

Coaching the Global Super-Bourgeoisie

Physical Lifestyle Intermediaries and the Management of Elite Social Capital

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EVEN as wealth increasingly concentrates within the top percentile of capital and income distribution, global economic elites continue to resort to external actors and authorities for their cultural and symbolic legitimation. The autonomy of these sources of legitimacy and the validating rituals they offer is intended to guarantee that the greatness of the super-rich is not reducible solely to their purchasing power. Legitimation must present itself as ontologically separate from raw economic capital, contributing to entrenching a meritocratic worldview of the social order. In this economic and ideological context, high-paying work opportunities exist for a service class whose various professions act as instruments and facilitators in converting large fortunes into other kinds of resources. As Goffman (1951, p. 303) noted long ago, “Wherever the symbolizing equipment of a class becomes elaborate a curator personnel may develop whose task it is to build and service this machinery of status.” In this way, elite meritocracy and distinction paradoxically require forms of intermediations that partly contradict the individualistic premise of meritocratic legitimacy.

During our research on the West Indian island of Saint-Barthélemy (Cousin and Chauvin, 2012a, 2013), we came across a number of professionals who specialize in direct services to the families of centimillionaires and billionaires who regularly stay there. Among these are the lifestyle intermediaries and coaches who assist the super-rich in optimizing their well-being and developing their body, personality, or living environment (Sherman 2011, 2015; Ramos-Zayas, 2023). These professionals must be differentiated from the less-skilled, lower-paid domestic employees with whom they rub shoulders in the complex organization of work that is increasingly taking place, and somehow resurging, in the large bourgeois houses of the US and Europe (Cousin and Lambert, 2019; Delpierre, 2022; Reynolds, 2022; Boyle and Vandebroek, 2025). But they also differ from other skilled professionals who manage the residences and ensure the mobility and security of their employers such as estate managers, head butlers, governesses, bodyguards, and private pilots. Employment subordination is often less obvious in the case of private coaches. Above all, the very skills they master are also desired to be learned for themselves by the super-rich. The relation of service and curation is thus traversed with an explicit magisterial logic, whereby coaches are expected to push their clients’ limits and transform their dispositions. Like the masters of arms or dance, preceptors, tea masters, and spiritual directors of yesteryear’s nobility (Roche, 1988; Brelot, 1992,

pp. 439–440; Surak, 2012), their explicit mission is to help their students excel in certain activities and legitimize them in the performance of their dominant identity.

In addition, physical lifestyle intermediaries can also be mobilized by their employers for the management and accumulation of social capital. Indeed, like the economic capital of the very rich, whose reproduction and accumulation is largely entrusted to wealth managers and financial advisers (Harrington, 2016; Herlin-Giret, 2019; Hoang, 2022; Bessière and Gollac, 2023), elite networks of personal connections are also often fostered and managed with the help of subservient intermediaries and social entertainers. Recent research has highlighted how married women and “girls” are still frequently tasked with such work, with various degrees of instrumentality and exploitation (Kendall, 2002; Hoang, 2015; Mears, 2020). Among the formal and informal structures organizing the sociability of the upper classes, some individuals and families also rely on delegating the maintenance of their social capital to highly skilled lifestyle and physical professionals.

This chapter focuses on the cases of a yoga teacher and massage therapist, whom we call Nathalie, and a tennis coach and personal trainer, whom we call Benjamin. Both work mainly for ultra-wealthy North American and European clients, many of whom are billionaires in dollars. The research it presents is based on twenty-five hours of in-depth interviews and dozens of additional hours of discussions with the two respondents, over several years (Cousin and Chauvin, 2019). Without naming their clients, we will provide information locating them precisely within the highest levels of socio-economic stratification and in the field of power (Cousin, Khan, and Mears, 2018).

The first section details Nathalie’s and Benjamin’s activities and employment conditions. In the second section, we look at their social and geographical trajectories and the early socialization to the cosmopolitan upper class that made these trajectories possible. The third section analyzes the social and spatial strategies these high servants of the super-rich deploy to select and renew their clientele. In the fourth section, we focus on the complexity of their interpersonal relationships with their students-clients, including the language of friendship they often adopt to describe them. This framing helps to mitigate the tension between their subordinate socio-economic position and their magisterial (athletic, moral, and sometimes cultural) role.

What Do High Servants Do?

