

“We must trust that look of hers”

William Dean Howells’s Urban Theory of Trust and Trustworthiness in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890)

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American distrust of the city goes back to the very beginnings of the nation, and is probably most famously voiced by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785):

The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitutions.

Jefferson’s vividly phrased abhorrence of “great cities” is closely tied up with his distrust of government, which we see expressed even more durably in his machinations to designate the site of the nation’s then new capital away from the existing major urban centers, New York and Philadelphia (Wills 2002; Conn 2014; Boehm/Corey 2017: 13). Most of the canonical American writers of the nineteenth century (from Emerson to Dewey) harbored similarly anti-urban attitudes, with some exceptions such as Walt Whitman’s vision of an urban utopia of flamboyant and harmonious co-existence. But, all in all, anti-urbanism remained the dominant ideology among the major American writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century (White 1961).

This said, many Americans, whether of old stock or recently immigrated, did not shun cities throughout the long nineteenth century.¹ On the contrary: the city that will be the “scene” of this essay, New York, had about 60,000

1 In their 2017 study on America’s urban history, L.K. Boehm and S.H. Corey write in their “Introduction”: “The history of the American city is in many ways the history of the United States. Although the agricultural tradition of rural America has left an indelible mark on the physical and cultural landscape, the United States is essentially an urban nation,

residents in 1800 and 600,000 by 1860 and, by 1900, Manhattan alone had 2.2 million residents (Conn 2014: 14).² Of course most of these city-dwellers did not see themselves as ideological or intellectual advocates for the advantages of cities or urban life-styles; they “just” moved there with various motivations. There has been so much emphasis on the squalid working and living conditions of the—objectified—“Other Half” (Riis 1890) that we tend to forget that, during these years of explosive urban growth through migration, even poor and underprivileged city-dwellers were intelligent, self-interested agents, who arguably chose the city over the countryside because it afforded them opportunities, however meagre, that they could not find elsewhere. The fact that they were lied to and criminally exploited (as vividly described in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, published in 1906), was not a problem of the “mobs” feared by Jefferson, but the result of governmental negligence, fraud, and political corruption steeped in economic egotism. Adding insult to injury, some “theoreticians” of the urban poor, such as, for example, the leader of the Social Gospel movement, Josiah Strong, called these city dwellers an “insolent rabble,” or compared them, following a wide-spread nativist, anti-immigration impulse, to “cannibals in some far off coast” (Strong 1885: 129; see also Boyer 1978, Boehm/Corey 2017: 141–182).³

Given the anti-urban stance among nineteenth-century literary commentators on city life, William Dean Howells (1837–1920) stands out as an exception and as one of the first observers who attempted to (re-)present a more comprehensive and also more detailed social view of New York just before 1900 (Kaplan 1986; Bramen 2000; Puskar 2018). This paper will argue that the novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) can be read as a reflection on trust and trustworthiness with respect to the momentous changes in urban institutional and political conditions in the metropolis of New York just before 1900. In this, I will focus both on trust (as a relational attitude) and trustworthiness

and has been so for a much longer period and to a greater degree than is generally acknowledged” (Boehm/Corey 2017: 1).

- 2 In percentages, the changing ratios are even more striking: in 1800 94 % of Americans lived in rural areas; by 1900 this number declined to 50 % (Conn 2014: 13–14).
- 3 Even reformers with deep sympathy for the plight of the urban poor and with an earnest wish to help, were often not able to see that their help took on the form of moralistic control and social engineering, disrespecting the dignity and individuality of their “wards,” especially when the persons to be “reformed” were foreigners, or of a different religious persuasion (Boyer 1974:ix; Kaplan 1986: 69–70).

(as a condition of the trustee), thus following Russell Hardin, who writes: "Poets, playwrights, and novelists get the issue right, but academics often miss ... the causal connection that trustworthiness begets trust" (Hardin 2002: 28).

William Dean Howells as Social Commentator

It is important to point out that my reflections on Howells's understanding of trust relationships in American urban society rest specifically on references in his novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The terms "trust" and "distrust" appear there again and again in a range of contexts, also in implicit references to trustworthiness, reliability, risk, expectation, and social justice. The centrality of the topic reveals itself in the closing sentence of the novel—a classically "foregrounded" position in any literary work. Here, the remark "Well, we must trust that look of hers" appears as a comment on a fleeting urban encounter—a point I will come back to later. The statement seems to be typical of the open endings in Howells's novels (Wetzel-Sahm 1995), but when we take trust to be one of the main motives of this work, it provides thematic closure, harking back not just to other moments in the novel, but also to the title that references a concept often understood to be a necessary element of trust: hazard, in the sense of risk (Skyrms 2008).

But before the actual analysis of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Howells's own trustworthiness as a reliable and insightful commentator on trust needs to be established. As in many of his almost forty other novels, he made use of a literary aesthetic that he had developed throughout his long and successful career as a novelist, critic, editor, and social commentator. He called this new mode "democracy in literature" and "realism" and saw its superiority above older literary traditions in its openness to a whole set of new topics and experiences that he summarized in the category of the "common sense" or "everyday" life (Howells 1891: 9–10). Much has been written about the success or failure of his efforts in terms of various interpretations of "realism" (with respect to style, philosophy, literary sociology, economy, institutional theory),⁴ but this discussion is only relevant here concerning his more inclusive stance towards topics and themes that he felt should be part of his fiction, or rather of literature in general (Trachtenberg 1982: 184–190). He has been criticized for

4 For a recent research overview and bibliographic essay see Ernst/Matter Seibel/Schmidt 2018: 1–34 and 29–31.

having a limited perspective, but this does not invalidate his observations; as Simon Blackburn writes: “It is a big step from the omnipresence of perspective to the omnipresence of illusion. You and I see the world from literally different points of view, but on the face of it we can each be right about what we see” (Blackburn 2005: 87).

