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It Used to Be Easier to Hide Your Wine Cave

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Earlier this week, photos began circulating of a recent subterranean fundraising dinner starring the presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg. Held in a glittering, ambiently lit wine cave in California's Napa Valley, the party might have been a rich wedding reception or a set piece from HBO's plutocrat drama *Succession*, except for a man sitting near Buttigieg wearing shorts. From the ceiling hung a massive inverted tree—or, the party being in a cellar, maybe a root system—tipped with Swarovski crystals. During last night's Democratic debate, the fete had its moment above ground, when Senator Elizabeth Warren said, "Billionaires in wine caves should not pick the next president of the United States."

Similarly swanky events have long been a feature of power brokerage in America, obscured from the view of those whose bank accounts don't merit an invite. Political fundraisers, philanthropic galas, and charity golf tournaments all follow similar formats—high-dollar parties where relationships are nurtured and money changes hands, all unseen by most of the people whose lives those decisions affect. But in the past few years, social media has given average people a closer look at the daily lives of the wealthy than they've ever had before, and now it's showing them how ill-equipped the rich are to answer questions about what they have and how they use it.

Those who attend high-dollar fundraisers can seem uneasy in the new glare of the internet's spotlight. Last month, Barack Obama urged Democrats to shun "purity tests," which often ask candidates to rebuke wealthy donors. After Warren's remark, California Governor Gavin Newsom rushed to defend wine caves, the underground cellars where vintners can age wine in cool, dry surroundings and host their fancy friends. Newsom happens to own a wine cave, and he noted that this particular wine cave is regularly used for Democratic Party fundraisers. Its owners, Craig and Kathryn Hall, are longtime party donors; Kathryn was an ambassador to Austria under President Bill Clinton. This battle might be about money in progressive politics, but it's also part of a much larger war over American wealth, fought in part because of what the internet has illuminated about the nation's inequality.

Read: How the "purity test" became political speak

Not so long ago, working- and middle-class people were mostly spared the details of wealth. Americans knew that rich people existed, but exactly what that meant in practical terms was mostly obfuscated. If you wanted to know how much a rich guy's suits or his wife's jewelry cost, you'd have to go to a high-end department store to find out. If you wanted to see inside their homes, you'd have to buy a copy of *Vanity Fair* or *Architectural Digest*. Shows such

as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* ran for more than a decade as a titillating peek behind the veil, and also as a testament to how strong that veil was—Americans lacked enough information to imagine on their own every trapping that such wealth could provide, and seeing it mostly felt like a rare, fascinating sideshow.

But during the 2010s, as social media grew to dominate American culture and communication, one thing became clear: Plenty of rich people had simply been waiting for an opportunity to tell the world about their money, and they were prepared to do so in great detail. In 2012, a Tumblr called Rich Kids of Instagram went viral for aggregating posts by scions of wealth such as the Dell-computer heirs (photographed on a private plane) and the Morton siblings (tubing off a yacht), whose father founded Hard Rock Cafe. Millennials born into wealth lacked the discretion their parents might have preferred, and they wanted to flex for the still-novel 'gram.

Since then, being wealthy online has turned into a career path unto itself, as well as a persistent source of memes. In previous generations, rich young women interested in fashion might have simply taken plush gigs at magazines; now many of them become Instagram influencers, advertising the lifestyle they were born into to millions of followers. On TikTok, a new generation of rich kids has taken to showing off their parents' homes, cars, and helicopters, under the banner of the "rich boy check."

At first, people responded to these kinds of social-media boasts with a mix of fascination and revulsion—plenty of clicks, likes, and guillotine jokes. But the trend persisted, and was even adopted by plenty of adults, as wealth inequality, student debt, and housing costs all soared. Such constant proof of how rich people really live made young people resent them. In a recent poll by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, a majority of people under 30 said that rich people amassed their fortunes by taking advantage of others; the poll also found that the same age group was the only one in which favorable attitudes toward socialism edged out those toward capitalism. When you're waiting for a bus to your second job while looking at photos of teenagers taking a helicopter to the Hamptons, it might be hard to hold on to the old idea of American meritocracy, or believe that the wealthy really are better than you.

Indeed, the Democratic presidential candidates who stand furthest to the left—Warren and Senator Bernie Sanders—enjoy the largest proportion of youth support, which they gained through promises to do things such as tax the wealthy and pursue universal health care. Buttigieg and his defenders have either failed to fully detect the cultural anger toward the upper class or simply made a calculation and decided that the money is worth it, and that the power they're tapping into isn't going anywhere. Either way, the country's elite will have to figure out how to address those who demand answers. The internet lifted the veil, and now everyone knows what's behind it.