rationalism and the lack of support for the development of a healthy climate for industry. Some of the animosity which might be generated towards "New Russians" is defused by the sense that their existence is an inevitable outcome of inept government handling of economic transition.4

The second common characteristic ascribed to "New Russians" is a disdain for frugality. In the collective image they are not only not careful with their money, but are in fact said to be eager to waste their resources in profound and absurd ways; as one man, who works as an armed guard, declared, "For 'New Russians' money is like garbage — they are always trying to get rid of it." The

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4This ineptness is in turn ascribed to two phenomena: first, to the ubiquitous corruption of top politicians and communists-cum-capitalists, for whom the economic chaos and decline in Russia has been enormously profitable; and, second, to the presumably "eternal" inability of Russians to do anything right, as summed up in constant refrains such as, "Well, it's Russia, what do you want?" As I have argued elsewhere (Ries 1997), through such fatalistic discourses, social conflicts may be defused, but at the same time, rational attempts at social change, even on a small scale, may be derailed — made to seem hopeless and ridiculous.
first anecdote featured above demonstrates the supposed competition among "New Russians" to spend more for something than their fellows. With family budgets as tight as they are today, and with most people fixated on buying commodities as cheaply as possible, this presumed "anti-frugality" of "New Russians" has an intense negative resonance. Furthermore, informants stress that exhibitionist wastefulness is not a mark of the "true businessperson." As one small-scale entrepreneur (a woman who buys eggs to sell through street stands) remarked to me: "real businesspeople don't buy expensive cars like jeeps or Saabs, because what's the use? They will just break down on our roads or be stolen. A real businessperson lives modestly, reinvesting their capital so that capital can work for them."

A disdain for education and high culture is the third feature commonly stressed in representations of "New Russians." In the second anecdote featured, a "New Russian" regards books not in terms of their content but in terms of their weight and how lovely they will look on their bookshelves, not even understanding the contrast of heavy and light reading. Often, "New Russians" are seen as being young people who never finished their education but leapt into trading or shady dealing as soon as that was possible. Because of this, presumably, they never had time to realize the value of knowledge or culture. Their "unculturedness" in the context of their great wealth is said to affect society as a whole in negative ways. "Our young people see 'New Russians' flying around town in their Mercedes' and they want to do the same," lamented one middle-aged woman. "It's impossible to convince them that there is something to be gained through continuing their education."

Closely related to this is the sense that "New Russians" spurn all traditional spiritual values. The third anecdote suggests that they don't even understand the value of their "souls." People commonly remark that "New Russians" live for the moment and don't perceive any value beyond money and the pleasures of the flesh. Aside from their hallmark thirst for money, "New Russians" are seen as being wantonly dishonest, ruthless, uncharitable, and unconcerned with the fate of the people or the nation; in other words, they represent the reverse of all cherished moral and social values. As argued above, the exaggerated image of anti-social behavior attributed to "New Russians" can be seen as reflecting its opposite, that set of socio-cultural and spiritual values which people are trying to maintain despite the multiple transformations of Russian society. Watching the televised coverage of bard-singer Bulat Okudzhave's funeral procession, where young people were shown as also mourning his death, one man remarked, "thank god all our children don't want to just become 'New Russians' — some still cherish poetry, and spirituality."

In terms of their lifestyles, "New Russians" are also seen as overturning conventional moralities and limits. They are frivolous and capricious with their money, demanding — and achieving — the impossible. As one man commented, "a 'New Russian' sees a picture of a fountain in Florence and decides he wants one just like that for his own mansion, and he wants it by
tomorrow!" Presumably, "New Russians" drink and debauch all night, every night in flashy casinos and clubs charging $500 entrance fees. They think nothing of dropping five thousand for lunch in a gourmet restaurant. "New Russian" men sleep with their secretaries, cheating on their wives without concern. One newspaper article summarizes "New Russian" family relations under the caption: "A Variant of Life (the New Russian)"

Young millionaires successfully make grey weekdays radiant, trying to meet each day with novel sensations. And each morning to wake up to something new. Still, the "ship of love" (a euphemism for family life) in which sits the spouse, doesn't break apart, but quietly floats alongside. The occasional attentions of the husband, and a fixed amount of cash, fully satisfy the mistress of the ship. (Evening Moscow, Aug. 1, 1997, p. 5).