That Howells did not question the soundness of his perception as such, did not mean that he was naïve when it came to problematizing the meaning of all that he saw. In fact, this epistemological uncertainty is at the center of his attitude towards the notion and meaning of trust in his *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. According to Georg Simmel, we are dealing with the phenomenon of trust when we are in a position of partial knowledge and control; both complete ignorance and complete knowledge preclude the notion of trust (Simmel 1908/1992: 393.) Philosophical definitions of trust since Simmel have been developed in manifold directions, but trust is often described as something that we only become aware of when we notice its absence, or when we feel that our trust has been betrayed (Hartmann 2020: 68). In a *Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells describes various crises of trust in a way that also support Ute Frevert’s identification of trust as an “obsession” of the modern period (Frevert 2013). Howells was concerned with such crises of trust just as he was deeply worried about the state and development of American society as a democracy during the last decades of the nineteenth century. His exceptional, but unsuccessful attempt in 1887 to save the anarchists of the Haymarket Affair from the death sentence is probably his most public and principled case of political activism,⁵ but he was an incessant commentator on American politics, both in his public and his private writings (Goodman/Dawson 2005: 279–287; Konrad 1986). Since the close relationship between democracy and trust has been shown extensively in research on the latter,⁶ this chapter will extend that connection in the sense that Howells’s literary notion of “democratic art” deserves credit for recognizing the relevance of trust relationships in late 19th century American society—in particular, urban society.

5 Howells was the only American writer who petitioned until the last minute against the death sentences for the anarchists; not one of his friends (who included Twain, Garland, Hale, Norton, Higginson, Lowell, Whittier, etc.) endorsed his protest (Goodman/Dawson 2005: 281).

6 The number of collections discussing the role of trust in democracies is daunting; for a useful recent overview see “What Kinds of Trust Does a Democracy Need? Trust From the Perspective of Democratic Theory,” by Mark E. Warren (2017).

Howells's talent and reliability as an observer of the American scene was prominently recognized including by his friend, Henry James, who wrote in an open letter: "Stroke by stroke and book by book your work was to become for this exquisite notation of our whole democratic light and shade and give and take in the highest degree documentary, so that none other, through all your fine long season, could approach it in value and amplitude" (Henry James, "A Letter to Mr. Howells" 1912, reported in Cady and Cady 1983: 233). James's compliment about Howells's powers of documentary observation echoes the latter's own self-image: "It makes me think that my strongest faculty, after all, may have been an art of seeing and hearing everything. I am sure I c'd not invent half as many things, thoughts, ideas, as I can remember" (February 9, 1890; quoted in Goodman/Dawson 310).

Throughout the novel, the observations and remarks on trust and the conditions of trustworthiness appear on various narrative levels: within conversations between characters, in dramatic interior monologues, or as authorial comments. It is striking that Howells repeatedly voiced his concerns about contemporary America by referring to faith and trust, but also distrust. Thus, he wrote to Henry James in 1888: "[America] seems to me the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun. I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content of 'civilization,' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality" (quoted in Trachtenberg 1982: 200). Soon after, he writes to his father in a slightly more optimistic mood in 1890 about his "faith in the grand and absolute change, sooner or later" and "the change that must come in favor of truth and justice" (quoted in Konrad 1986: 220). Between the overwhelming pessimism of the quotation from 1888, and the more positive outlook he conveys to his father, lies Howells's publication of his novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in 1890.

Though decidedly not autobiographical, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is inspired by Howells's own move to the city of New York in the year 1889. The novel's protagonist, Basil March, a writer and literary journalist (but, again, not an avatar of Howells), and his wife, Isabel, decide to relocate from Boston to New York. They experience the urban environment and make new acquaintances: Dryfoos, a rich "capitalist;" Lindau, a German-American "anarchist/socialist;" Alma, a female artist; Miss Vance, a philanthropist—all of whom are trying to find their bearings in New York. Howells, as a public intellectual and literary historian (Melzer 2003; McGrath 2012), uses them to construct

a web of trust-related case studies, from which three urban topics seem to evolve: (1) trust in the city of New York and the development of a modern urban environment; (2) big business and the question of trustworthiness; and (3), trustworthiness of women, or “gender trust,” referring to the changing role of women in modern urban society. These themes demarcate areas that were important for Howells’s own, often ambivalent, attitude towards the future of the United States as a social experiment. Indeed, Howells’s optimism (or, sometimes, pessimism) is closely related to his own ability to trust and his expectation of others, while it is also at the center of his poetics of realism of everyday life, when he explicitly writes that “the time is coming, we trust, when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to human nature, known to us all” (Howells 1887: 154).⁷

From a theoretical perspective, all three areas are directly related to questions of trust, but not all in the same way. As Geoffrey Hosking has argued,⁸ the definitions of trust and trustworthiness can be placed on a continuum defined by two coordinates, thick versus thin, and strong versus weak. The thick-thin distinction refers to the *kind* of contact the trustor and trustee have: a close contact based either on extensive knowledge (thick), or a relationship that is based on superficial contact (thin). The strong-weak distinction points to the degree of vulnerability the trustor exposes herself to (Hosking 2016: 47). The sort of trust that is required to support the “routine coordination relationships” that are the necessary foundation of a functioning urban society are increasingly located in large part at the strong, thin corner. Impersonal (strong, thin) trust appears in complex social institutions such as banks, police, urban planning agencies, complex government services, etc. without which large modern cities not only could not function, but never would have come into being in the first place. Hosking notes that this sort of trust is “ever more prevalent in our social life today” (ibid. 47).