Let’s begin by introducing Nathalie and Benjamin, as they were in 2019. For the past twenty years, fifty-seven-year-old Nathalie had been an independent yoga teacher and masseuse for an extremely wealthy clientele. For a dozen years, she worked with villa dwellers, yacht passengers, and luxury hotel guests in St. Barts, also paying them occasional visits in the Hamptons (Dolgon, 2005). Then, since moving to mainland France, she was at the service of their counterparts in Saint-Tropez (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 1998; Bruno and Salle, 2018; Salle, 2024). Her regular clients have included leading members of the global economic field of power: New York financiers, media moguls, conservative Midwestern industrialists, Silicon Valley tycoons, the owners of major French, Belgian, and Swiss companies, Hollywood stars and producers, art and sports celebrities, wealthy English and Italian aristocrats, Arab princes and princesses, the family of a former member of the Beatles, and that of the founder of one of the world’s largest private military companies.

For both yoga classes and massage sessions, Nathalie’s rates were usually around €250/hour. However, during the high season in St. Barts, or when she was called in on boats or by particularly luxurious hotels on the island, they went up to €500/hour, which was seven to fourteen times what a regular yoga teacher earned in Paris (Kock, 2019). It was then

common for her to be booked, sometimes by a single family or group, for eight- or ten-hour days, which included yoga and massages. Nathalie recounts how she has seen yoga evolve from an esoteric practice emblematic of an alternative lifestyle critical of capitalism (“a beatnik thing”) to a discipline for the body and mind particularly appreciated by elites, who see it as a way to not only increase their well-being and serenity (Vigarello, 2016), but also improve their concentration, intellectual faculties, and professional performance (Kucinskis, 2019).

During the summer of 2017, Nathalie divided most of her working time between three families. The Bs, who come from a line of renowned Dutch brewers, spent the season in their Tropezian villas, taking advantage of the opportunity to indulge in numerous activities, including yoga, and to have regular massages after their sporting exertions. Her second main client was a wealthy Belgian-Luxembourgish family, several of whose members studied yoga assiduously. Spending their summers in a large rental house on the Var coast—tended by a housekeeper, several housemaids, and a gardener—situated in a gated community with private beaches, a clubhouse, tennis courts, and a marina to moor their boat, they continued their quest for physical wholeness and full mindfulness, which had begun a few years earlier when Nathalie introduced them to yoga. One of their daughters, A., then in her thirties, a Stanford graduate living in the Bay Area and working for Google, was—according to Nathalie—her only student to be “studying yoga seriously” and on her way “to become a yogi.” Because she had chosen the Ashtanga vinyasa yoga of Mysore, her private classes with Nathalie strictly followed the rules set by the founder of this famous style of yoga. That summer, beyond her ordinary pursuit of personal well-being, performance, and transcendence, A. was also expecting her practice of yoga to prepare her physically and mentally for her forthcoming wedding, scheduled a few weeks later.

Finally, Nathalie’s third main clients were the Zs, a multi-centimillionaire family of physicians and private clinic owners, for whom she worked every summer in Saint-Tropez and with whom she had spent several months in Geneva on various occasions in the previous years. It was the Bs, with whom they were friends, who introduced Nathalie to the Zs. She massaged them and gave them group and individual yoga lessons. The Zs were particularly appreciative of Nathalie’s therapeutic ability to resolve long-term bodily pains and, by virtue of their profession, strongly contributed to her reputation among their upper-class friends in Geneva, some of whom came to visit them in their villa in Saint-Tropez because they knew they would be able to benefit from massages and yoga classes. The Zs’ social capital has thus brought in many more occasional customers, while their high level of economic capital has enabled them to bring her to Switzerland when wealthy vacationers desert Saint-Tropez, allowing Nathalie to compensate for the largely seasonal nature of her business in the seaside resort.

By comparison, Benjamin, a personal trainer and tennis instructor established in New York City, had a more regular annual work schedule. Thirty-three in 2019, he earned just over \$230,000 a year, placing him in the ninety-eighth percentile of US income distribution. Most of this sum (\$140,000) came from an annual sixteen-hour weekly contract with a wealthy Upper East Side family. For the previous four years, he had trained their thirteen-year-old son for three hours every Monday and Wednesday afternoon, coached him during Sunday tournaments and also often picked him up from school before training sessions at one of the most exclusive tennis clubs of Manhattan. Benjamin set up his playdates with young sparring partners and was always personally responsible for driving him to weekend tournaments. Added to this were several hours of weekly strengthening exercises, which took place in the gym of the family home, a vast duplex worth over \$40 million. Benjamin also followed his clients to the Hamptons during the summer months and was invited to accompany them

on vacation several times a year, traveling aboard their private jet to fly to Aspen, Miami, St. Barts, or Saint-Tropez.