Anecdotes and tales about the sexual adventures of "New Russian" wives also circulate abundantly; however, in contemporary folklore the wives are noted most of all for their endless shopping exploits, as they cruise the cities of Europe in search of the latest designer clothes and absurdly pricey trinkets. Meanwhile, the children of "New Russians" are either tucked away in expensive private schools in Europe, or left to their own devices (and considerable allowances) in Russia. They are seen as being psychologically warped by all their wealth and the moral depravity around them. A brief piece in the newspaper "Arguments and Facts" claims that "statistics show that out of every 100 teenagers in Moscow drug treatment centers, only 23 are from proletariat families. The rest are the offspring of 'New Russians'." (Argumenty i fakty, No. 868, June 1997).

Like all social archetypes, the image of the "New Russian" is complex and fraught with contradictions. Despite their supposed greediness, "New Russians" sometimes engage in acts of flamboyant generosity. One government worker in Yaroslavl described how a "New Russian" treated all the guests in a summer rest home to huge banquets every evening, with imported delicacies and champagne. She remarked that he was "absolutely charming, making jokes, entertaining us all, handing out little presents." (She also noted that he was poisoned in a hospital room several months later and died). A Moscow teacher related how the "New Russian" father of one student, learning about attempts to establish a computer laboratory in the school, called and offered the teacher $3000, which he handed over in cash, requesting no documentation or receipts. Newspapers occasionally note the spontaneous generosity of "New Russians," who give money to hospitals, arts organizations, homes for invalids, and the like. Through their wealth and connections, "New Russians" occasionally accomplish difficult feats. Argumenty i fakty (866, May, 1997, p. 22) reports the following "exceptional" story:

In one good and well-respected but not highly privileged government clinic, a "New Russian" was being treated, by his looks and mannerisms... a bigwig bandit. Learning, from conversations with the head of the ward, that the hospital's doctors hadn't received their pay — miserly pay at that — in several months, the patient grabs his cellular phone,
calls some very influential official and in friendly tones, speaking as if between equals. says "hey, what kind of business is this, here I lay, they are really fixing me up, but these lads in white aren't being paid, what a muddle... You fix things up there, okay?" Within a couple days the entire personnel of the clinic received its pay...

Though tales like this one are quite possibly apocryphal, they suggest the complexities which an analysis of the image of "New Russians" must take into account. First, it appears that, as in so much folklore, traditional or contemporary, a glimmer of redemption is sought in the person of the anti-hero; in other words, in their narratives people (including journalists) seek some sense of social justice in the very persons ("New Russians") who collectively represent the collapse of social justice.

The second analytical problem which such narratives highlight is that of defining exactly who is a "New Russian." Whenever people touched on this theme in interviews I would ask them to explain who they considered to fall into this category. The answers were vague and inconsistent. In terms of particular social or professional groups, many informants cited bandits, bankers, and kiosk-owners as being "New Russians."

Significantly, government elites, high-level bureaucrats, and former communists turned capitalist bosses of large enterprises are not "New Russians" even though they are viewed as having acquired great fortunes in the past years, living lavish lifestyles at the expense of working people, as being corrupt, cynical, and brilliant at illegally privatizing state property. However much some of their practices may resemble those of "New Russians," they seem to be regarded as being in a quite distinct social category. In a sense, "New Russians" may serve as a symbolic buffer between the general populace and the political-economic elite, absorbing some of the contempt and hostility which those of more modest means might experience vis a vis the prosperous and powerful.

Often, "New Russians" are defined in terms of income. One man (who himself earns $300 per month) told me that a 'New Russian' is anybody who earns from $500 to $1000 per day. Yet another said that it is anyone who earns more than a million dollars a year. Contradicting these answers, however, many people cited much more modest incomes as defining "New Russians" — some even said that anyone earning over $1000 per month could be considered a "New Russian," reflecting, it seems, the gap between the average salaries of the majority of people and the relative

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5In a forthcoming paper I explore extensively the ways that people talk about the corruption of political elites, referring to them as "the real mafia" in opposition to the more obvious street mafia (Ries, n.d.).

6The fact that this is accomplished through humor is quite significant. Because "New Russians" are made to seem ridiculous and absurd, by most people they are viewed more with contempt than with outright hostility. One college student, herself the daughter of a successful entrepreneur, described how a "New Russian" studying in her institute clearly "buys" good grades at the end of the term. "She has gold rings on eight fingers, a fancy haircut, dresses — she stands out completely from the rest of us, most of us dress pretty much the same, and she stands out like a black spot... but nobody feels envy towards her... there is such a good escape from social envy: laughter. She makes herself ridiculous, and thus all the force of annoyance we might feel is defused in the most innocent way."
security a salary of $1000 provides. (Obviously, $1000 per month does not allow for nightclub entertainments, brick mansions, or the other symbols of wealth attributed to "New Russians").