7 When Howells reprinted this text in his collection *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), he changed the “we trust” to “I hope.” His reasons for this could not be established so far.

8 Hosking’s analysis goes back to Tilly (2009), but arguably also as far as Hume, who developed what we would now recognize as the distinction between social coordination projects (thin trust) and cooperation projects (thick trust), framing the development of complex society in terms of the former, in the analytical framework of his *History of England* (Sabl 2012: 21–42).

A Hazard of New Fortunes takes us to the scene of New York at an early phase of the dynamic changes to which Hosking refers. To characterize Howells as a pioneering "literary sociologist" of trust relationships⁹ does not require us to see him as a systematic theoretician of trust. Also, the following reflections cannot claim to give a comprehensive view of the treatment of trust in the entirety of his oeuvre—this would require a project of a much larger scope. What a novel like *A Hazard of New Fortunes* can add to our understanding of a new urban modernity on the one hand, and of trust and trustworthiness on the other, lies in the fact that it is a text written by an exceptionally perceptive observer, who delivers a "good-faith" contemporary description of open-ended social developments in a rapidly expanding metropolis. In literary theory, Catherine Elgin talks about narratives as "thought experiments," in which authors creatively—not just empirically, but also making use of *poesis*—create scenarios that self-referentially theorize their observations (Elgin 2007) and thus can be linked to a specific type of literary epistemology (Davies 377–379). Additionally, as Hardin and others have pointed out, literature has always been a great semantic field to discuss trust, and trustworthiness (Hardin 2002: 28; Hartmann 2020: 94–95).¹⁰

Trust in the City

A Hazard of New Fortunes is one of the first novels to present New York as a modern urban environment, displaying aspects of infrastructure, housing, socioeconomic observations, and even "what may be the first Italian restaurant in all of American fiction" (Puskar 2018:491). Howells, remaining true to his convictions as a documentary realist, records details that strike him as surprising, noteworthy, or simply novel developments.¹¹ Given the large number

9 Howells's special position and signature status as a sociologically inclined actor in the literary field of late nineteenth-century American literature is convincingly presented by Florian Sedlmeier as an idiosyncratic position in which "Howells imagines the societal function of both criticism and literature in a way that constructs literature, and most prominently, the novel, as always already contingent upon the shifting configurations of the social" (Sedlmeier 2018: 86).

10 Dietmar Schloss's contribution to this volume points in a similar direction.

11 Some of Howells's remarks, especially about the "picturesqueness" of poor, ethnic areas of the city have been rightly criticized as signs of his bourgeois, white, middle-class perspective (Kaplan 1986: 72, Puskar 2018: 496).

of studies on urban reform, sociology, and history of American cities in the Progressive Era and beyond,¹² one might wonder what Howells's novel could possibly contribute to the debate. But, as already argued, it is exactly his *literary* point of view that promises new insights into the emotional and cultural development of trust relationships in American cities; Howells's eye and ear for seemingly insignificant details (as admired by Henry James) provide valuable and so-far untapped sources for scholarly research.

Cities cannot function without a complicated and carefully calibrated set of trust relationships. In *A Hazard*, there are several aspects of the urban environment that could be related to notions of trust and distrust, but I will concentrate on a few aspects related to public transportation in New York. As argued elsewhere in this volume, mobility—and immobility—are closely connected with trust relationships on various levels (see Gerhard/Keller/Werner in this volume). Howells's approach to the implications of urban mobility exhibits two features: a realistic, documentary style, and also a literary/figurative technique, which allows him to express atmosphere, mood, and emotions; resulting in a tapestry that includes both straightforward description and symbolic action. In particular, as I will argue later, in the case of the issue of mobility and trust it provides a heuristic tool for the examination of “strong thin trust” (following Hosking's categories), but also of a frequently discussed distinction between trust and reliance (or trustworthiness and reliability) as Hartmann (2020: 104) would put it. One suggested empirical distinction between the two is that if we trust something or someone, that trust can be “betrayed,” while if we rely on something, although we expect that it functions in a specific way, we are not emotionally involved if it does not (Baier 1986). Annette Baier's explication of this distinction is that, in the absence of “goodwill” on the part of the trusted person or institution, we can talk only about reliance. But since the presence or absence of this goodwill in the trustee is not always traceable, I suggest a distinction based on the feelings and attitudes of the trustor. Following up on the thoughts of Karen Jones in her article “Trust as an Affective Attitude” I will show how, in *A Hazard*, the positive feelings and optimistic expectations of the novel's protagonists influence their perception of New York's transportation system as trustworthy—or not.

12 The first wave of what we consider sociological publications on the American metropolis started shortly after the Civil War, when the American Social Science Association (ASSA) was established in Boston and influenced the whole course of urban studies, even beyond its dissolution in 1912 (Boehm/Corey 2017: 168).