He did not train his young students with the goal of turning them into professional athletes. The “kid” he was in charge of, the son of a Wall Street banker and scion of a three-generation lineage of Harvard graduates, was actually supposed to soon join one of the most prestigious preparatory schools on the East Coast. Both he and his family were therefore prioritizing academic excellence over sports achievements. However, athletic performance can play a crucial role in the admissions process to the best American universities (Stevens, 2009). Officially, the Ivy League is first and foremost an intercollegiate sports league, and being able to play for the tennis team of the school one is applying to *de facto* means being subjected to lower academic requirements (Karabel, 2005). For this reason too, Benjamin was integrally part of his clients’ social and cultural strategies of concerted cultivation and class reproduction (Lareau, 2011).

Moreover, he was also responsible for transmitting to his students a physical ease, athletic body hexis, and agonistic masculinity, all highly valued by New York’s economic elites and most lucrative professional sectors (Guilhot, 2006; Rivera, 2012). He accomplished this by setting examples and acting as a role model, giving directions, and fostering body-based learning:

Beyond tennis, there’s a lot of stuff to work on: behavior, posture, it depends on each kid. Some kids, they don’t know how to walk. And when you teach him to climb stairs or walk with his back straight, and the father sees that his son has made progress, he’s happy.

As for Nathalie, she is often assigned a similar mission with the teenage girls of the families for whom she works regularly, for instance, with one of the granddaughters of the Zs:

When she was a 16–17-year-old, she went through difficult times, because she had gained weight and so, she felt uncomfortable in her own skin. Since her girlfriends were quite good-looking girls who stayed with her during the holidays, she was feeling a bit like the ugly duckling: she wasn’t very confident, very shy, and she couldn’t speak in public. And I had noticed it. Thus, when I mentioned it to her grandmother, who wasn’t very happy either that she was gaining weight like that, she jumped at the chance and put her in my hands. She told me: “Nathalie, you take care of M.!” And during the whole summer, after discussing the matter with the girl, I made her exercise, do cardio to lose weight, I put her on a diet, I made her do vocal exercises, I gave her some meditation tips to learn how to speak in public and to get her confidence back. And I told her grandmother: “Listen: go to Merano [a renowned spa resort in the Italian Alps] with her, for a little treatment.” . . . And as a result, her granddaughter, she regained confidence and everything went well: right now, she’s doing very fine, she’s going to business school, and she’s with her boyfriend, who’s very fine too.

During the school year, in addition to his main student, Benjamin also provided a few hours of weekly tutoring to other Upper East Side families, including those of a former business partner of Mitt Romney and one of Donald Trump’s historic lawyers. There was, however, a second family with whom he had a stronger relationship: a Swiss immigrant couple with children living in a quintuplex worth \$15 million. Benjamin spent time there every week, picking up the teenage boy he had been training and occasionally giving him on-site exercise sessions. In addition, during weekends and summers at their Hamptons villa, he was almost systematically mobilized as a social asset by the head of the family, a prominent Madison Avenue gallery owner. Indeed, the latter, a former Top 500 ATP player, had explicitly integrated Hamptons stays and tennis matches into the management of his professional social capital, a common practice among the wealthiest gallerists of New York’s art scene.

The fact that each Hamptons' mansion has several guest rooms, as well as a private pool and a court, allows for an intense sporting sociability at home, organized by the "tennis pro." It is also common to invite friends and local acquaintances from neighboring villas to take advantage of the presence of the tennis pro and pay a visit for a lesson or session with him. For instance, Benjamin was regularly employed by some of his best clients to take part in what he called "billionaire games": doubles during which his clients strengthened their personal ties with their own bigger clients and business partners. Over time, these opportunities enabled him to expand and improve his personal network. In the Hamptons, his gallerist client successively introduced him to P. and S., two of New York's most renowned art advisors. P. is close to, and often works for, one of France's two leading contemporary art collectors. As for S., he himself became one of Benjamin's most valued clients. He regularly called on him to help maintain his network of gallery owners, artists, and major collectors, including hedge fund managers, Russian oligarchs, and Saudi princes. Having trained and organized tennis sessions for S., his family, and guests during several summers, Benjamin has thereby built many ties at the heart of the contemporary art world (Becker, 2008; Thompson, 2008). He recalled:

In the summer, his house in the Hamptons is like a hotel. . . . He always invites artists like J. [a very famous centimillionaire artist] and others. All the artists, the big artists, he invites them to his house to talk business. And he has very big clients: he's also the art advisor to D. [a Russian-Cypriot multi-billionaire] . . . And so there are artists, there's L. [a centimillionaire gallerist, generally considered the greatest art dealer in the world], there are clients, there's a famous chef who cooks. Everything is done to be perfect.