Many people used criteria other than income to define "New Russians." One successful businessman (who excludes himself from the category of "New Russian") remarked that this is a very difficult thing to define:

"There are two categories of 'New Russians' — there are those criminal kinds, who associate with bandits and the criminal world and who are depicted in anecdotes, with maroon jackets and little education, who speak in criminal slang and so on. Then there is a category of 'New Russians' like my friend D., who considers himself a 'New Russian.' He buys up little provincial firms and fixes them up and they manufacture food products and beverages... one of those people who is attached more to culture, who sees himself as having spiritual values..."

The armed guard cited earlier said, in this vein: "Every Russian knows at least one 'New Russian' — a cousin, a relative, a neighbor, an acquaintance. They are those with no brains, none at all, their skulls are empty. They are pure criminals. They are bandits who buy beer at 50 cents per can and sell it in another place for $1.50. If you earn money through work you are not a 'New Russian.'"7 This answer was much more in line with the general conception of "New Russians" as people who make money through speculation — or at the best through trade — but not through productive work. This points to a clear distinction in many people's minds between production and distribution activities; the former is seen as beneficial to Russia while the latter is seen as barely distinguishable from criminality.

Businesspeople themselves often made this distinction, in interviews frequently highlighting those aspects of their work which "helped Russia" in opposition to a notion of pure commerce. One successful business-owner, who imports frozen goods with expired dates from Europe, has his staff paste new expiration dates over the old ones, and distributes them through stores and stands on the street, declared to me that "hundreds of people depend on my firm for their livelihoods."8 When I asked if he considered himself a "New Russian" he retorted, "what kind of 'New Russian'? I work all week from morning to night, there are constant problems to be solved, with customs, or our trucks breaking down, tax inspections, regulations..." A woman whose husband trades in Moscow real-estate, but who made his first capital as an audio-video "pirate" in the late 1980s, said "I guess we are 'New Russians' in the sense that we travel once a month to Europe and are building our own house [an elegant 20-room mansion with classical gardens, gazebos, and fountains], but my husband..."

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7Intriguingly, this man actually went on to comment that Sergei Mavrodi (whose pyramid scheme, MMM, defrauded hundreds of thousands of Russians in the early 1990s) doesn't belong in the "New Russian" category, since even though he engaged in fraud, he must have worked very hard at implementing his pyramid scheme. This shows the degree to which a "New Russian" image may be associated primarily with laziness or a lack of effort and work.

8This man did not reveal the reason for the profitability of his business to me; it was a mutual friend who explained the key detail of changing the expiration dates.
never stops working, I almost never see him. He is a very serious businessman... his company has restored dozens of old Moscow buildings." In our conversation, this woman stressed her high-culture background, her education, and the enormous amount of work and worry which she put into designing their new home.

These examples show the ways that many businesspersons try to dissociate themselves from the caricature "New Russian" image by stressing their hard work and the anxiety which accompanies it, their seriousness and dedication, and the contribution which their work makes to Russia in one form or another. Even a mafia gang-leader who I interviewed in Yaroslavl in 1995 (see Ries 1997: 195-196) emphasized all of these elements in his "profession," asserting that "bandits" provide a crucial service to Russian businesses in the face of a lack of clear laws and government support.

One final point about the contemporary folklore surrounding "New Russians" is crucial to make. The wealth, lifestyles, and dishonest, anti-social practices of "New Russians" are often represented as bringing about their own demise in one way or another. The most obvious danger of being a "New Russian" is that of getting killed. "New Russians" supposedly have no scruples, constantly cheat and defraud each other, try to destroy their competition through dubious means, and so on, and all of this presumably means they live under the constant threat of violence. As such, some of the common items associated with "New Russians" are vicious guard dogs, high fences, elaborate security systems, bodyguards, etc. People often ask, rhetorically, "who would want to live like that?" and in so doing, reassure themselves that though they may be struggling economically, at least they don't have to live in constant fear in fancy mansion-prisons.

There are consolations in the realm of social identity, as well, and these are perhaps the more significant, in terms of the maintenance of the social values key to the development of stable post-Communist social systems. To the extent that they identify with patterns of behavior in opposition to those of the folkloric "New Russian," the emerging middle and entrepreneurial classes in Russia today collectively reinforce an archetypal mode of practice based on the values of frugality, economic reinvestment, productivity, integrity, education, "culturedness," and so on. The socio-economic climate does not always make it easy to practice these values; indeed, there are often strong incentives to abandon these principles, at least situationally. But a sense of repugnance towards the conduct associated with "New Russians" — however much these may seem "natural" in Russia today — may ideologically incline individuals towards more constructive modes of practice.
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