New York had grappled with traffic management problems all through the nineteenth century, and various approaches were proposed to help develop effective means of mass transportation for a rapidly growing population (Cheape 1980). In 1880, the Census Bureau recognized that New York had become something new—a metropolis (*ibid.*: 20)—and thus presented essentially different, and more complex, problems of urban management. Beside the practical question of moving a large number of people to and from work, urban reformers thought they had also to address less tangible aspects of transport management beyond simple infrastructure; e.g. the prevention of disease and crime, but also the wish for order and control (Boyer 1978). By 1889, when Howells moved to New York, there was an extensive system of elevated tracks in place (Cheape 1980: 32–40). The “El” or “L” roads were important for the development of New York, but they were often the target of severe criticism: the trains were dirty, loud, and the streets underneath them were thrown into all-day shade. Since the system in any given area was privately run by a local monopoly, the owners did not feel compelled to make improvements: the local transit facilities made money anyway.

When the protagonists in *A Hazard* first arrive in the city, they are not aware of any of this, and they are thoroughly fascinated with the El. It becomes part of the experience of New York as a place providing a sense of freedom and also an optimistic, progressive environment: “At Third Avenue they took the Elevated, for which she [Isabel March] confessed an infatuation. She declared it the most ideal way of getting about in the world” (79). Later, they arrive at Grand Central Station, where they look down on the tracks and, observing the trains waiting to leave, they fall into a similar rapture:

They had another moment of rich silence when they ... looked down upon the great night trains lying on the tracks dim under the rain of gas-lights What forces, what fates, slept in these bulks which would soon be hurling themselves north and west and south through the night! ... The Marches admired the impressive sight with a thrill of patriotic pride in the fact that the whole world perhaps could not afford just the like (80).

This mix of excitement about, and admiration for, the technological and organizational “affordances” of the *American* transportation system, quite explicitly expressed in terms of emotional involvement, can be characterized as an attitude full of trust in institutional structures and not merely a reliance on them: trust that the system works, that it is effective, safe, and that it is there for the public who do not need to worry about it, but rather can simply rely

on it. However, there is more than just a sense of reliability in this comment: “The attitude of optimism is ... in terms of a distinctive, and affectively loaded, way of seeing the one trusted” (Jones 1996: 4). The Marches even connect this to their patriotism, pride, and a cradled feeling of community. But, as we will see, this kind of “affective” trust towards New York’s transportation system will fade and finally almost disappear in the course of the novel—a development, which is, of course, carefully orchestrated by Howells.

When we are still at the beginning of the March family’s life in New York, the couple also comments on the fact that the elevated trains afford glimpses into the living rooms of New York residents: “He said it was better than the theatre, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows; [...] what suggestion, what drama, what infinite interest!” (*A Hazard*: 79).¹³ It seems odd that Basil and Isabel March do not show any compunction about peering into other people’s lives, but the significance of the scene lies also in the way the inhabitants offer themselves up for this “performance.” To call this “trust” would be overstating the degree of agency involved, but the Marches do not notice any active signs of “distrust” (in the form of curtains, etc.) either. The speed with which the train moves past these windows seems to insulate the inhabitants from the potential of real intrusion, while the voyeuristic impulse of the travelers parallels Howells’s conviction regarding the importance of ordinary life as the subject of democratic art. The atmosphere of this quintessentially urban scene contradicts notions of the metropolis as a place characterized by distrust and taciturnity. Compare, for example, Georg Simmel’s much more threatening description of encounters in a metropolis in his “*Großstädte und das Geistesleben*”:

If we had to respond with the same number of internal reactions to the continuous external contacts as in a smaller city ... we would be completely atomized internally and come to a wholly inconceivable mental condition. It is partly due to this psychological circumstance, and partly to the right not to distrust, which we feel in the face of ephemeral elements of the life in a metropolis, that we are forced to be reserved. (Simmel 1803/1995: 122–3, my translation)¹⁴

13 Amy Kaplan criticizes the Marches for looking into poor peoples’ lives, but it is clear that the “El” does not just go past poor apartments; what the Marches see is middle-class life. (Kaplan 1986:70).

14 In the original German: “Wenn der fortwährenden äußeren Berührung mit unzähligen Menschen so viele innere Reaktionen antworten sollten, wie in der kleinen Stadt, ... so

Simmel does not just describe distrust as an essential attitude in the city, he even talks about a "right to distrust."¹⁵ His position could not be further from the attitude of the Marches, who feel a sense of acceptance and an exhilarating connection to the city; to its system of transportation and its inhabitants. Whenever March takes the El, he ponders over his fellow passengers on the train: "He found the variety of people in the car as unfailingly entertaining as ever. He rather preferred the East Side to the West Side lines, because they offered more nationalities, conditions, and characters to his inspection" (*A Hazard* 197). There might be some objectification, but there is never a sense of distrust or discomfort, as mentioned by Simmel in his account of life in a metropolis. March also notices the "numerical subordination of the dominant race" (ibid. 198), in other words, the growing cultural and ethnic diversity of the city. At the same time, he does not connect these observations to any kind of explicit political statement: "he did not take much trouble about this" (ibid. 199). His interest is rather personal: "what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were—these were the matters of his waking dreams" (ibid. 199). In this, he anticipates Simmel's own conclusions about the interplay of various influences and "powers" in a city: "To the extent that such powers are organically present in the roots as in the crown of social life in its entirety ... it is not our task to accuse or to forgive, but alone to understand" (Simmel 1903/1995: 131, my translation).¹⁶

As already mentioned, Basil March (and, indirectly, Howells) has been criticized for the limitations of his middle-class background. But one episode shows that his interest is genuine and that he is capable of real empathy.

würde man sich innerlich völlig atomisieren und in eine ganz unausdenkbare seelische Verfassung geraten. Teils dieser psychologische Umstand, teils das Recht auf Misstrauen, das wir gegenüber den in flüchtiger Berührung vorüberstreichenden Elementen des Großstadtlebens haben, nötigt uns zu Reserve."