This section has highlighted how the pursuit of elite distinction also relies on the careful curation of habitus, with physical lifestyle intermediaries playing a key role in shaping and maintaining the embodied dispositions valued by their clients. Their work ensures that the cultivation of physical and social capital is seamlessly integrated into the everyday lives of the super-rich. To better understand the personal and professional trajectories of these intermediaries, it is necessary to explore how their social and geographical backgrounds have positioned them to navigate and adapt within the world of the global super-bourgeoisie (Cousin and Chauvin, 2021).

Early Socialization to the Upper-Class and Professional Trajectories

What socialization and what social and geographical trajectories have led Benjamin and Nathalie to their current position? Although they have experienced opposite social mobilities (rather downward for her and clearly upward for him), they both acquired early on a habitus and skills that subsequently played a crucial role in their professional activities.

The son of a nurse and a postal worker of Guadeloupean origin who died when he was a teenager, Benjamin joined early on one of the historic tennis clubs of Neuilly-sur-Seine, the very socially exclusive municipality where his father worked (Saint Martin, 1989; Waser, 1995). The club was thus one of his main educational settings and a context of socialization that brought him into contact with the French business elite and competitive sport from a young age:

I met the stars of the day. Do you remember? Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras . . . there was, for instance, the CEO of Canal+ who came to play; there were guys from TF1 [Canal+ and TF1 are two prominent French commercial television networks]; there were big businessmen:

people from Neuilly. You name it! . . . And when you're a kid, it becomes a bit like a family: they invite you on vacation, the parents have meals together. We spent our holidays at the tennis club. They had apartments in Deauville [Normandy's most upscale seaside resort], so we used to go there on vacation and to play tournaments. We'd stay for two weeks each time and meet people there.

From age twelve to sixteen, Benjamin's regional tennis ranking earned him a free membership to the club and unlimited access to its facilities. The club then employed him for six years as a tennis coach. He assures that he never felt discriminated or stigmatized there for being Black, linking such inclusivity to the fact that many families of African political elites and diplomats were also members. Meanwhile, Benjamin and his tennis friends would go out together, being regular patrons at the most socially selective Paris nightclubs (Réau, 2006). The beginnings of his adult life thus gave way to a familiarization with the material culture of the dominant classes. One of his friends and tennis trainees at the time, an industrialist of Egyptian-Jewish origin who had developed an almost paternal attachment to him, regularly lent him his sports car, his Neuilly apartment on the Île de la Jatte, and his villa near Monaco to spend time with his friends and girlfriends.

It was also he who enabled Benjamin to move to the US. While the twenty-two-year-old was on vacation in Los Angeles, he put him in touch with several of his French friends who lived there. After taking lessons with Benjamin, they hired him as a tennis instructor for their children. Benjamin stayed in California for a year, then followed one of the families employing him to the East Coast: "They said to me, 'Come to New York!' And they helped me: they paid my rent and everything. Because for them, it's nothing: for those people, it's pennies and nickels." As the family's children attended the Lycée Français of New York, their father introduced him to other French-speaking New Yorkers who were looking for a tennis teacher. Among this group, Benjamin built up his first local clientele, with clients paying him up to \$200 per hour. Sessions were taking place at one of the Upper East Side clubs with which the Lycée had an agreement, and where he would later become a regular. As a result, Benjamin met former soccer player and 1998 FIFA World Cup winner Youri Djorkaeff and former tennis player and 1983 French Open winner Yannick Noah (who is Black). He played tennis regularly with the Noah family and benefited from Noah's recommendations to friends and members of the club, which eventually hired him as a bilingual tennis teacher (with independent contractor status) to cater, in particular, to the Lycée's students. Once integrated into this very affluent "French community" (the tuition for the Lycée Français was around \$40,000 a year), Benjamin thus expanded his network and list of contacts in the Upper East Side. For three years, the classes organized by the club earned him just \$30 per hour, but introduced him to many upper-class families of New York's wealthiest society. Several of these families expanded his private clientele to decisive proportions and truly launched the private coaching business he now runs full-time.

By comparison, Nathalie has more institutionalized cultural capital than Benjamin. Trained in ballet from the age of seven to seventeen, she later spent twelve years practicing contemporary dance and modern jazz at the American Center in Paris (Delanoë, 1994). At the same time, she discovered yoga at the age of eight through a book by André Van Lysebeth found on her parents' bookshelves. She began taking weekly yoga classes in the early 1980s while in her twenties, at a gym in the bourgeois 16th arrondissement, where she made rapid progress thanks to her dance experience. It was not until the age of thirty-seven, however, that she decided to turn her career around and make it one of her two main activities. From the early 2000s onward, while already teaching yoga in St. Barts, she accumulated training and credentials from some of the world's most prestigious institutions, with the goal of