15 It is interesting to note here that research about the current political situation in the US also contradicts Simmel and his association of cities with distrust. In a research paper by Will Wilkinson of the Niskanen Center, titled "The Density Divide: Urbanization, Populization, and Populist Backlash" from June 2019, it is argued that it is not urban diversity that creates distrust, but spatial segregation, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Wilkinson-Density-Divide-Final.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2020).

16 "Indem solche Mächte in die Wurzel wie in die Krone des ganzen geschichtlichen Lebens eingewachsen sind, ... ist unsere Aufgabe nicht, anzuklagen oder zu verzeihen, sondern allein zu verstehen."

When he walks through one of the poorer parts of the city, he witnesses a dramatic scene on the street, which he does not entirely understand, but which he is able to recognize as an event that is typical of what gives life in a city a specific atmosphere:

March understood the unwillingness of the poor to leave the worst conditions in the city for comfort and plenty in the country when he reflected upon this dramatic incident. ... A small town could rarely offer anything comparable to it and the country never. He said that if life appeared so hopeless to him as it must to the dwellers in that neighborhood, he should not himself be willing to quit its distractions, its alleviations, for the vague promise of unknown good in the distance somewhere. (202)

Howells's observations are an indirect commentary on the programs of reformers who thought of themselves as the "ethical elite" and whose vision of a perfectly managed urban world took the form of social engineering based on their own set of values and norms, "with objective standards of social control" and plans forged above the heads of individuals (Boyer 1978: 149, 176 ff.) These reformers would never have identified with the tastes of the "disorderly" poor as March does.

The Marches go regularly on long walks, during which the city appears as "huge, noisy, ugly, kindly" (339), and when Isabel March reminisces about Boston's "intellectual refinement of the life they had left behind them," her husband answers that "it was very pretty, but he said it was not life—it was death in life" (339). Finally, on the occasion of one of her returns to Boston, also Mrs. March recognizes the sullen faces in the horsecars as the "Puritan mask, the cast of a dead civilization" and she "sighed to think that less than a year of the heterogeneous gayety of New York should have made her afraid of it" (*A Hazard* 342). Ms. March is not afraid anymore of the "heterogeneous gayety" of New York, which can be translated into the positive statement: Ms. March began to see the heterogenous gayety of New York as a trustworthy environment—nothing to be afraid of.

The spontaneous affection for, and comfortable trust in, the city's institutions begins to change when Basil March becomes more aware of some aspects of the city, including the workings of its transportation system. He starts to notice and comment upon the chaotic system of elevated trains. The way they cut through the cityscape fills him with a sense of foreboding, with a "vague discomfort." After the enthusiasm of his first encounters with the elevated trains, he now perceives the struggle between the established archi-

ture and the messy system of the elevated railroad, as an "absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder" resulting in a "chaos to which the individual selfishness of the railroads must always lead" (*A Hazard* 200). The railroads are, of course, not capable of selfishness, and, thus, the butt of the criticism must, in fact, be human beings and the institutions and businesses run by them. March's aesthetic unease translates into social anxiety and foreshadows the climax and catastrophe of the novel, when public and private storylines converge and bring about chaos, violence, and death—in a complete antithesis to the earlier "gay" exuberance of the city.

This decisive turn is closely related to a labor crisis in New York. Modeled on the 1889 strike of the employees of the Atlantic Avenue Railroad (Cudahy 2002: 152), Howells culminates his novel with some tragic events around a streetcar strike. The strike is about a loss of wages that affects about six thousand drivers and conductors (of horse-drawn streetcars). Beaton, a minor, rather unattractive, character in the novel, has no sympathy for the strikers:

Beaton felt a sudden turn of his rage toward the men whose action would now force him to walk five blocks and mount the stairs of the Elevated station. "If you'd take out eight or ten of these fellows," he said, ferociously, "and set them up against a wall and shoot them, you'd save a great deal of bother." (*A Hazard* 450)

The character's reaction unequivocally reveals him to be a cynical, self-involved, and cruel person, whose anger about having to walk "five blocks and mount the stairs" is enough to provoke such a violent reaction. The policeman Beaton is talking to does not take up the suggestion, but it is clear that his role is to survey the scene and keep order: "On the other side of the street Beaton could see another officer sauntering up from the block below. Looking up and down the avenue, ... he saw a policeman at every corner. It was rather impressive" (*A Hazard* 451). The system of surveillance presented here is adapted to the long, straight grid of streets of midtown Manhattan.

Whereas Beaton is annoyed, because inconvenienced, Basil March is actively drawn to the situation and is "very curious about the strike, whose importance, as a great social convulsion, he felt people did not recognize" (*A Hazard* 457). He has read about violent outbreaks between the strikers and the police, but when he starts walking the streets, he does not experience anything of the sort: "[A] car laden with policemen came down the track, but none of the strikers offered to molest it. In their simple Sunday best, March thought them very quiet, decent-looking people, and he could well believe that

they had nothing to do with the riotous outbreaks in other parts of the city” (*A Hazard* 458). The reference to the looks and the clothing, and the overall habitus of the protesters is not accidental and is part of a general source of epistemological anxiety in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that is related to trust and distrust: The question of how much of what is “visible” affords a reliable foundation for future action; in other words, how far can one “trust” one’s own impressions.