increasing her credibility and pursuing what she now perceives as a vocation inseparably professional and spiritual. She regularly traveled to India for periods ranging from a few months up to over a year and a half, obtaining a diploma in yoga education (D.Y.Ed.) from the Kaivalyadhama College of Yoga and Cultural Synthesis in Lonavala, and her official accreditation as a teacher by the Ministry of Ayush. She went to Mysore four times to study with Pattabhi Jois, the developer and guru of Ashtanga vinyasa yoga, but also spent time in Pune at the main Iyengar Yoga Institute, at another school of this renowned yoga style in the Himalayas, and at institutes belonging to the Bihar and the Vivekananda traditions (Alter, 2004; Singleton and Goldberg, 2014).

She proceeded in a similar way with her massage training. In the early 1990s, thanks to repeated stays at the Wat Pho royal temple's school (O'Neil, 2008), she obtained a diploma in traditional Thai massage recognized by Thailand's Ministry of Education. Then, in the late 2000s, she completed a complementary semester at the center for applied traditional medicine of one of the country's leading universities in order to get a more advanced certificate. Finally, she took numerous shorter courses in other massage techniques, which enabled her to become a member of the American Massage Therapy Association, another important sign of professionalism for some of her American clients in St. Barts.

Nathalie is the daughter of a gallerist (her mother) and of the owner of a medium-sized industrial business (her father). She grew up in the upscale neighborhoods of Brussels and in the upper-middle-class mega-condominium of Parly 2 on the western outskirts of Paris. She went to a public junior high school in Versailles, then attended a private high school nearby in Châtenay-Malabry, and spent most of her summers on the French Riviera. While briefly studying at Paris-Assas, France's most prestigious law university, she was employed at her father's company. She then became a sales executive for several office equipment and IT multinational companies based in Paris and in the new business district of La Défense. During this period, she regularly went out to famed high-end Parisian nightclubs such as Le Palace and Les Bains Douches (Pacadis, 2005) and became even more familiar with the lifestyles of the more affluent:

In the 80s, I was a "working girl," and all my friends at the time were yuppies, stockbrokers, guys who worked on the stock exchange, who earned millions and lent me their Porsches to go down to Saint-Tropez. We'd rent villas for I don't even know how much. We'd go to the Deauville casino, where we'd blow 25,000 francs in one night. We went to all the super-luxury and five-star hotels of the French Riviera. In Saint-Tropez, we had a villa in the Saint-Claude neighborhood, then in Sainte-Anne. We had valet parking. That's how we lived!

Single and without children, Nathalie analyzes that the "excesses" of her youth contributed, in reaction, to later push her toward the ascetic ethos she associates with her practice of yoga (and Buddhism). However, she also insists that her previous experiences have greatly helped her, in the course of her career serving the very rich, to know how to modulate her registers of interaction with the latter—for instance, to adapt to national specificities, class fraction habits, or family dynamics—and organize accordingly her strategies for building and keeping her clientele.

In St. Barts, she started out as a masseuse. But despite the vocation she felt for it, her success, and the substantial income it brought her, Nathalie perceived the profession as undervalued and feared a symbolic downgrading of her social status. Her greatest fear at the time was running into acquaintances from her previous Parisian life who would recognize her. So, when the booking agency she worked with as a masseuse, and which knew she was practicing yoga at a local gym, suggested that she also develop yoga teaching by giving private lessons in the island's holiday homes and rental villas, she seized the opportunity. For her,

it meant investing herself in a second profession perceived as more prestigious and more likely to enable her total fulfillment. Since then, Nathalie's dual skills have contributed substantially to her attractiveness to customers, while the symbolic capital associated with the names of many of the latter, as well as the prices they pay, contribute to the positive representation she has of her profession.

This section has shown how the early trajectories of Nathalie and Benjamin have been instrumental in their ability to navigate elite spaces and cultivate the embodied dispositions required to meet the expectations of their clients. Their previous exposure to upper-class environments and their accumulation of culturally valued interactional competencies have not only facilitated their professional integration but also positioned them as credible agents in the reproduction of elite lifestyles. These trajectories underscore the importance of both inherited and acquired forms of capital in shaping access to, and legitimacy within, exclusive social spaces. Beyond their individual backgrounds, their careers illustrate how professionally coaching the super-rich hinges on the capacity to translate personal socialization into validated expertise that aligns with elite demands and accessing the networks necessary to even identify those demands. Indeed, understanding how they leverage these resources to sustain their professional standing requires turning to the strategies they employ to select, retain, and renew their highly exclusive client base.