In a situated response to exactly this theoretical conundrum, the state of affairs changes abruptly, chaotically; the car, which March has meanwhile mounted, is stopped by a tumult between strikers and the police. He is astonished to see a “tall, old man, with a long white beard, who was calling out to the police: ‘Ah yes, Glup the strikers—gif it to them! Why don’t you co and glup the bresidents that insoalt your lawss’”? (470)¹⁷ The man, Lindau, is a German anarchist/socialist and an old friend of Basil March (more about Lindau in the next sub-chapter). Lindau’s criticism is systemic and characterized by a deep distrust of the whole organization of American business life, including the organization of transportation in the city. The alternative to the system of countless private companies would be an arrangement founded upon public interest and organization, leading to reliable services (cf. March’s earlier unease about the “selfish railroads”). Lindau is clubbed so severely that he dies later, but his death is paired with another casualty: the (more or less) accidental shooting of a young man, Conrad, who naively approached the scene of violence with the intention of arguing for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Before he even can say a word, he is hit by a bullet coming from a policeman.

With respect to our discussion of trust, we see here a disintegration on various levels: the spontaneous and affective trust of the March couple in the city’s institutions, but also on the level of the organization of transportation infrastructure; a typical instance of a trust relationship that is strong (the importance of mobility) and thin (the general reliance of a system), according to Hosking’s terminology (2016: 47).

17 Howells tries to reproduce the German accent of Lindau—an accepted means of “realistic” dramatic characterization around 1900, which was also used for other accents, most notably for the rendering of African American vernacular expression (cf. Redling 2006).

"Merchant princes, railroad kings, and coal barons": The (Un)Trustworthiness of Big Business

As already mentioned in the introductory part of this essay, Howells became deeply skeptical about the political development of the United States during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although he had profited from having written the campaign biography for the Republican president Hayes in the 1870s, fifteen years later he dismissed both the Republican and the Democratic parties and started on his own campaign for social reform. He took to Tolstoy's ideas, whom he first read in 1885, but, in his native context, was more influenced by Henry George's theories on the taxation of land and by Laurence Gronlund's popular American re-interpretation of Marx's theories in *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884). The influence of these thinkers appear also in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Arms 1939), tailored to the overall experience of the March family in New York.¹⁸ From the perspective of theories of trust and trustworthiness in modern democracies, it is important to emphasize that the character constellations and plot twists invented by Howells are only possible in an urban setting. The triangulation, for example, of a beautiful old-money socialite, a poor German anarchist, and a troubled young man looking for his place in life is only realistic in the metropolis, where chance encounters are nothing out of the ordinary.

Howells creates a character constellation that allows him to play out a conflict between a "socialist" and a "capitalist": On the one hand, Lindau, an elderly German exile of the 1848 revolution, with radical socialist tendencies, and, on the other, Dryfoos, the wealthy owner of a gas-field, of the same generation as Lindau but with "typical" modern American persuasions concerning business practices. While Lindau had participated in the Civil War and lost an arm in battle, Dryfoos "had an old rankling shame in his heart for not having gone into the war" (*A Hazard* 372). The sacrifice that Lindau had made for the country, in fact giving the proverbial arm for it, is an important marker for his trustworthiness. As Basil March puts it: "He lost a hand in the war that helped to save us and keep us possible, and that stump of his is character enough for me" (*A Hazard*: 163; my emphasis).

18 Howells's political views in the 1880s were still developing, which allows us to view *A Hazard* as a thought experiment. His most explicit exposition of his socialist views appears in his later, utopian novel *Travelers from Altruria* (1895).

The go-between who arranges for contact between Lindau and Dryfoos, is Basil March, who had known Lindau from his youth. Their reunion about thirty years later in the novel is firmly situated in an urban setting,¹⁹ in a restaurant, where March accidentally comes across his former friend and German teacher. Whereas their earlier, pre-Civil War friendship flourished in the environment of a small-town printing shop, resembling an idyllic American, democratic version of an old-world private education, the relationship in New York is dominated by the social gap between the two: the younger man a successful editor of a magazine, firmly anchored in a middle-class existence versus the old and frail Civil War invalid, who rejects his government pension out of principle and makes a meagre living as a painter's model.

March is shocked to see that his former friend lives such a lonely life full of deprivation and decides to help Lindau by offering him a freelance position as a translator and reviewer of foreign literature. March delivers his proposition in person, and they start a conversation about the question of the causes of poverty and inequality. For Lindau, it is clear where the problem lies: "those boor millionaires that hadt to steal their money," and continues ("in German," therefore without the accent-markers):

Not the most gifted man that ever lived, in the practice of any art or science, and paid at the highest rate ... could ever *earn* a million dollars. It is the landlords and the merchant princes, the railroad kings and the coal barons (the oppressors to whom you instinctively give the titles of tyrants)—it is these that *make* the millions, but no man *earns* them (*A Hazard*: 207).