Selecting, Retaining, and Renewing a Very Wealthy Clientele

Although firmly established with centimillionaires and billionaires, these two physical lifestyle intermediaries were nonetheless constantly faced with the need not only to retain but also to regularly renew their clients. Benjamin's successive young pupils, who earned him most of his income, grew up and left the family home. As for Nathalie, she worked mainly in sea resorts and was therefore subject to the changing habits of some of her customers. In 2019, though a few luxury hotels kept formally recommending her to their guests, Nathalie recruited mainly through more informal processes. Customers whose trust she had gained recommended her or introduced her to their friends, neighbors, or local acquaintances:

I get my new clients mainly by co-optation, by recommendation, so the people my clients introduce me to are generally people who look like them, or are even better than them.

Such introductions occurred, typically, when Nathalie would be hired for the day by a client offering her services to his guests. In addition, beyond explicit recommendations, customer recruitment also happened through emulation; the richest and most famous clients were often perceived by others as guarantees of her skills and reliability. They also trigger symbolic appropriation attempts, with some people seeking status by getting the same yoga teacher as a rock star or a business magnate, or the same masseuse as players of the French national soccer team. For instance, after having worked for several days in a row on the superyacht of a renowned multi-billionaire New York investor, Nathalie was immediately contacted by the owners and captains of other yachts then present in the harbor or anchored in the bay of Saint-Barthélemy, who had seen her come aboard.

In a few cases, both in St. Barts and in Saint-Tropez, Nathalie had been attached to a physical house rather than its particular occupiers. She was systematically recommended by the owners (or by their estate manager or their head housekeeper) to the guests to whom they rented their villa. Other times, it was her temporary integration into her employers'

household that allowed her to meet new clients. For instance, while she was spending the whole summer “invited” in a mansion in Long Island:

In the Hamptons, I was working for the most popular persons of the Hamptons! [smile] I was working for [a New York family prominent in show business, fashion, and art, with a member who is a billionaire and several others who are centimillionaires] . . . All the charity events and other events: nothing happens without them! Their villa was in Bridgehampton, and they are the ones who introduced me to F. [an investment banker and former US ambassador], to the Rothschilds, to T., who was a former White House advisor from the Kennedy administration: those were their friends and that’s how they then became my clients. . . . I lived at their place the whole summer, because they were my clients in St. Barts, where I worked for them every year. I got the entire family: the nieces, the nephews, the cousins. I got to know their kids, and the fiancés of their kids, and the women they later married, then their grandchildren. I know all the branches of the family, in fact. And now they really are into yoga and meditation.

Likewise, Nathalie spent two consecutive years in the fall and winter in Geneva with the Z. family. They housed her (for free) in their *hôtel particulier* or in one of their nearby apartments. Paid by the hour for the yoga classes and massages she was providing to her hosts, she also had the opportunity to meet their friends and many visitors and offer them her services (with the encouragements of the Zs., who were themselves drawing prestige from having her attached to their household).

Benjamin followed a similar procedure: to meet new prospects, he relied even more than Nathalie on recommendations and his regular presence in key places, to the point that all his 2019 clients knew each other personally. This general interconnection fostered a feeling of social control, as any issue with one client could quickly become known to everybody. But it also allowed him to establish himself unanimously among his clients as their main expert on everything tennis related. Many of his former young students, whom he helped in their varsity athletic and academic careers and with whom he remained on very good terms (sometimes still coaching them during the summer), directly contributed to his reputation. This prospecting via people, in contexts or places with a strong social identity, enabled him to precisely target the upper classes, extremely well endowed with economic capital, for whom he wished to reserve his service offering. Speaking of himself and another tennis instructor whom he considered more or less his equal, he explained:

We only want whales [very wealthy people spending a lot for leisure]. And, of course, in those places: if we meet them in the Hamptons, it’s clear. You know right away who you’re dealing with. If you meet someone in St. Barts, knowing that the house rent for the week is \$120,000, you don’t need to ask yourself too many questions. And then, on my side, I make sure to check the right boxes in the mind of my students’ parents: I tell them straight away that I live in New York, that I’m in St. Barts in the winter, and every summer in the Hamptons. And right away, they’ll say to themselves “he’s the right guy.” And immediately there’s a practical side too: they’ll think that all they have to do is deal with me, rather than with four or five people, one in each place.

Recruiting new customers on weekends or during holiday periods was also facilitated by a particular property of tennis: like yoga (but unlike golf, sailing, or riding), it is an activity you cannot usually indulge in for more than a few hours a day. Thus, in the Hamptons, St. Barts, or elsewhere, this physical limitation of Benjamin’s main clients and their guests was one of the conditions that made his diversified sociability possible—and of the prospecting that effectively followed from it. Prospecting took place via impromptu tennis lessons and

matches with neighbors and friends, participation in social events organized by his employers, outings to restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, as well as meetings with other qualified professionals in the service of the super-rich. Starting in 2012, Benjamin was faced with many more opportunities than he could himself seize during the summer season. As a consequence, he began to place and manage other (less connected and less well-recommended) tennis instructors to answer the demand within his network he could not or did not wish to take care of personally.