Lindau's interpretation of the economic developments in the USA points not just to his own distrust, but also to a general distrust felt by the public; after all, the associations he invokes (the one he leaves out is the "robber baron") are not Lindau's inventions but were in general usage. The distrust of "big business" started long before the successful campaign of anti-trust legislation (Sherman-Act of 1890) and has continued as an undercurrent in the public perception of American economic life long after that (Orbach/Rebling 2012). A systematic analysis of this economic aspect is beyond the scope and ambition of this paper, but the question of the trustworthiness of "big business" and "monopolies" was a live—and yet undecided—issue on the minds of the

19 March is being asked by his fellow editor: "What did I tell you about meeting every man in New York that you ever knew before?" (*A Hazard*: 99).

American public when Howells wrote *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The 1888 illustration in *Harper's Weekly* expresses the distrust towards big business, and, in particular, of the so-called, and somewhat ironically designated, "trusts."²⁰ These are represented as a giant octopus, reaching for Justice, who is only half-blind, and uses its one open eye to kill the scorpion of anarchism. The caricature can be taken as a backdrop to Lindau's radical convictions, and, in a larger sense, to Howells's unsuccessful activism for the sake of the Haymarket anarchists in 1886:

The exchange between March and Lindau now turns towards that "mark" of Lindau's character, his missing hand, which is the proof of Lindau's trustworthiness. March effuses about Lindau's sacrifice: "And I don't believe there's an American living that could look at that arm of yours and not wish to lend you a hand for the one you gave us all" (*A Hazard*: 209). But Lindau rejects March's slightly sentimental suggestion:

Lindau smiled grimly "You think zo? I wouldn't moch like to drost'em. I've drierdt idt too often." He began to speak German again, fiercely: "Besides, they owe me nothing. Do you think I knowingly gave my hand to save this oligarchy of traders and tricksters, this aristocracy of railroad wreckers and stock gamblers and mine-slave drivers and mill-serf owners? No; I gave it to the slave." (*A Hazard*: 209)

March reacts to this with "a look of pain," but, as it turns out later, still does not understand Lindau. He idolizes his former teacher, but thereby turns him into a symbol: a hero of the Civil War and an American patriot, although Lindau

20 A straightforward synonym for a trust in this sense, is conglomerate, combination, or monopoly, but only in the US, and only since 1882, when the first large trust of this kind was created, the Standard Oil Trust. The term "trust" rapidly gained an independent existence and both approving, and disapproving language users created its meaning as simply a business corporation that controlled a certain field of business. The specific American usage also becomes obvious in that that legislation against it is called Anti-Trust law in the US, whereas, in British and European legal contexts, the synonymous term is Competition Law (Orbach/Rebling 2012). The term had, however, little to do with its original usage: "It is important at the outset to state the nature of a "trust." The term is an unfortunate one, since it is in no respect descriptive of the subject at issue. A trust is in general simply the case of one person holding the title of property, whether land or chattels, for the benefit of another, termed a beneficiary. Nothing can be more common or more useful. But the word is now loosely applied to a certain class of commercial agreements and, by reason of a popular and unreasoning dread of their effect, the term itself has become contaminated" (Dwight 1888: 592).

Figure 1: “Crushing the Scorpion of Anarchy, But Sparing the Octopus of Monopoly”



Harper's Weekly, January 21, 1888. (Quoted in Orbach/Rebling 2012: 615)

had told him earlier that he did not feel “American” (“What gountry hass a poor man got, Mr. Marge?”). March fails completely to engage the actual Lindau’s politics. Their exchange sets up an explicit contrast in their understanding of the (trust) relationship between citizens and business. Lindau sees this as essentially predatory. When March claims that any American would be happy to “lend [Lindau] a hand for the one you gave us all,” his response is summarily dismissive, and is explained by a lack of trust in the people who support the current system.

Interestingly, in spite of his supposed intellectual credentials, March does not counter, is not able to counter, Lindau with any sort of argument about why trust is to be expected. The only response he can provide is naive pa-

triotism (essentially: Americans, simply because they are Americans, are decent—trustworthy—people). Howells, the author of the novel as a thought-experiment, clearly understands this: he is endorsing neither March's unreflective naivete, nor Lindau's incoherent radical leftism that dismisses the Americans in the street by confusing them with their institutional oppressors. Rather, Howells draws our attention to the reasonable synthesis of these two extremes, which recognizes that money, the law, and financial institutions in fact *embody* the necessary basic levels of trust required for a city based on economic expectations to function. As Geoffrey Hosking writes: "Money and financial institutions underpin the *minimal* trust necessary to the never ceasing human activity of trade in goods and services. ... This is the basis of capitalism" (Hosking 2016: 196).

The key here is the word "minimal." As the further developments in the novel make clear, especially the ending, Lindau's distrust is not a solution, but it is similarly clear that in the eyes of Lindau, March is not trustworthy either. When March enlists Lindau's services for the magazine, he realizes from the beginning that Lindau would find it impossible to accept a salary if he knew that it came from Dryfoos, the capitalist, "who had got his money together out of every gambler's chance in speculation, and all a schemer's thrift form the error and need of others" (*A Hazard* 211). But March just glosses over this, and thus effectively betrays his friend's trust. To make matters worse, March organizes a dinner at Dryfoos's house, where Lindau is also invited. Since both Dryfoos and Lindau are convinced of the rightfulness of their positions, there is no polite, non-committal conversation, and once Dryfoos learns about Lindau's radicalism, he insists on dismissing him from the magazine. March, however, refuses to do so, and is ready to resign himself, when Lindau turns up at his doorstep and returns the money he was already paid: "It iss not hawnest mawney... I feel as if dere vas ploodt on it" (*A Hazard* 402).