Right now, for instance, we're in Aspen. They have a friend who is a big art collector. And we're using the tennis court at his house. Thus, they say to him: "Go ahead! If you want to play tennis, Benjamin will be there and he'll play with you." And afterwards, when it's like that, we talk: the guy, he's one of the former directors and board members of Goldman Sachs, he runs a private equity firm today, and he's also the current president of Museum X. [one of New York's most prestigious museums]. . . . And then, for example, when he's in the Hamptons, he calls me because he wants a tennis instructor from 8:00 a.m. to noon, or all day. And everything gets done easily. And that's why I love going to St. Barts, Aspen, Miami, Fisher Island. Because in those places, as soon as they have something there, I give them my card and say: "Listen, I'm there. So, if you want a tennis instructor, just give me a call."

Nathalie and Benjamin, in developing and cultivating their clientele, relied on a variety of strategies to manage social and symbolic capital: their own, as well as that of their clients. If new clients were generally recruited within a dense network of strong ties between upper-class families, and if sharing a coach was thus first and foremost a factor of bonding and of consolidation of the coach's reputation, it could also take part in a dynamic of bridging (Burt, 2005). Beyond their organizational differences, tennis and yoga both fostered new encounters and collective sessions orchestrated by the coach/teacher, which were opportunities to extend the social capital of the participants and to partially delegate its management. This delegation further reinforced the relation of trust when the test it represented was passed successfully. It also increased the social status of the coach in a world and symbolic economy where the capacity to build interpersonal connections and a personal network is strongly valued as a quality in itself (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). Finally, through their attachments to the families who are their main employers during a given period—and who sometimes pay them just to stand by and stay available all day long—Nathalie and Benjamin are also part of a contemporary apparatus of conspicuous leisure (Veblen, 1899).

Between Subordination, Authority, and Friendship

Our respondents derived their legitimacy and authority from fields and social worlds that are largely autonomous from economic power and, at the same time, eminently desirable to their student-clients. Of course, the parents of Benjamin's pupils had the means to offer their children two weeks at the US Open or Roland-Garros with him. But the friendly get-togethers he organized with some of the circuit's top players could not be simply bought, and were proof that he belonged to the world of top-level tennis:

I got him to meet Gaël Monfils, for instance. And Gaël said to him: "Listen to Benjamin! He's a buddy of mine: we used to train together back in the day!" And for the kid, it's a great experience!

The same went for Nathalie in the world of yoga. From her stays in India, she returned with tales of her many retreats and her voluntary service at the Dhamma Giri pagoda run by S. N. Goenka, one of the birthplaces of the Vipassana meditation movement that has flourished worldwide over the past half-century (McMahan, 2008). She also brought back memories of invitations to Patthabi Jois' home in Mysore, prayers at his side in the small family temple, the massages she sometimes gave his daughter, and attending the guru's funeral alongside his family. While spending a few months in Dharamshala, Nathalie also had the opportunity to give French lessons and a series of Kaivalyadhama hatha yoga classes to members of the Tibetan government in exile and to several monks of the Dalai Lama's entourage. It allowed her to be invited to the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations and to his daily teachings for a month. Years later, those were experiences which, even if mentioned in passing in a conversation or reported by someone else, contributed to Nathalie's reputation and charisma, and gave some of her students the feeling of having an exceptional teacher.

Another essential characteristic of Nathalie's and Benjamin's work was the variegated emotional labor it required, and their recurrent symbolic distancing from the transactional or self-interested dimension of the relationship. Although Nathalie acknowledged she was economically subordinated to her clients, the interactional dynamics prevailing in her classes regularly led her to adopt a directive pedagogical attitude. She justified her authoritative posture by citing her expertise regarding the risks and inherent limits associated with physical activity, including those of her students' bodies, and her duty to prevent accidents and injuries. This objective situation and the client's self-surrender, which sometimes took the form of a therapeutic request, thus mitigated the potential coding of their relationship in the language of social subordination. Similarly, to enable his main young pupil to "blossom" and "build himself up," Benjamin took on the parts of both role model and "big brother," sometimes complicit, sometimes gruff (see also Smith Maguire, 2008), and his legitimacy within the family and the household appeared very strong. He was a regular at his main employer's various residences. He enjoyed a privileged and more autonomous status compared to even the most qualified domestic staff. Like Nathalie, over the years, he made a visible contribution to modifying his clients' lifestyles and leisure activities.

Moreover, for both of them, a relationship that went well with a student (whether adult or child) would always be at least partially framed and described in terms of friendship by the two parties. Nathalie was on first-name terms with most of her main clients. Like Benjamin, and unlike domestic workers, when she was a "guest" for varying lengths of time with one of her clients, she often ate at their table and was officially housed in a guest room separate from the staff quarters. In addition, the "friendly" dimension of the relationship also took the form of an economy of gifts and counter-gifts, with Nathalie and Benjamin performing extra-professional tasks like voluntary work for the client-friend's charity or mobilizing their own personal network to get them a reservation in a particularly selective restaurant or club.

Discussion

Bryan Boyle and Dieter Vandebroek (2025) have recently analyzed our case study as an example of *specialized* labor of production and reproduction of an employer's or client's elite lifestyle; a labor of distinction focused on curatorship, defined as "the management of employers' class symbols." As we have shown, Nathalie and Benjamin participate in the curation of their employers' habitus, in particular their bodily hexis through physical practices, and in their pursuit of symbolic capital and distinction. Additionally, they play a key role serving their strategies of accumulation of social capital and even institutionalized cultural capital, such as when they help their young students get admitted into a highly selective school.

However, while they do not (or rarely) engage in “menial” tasks, the service they provide, often within the elite household, places them in a situation of subordination to their employer which can be in tension with the magisterial relation inherent to curatorship. Friendship between the coach and their student-client is one way to resolve or at least reduce this tension. It therefore functions as an alternate modality of concealment or euphemization of the delegated labor of distinction performed at the service of the elites. In this case, the quasi-domestic worker does not disappear backstage nor act as a “non-person” (Goffman, 1990; Boyle, 2026); they hide in plain sight as a friend. Even if Benjamin told us how several of his clients appreciated the fact that he looked “like an NBA player,” coaches introduced as friends may not all be able to directly perform conspicuous Veblenian embodiment “signaling the employer’s status through bodily display” (Boyle and Vandebroek, 2025). Still, they do contribute to their prestige as *familiars* of their household, linked to it by strong ties and authentic interpersonal attachment, and connecting it to other valued fields and social worlds.

Indeed, there is a second reason why the two physical lifestyle intermediaries we presented in this chapter often borrowed the language of friendship to describe their professional relationships and shared a concern for authenticity in practice. The very wealthy families they serve can buy many things, but not the moral value associated with physical commitment and performance, nor the bodily virtuosity pursued as an individual salvation good. Yet these “qualitative” properties that evade and restrict commodification are not disconnected from the “quantitative” possessions of these families and individuals. If the super-rich cannot buy what cannot be bought, they may nevertheless buy the services of mediators who offer legitimate access to it or enable its gradual acquisition. However, for money to buy mediation to what may not be bought with money, the tie with the mediator must itself be negated as a mere purchase. This denial is not only rhetorical. It is rooted in the system of social, spatial, and emotional arrangements we have described.

Research on emotional labor distinguishes between surface acting, where external performance is experienced as being in tension with one’s inner self, and deep acting, where performance and interiority align to meet the feeling rules dictated by an institutionalized interactional setting (Hochschild, 2012). The reciprocal framing of relationships with recurring clients in terms of friendship thus contributes to a sense of genuine teaching and learning, perceived as authentic and at least partially disinterested. Of course, authenticity here is primarily attested by the inherent truthfulness of physical activity, which directly engages the body and cannot be delegated—unlike building an art collection, decorating a home, organizing an event, or writing a speech. One cannot perform yoga postures or play tennis by proxy. Still, the friendship one shares with one’s yoga or tennis instructor serves as further proof of a true passion for the activity, ensuring the genuineness of the practice and of the sociability that comes with it by symbolically distancing them from instrumental concerns. This sense of friendship and passion also enhances the moral value of those involved, showcasing their dedication to effort and their pursuit of mastery over body and mind, goals that require a certain material detachment.

Ultimately, friendship emerges as one solution to three separate conundrums: first, as a way to transcend the subordination-authority dilemma; second, as a way of legitimating monetarily mediated access to the unvaluable; and third, as a transitive way of accumulating friends and reinforcing ties in the most authentic manner (through another friend rather than a servant). Beyond the curation of habituses, the intermediation roles and activities of Benjamin and Nathalie—and the frame of friendship that structures them—thus prove integral to the symbolic economy of the social capital of the dominant classes they

serve, within which their own professional existence is continually embedded (Cousin and Chauvin, 2012b).

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