The idiomatic personification of the money as "honest" needs to be seen here in the larger context of Lindau's trust in American society. Since the money is of course only a synecdoche for a system that Georg Simmel first characterized as trust-based, this kind of trust can also involve an additional element of faith that "can vary in strength and importance" (Möllering 2001: 406). For Lindau, his lack of trust in the "system" does not allow him to make any compromises; his trust, or distrust, is fundamental (religious connotation intended). Additionally, the association with "blood" foreshadows the tragic ending of the novel.

The description of the situation, in which Lindau and Conrad die, is told from an omniscient perspective:

The officer lifted his club, and the old man threw his left arm up to shield his head. Conrad recognized Lindau ... and he was going to say to the policeman: "Don't strike him! He's an old soldier! You see he has no hand!" but he could not speak, could not move his tongue. The policeman stood there; he saw his face; it was not bad, not cruel; it was like the face of a statue, fixed, perdurable—a mere image of irresponsible and involuntary authority. Then Conrad fell forward, pierced through the heart by that shot fired from the car. (*A Hazard* 470).

The specifics leave no doubt that both Lindau and Conrad are victims of random violence. At the same time, the symbolism of the scene is striking: Lindau, the old man without a hand, an iconic part of the body, standing for power, agency, but also for innocence and unity, lacks all agency, and cannot even effectively protect himself. Conrad, who wants to help him, cannot move his tongue, and is thus unable to articulate the truth. The police on the opposing side are part of the institutional infrastructure that is supposed to guarantee order, and also protection for the citizens, but as presented in this scene, it is just the tool of "irresponsible and involuntary authority." Such authority is, by definition, not trustworthy. Applying Tilly's and Hosking's categories here, we can again identify the rise of the relevance, and, in this case, the tragic failure, of strong, thin trust in modern, especially urban (anonymous, coordinated) environments (Hosking 2016, Tilly 2009).

The death of Lindau and Conrad is the climax of the novel, followed by a long denouement in which the individual responsibilities of the characters are reflected. In a striking omission, the role of the police as the "mere image of irresponsible and involuntary authority" is not addressed at all. There is no room to follow up on this here, but the lacuna is all the more surprising given Howells's involvement in trying to save the so-called Haymarket anarchists, who, as Howells wrote: "were put to death in the prime of the freest Republic the world has ever known, for their opinions' sake" (Unpublished letter to the *New York Tribune*, November 11, 1877, quoted in Goodman/Dawson 2005: 284).

About the Picturesque "Poseuse": How Can She Be Trusted?

The third thought-experiment I look at in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is concerned with the changing role of women in American society, and, more specifically, with the question why women were generally not trusted to be able to take on public functions. The last decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by industrialization, urbanization, the closing of the frontier, and immigration—but also by the rapidly growing public activities of female reform activists (Buenker 1971; Matthews 1992; McCammon et al. 2001; Perry 2002; Schüler 2004). The most important manifestation of these was the struggle for the vote, but women advocated many other causes beside suffrage. The often-charitable projects in urban settings were carried forward by some well-known icons, but also by countless middle-class women who are forgotten today. The main arguments against female public activity followed a pattern based on the notion that women were incapable of taking over public roles because of their essential "femininity": women could not be trusted in public tasks and offices, no matter how well prepared they were, because they were women. This idea was directly tied to what was seen as their most important function in society: their reproductive role, or, as the rhetoric of the time put it, the holy role of motherhood, which included also the potentiality of becoming a mother, or the missed opportunity to have become one. Thus, it was imperative that women remained in their "separate spheres."²¹

Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, women, especially in urban environments, had become active in public roles: as reformers, journalists, and organizers. In her article, "Men Are from the Gilded Age, and Women are from the Progressive Era," Elizabeth Perry focuses on the careers of those female activists whose contributions to this era are often overlooked—simply because they were not always explicit about their motives, out of fear to appear "unsexed" (Perry 2002:3). This strategy acknowledged society's general suspicion of women with public agency, or those wielding any form of power. The

21 The first ideological cornerstones in the construction of the "separate spheres" ideology in US history were laid during the foundation of the Republic. When Abigail Adams admonished her husband John Adams to "Remember the Ladies" in 1776, with little success. The "ladies" were instead offered the task of bringing up men for public office. Later, this cult of "republican motherhood" merged with the Victorian "angel of the house" or "true woman" paradigm, emphasizing even more that women would lose their femininity if they pursued professional or political careers (Klaiber 2005: 476–77; Kelley 1984).

degree of distrust that activist women had to contend with becomes immediately apparent in anti-suffrage caricatures. Beside the predominant motifs showing women activists as negligent mothers and frigid shrews, their appearance was also a popular way of suggesting that women were not trustworthy:

Figure 2: Anon. (n.d.): "Some Plain Things at the Suffragette Meetings"



University of Northern Iowa, Palczewski Suffrage Postcard Archive.

It seems paradoxical that it was possible to question women's motives and thus the extent to which they could be trusted to seriously participate in public life on the seemingly contradictory (not to mention irrelevant) grounds that they were thought to be either too ugly, or too pretty. But these two caricatures display their true meaning exactly in this juxtaposition: as an expression of the same kind of distrust stretched across the spectrum of possible perceptions of women as "vain" creatures, who could not be trusted to have truly political motives. The aspect of "spectacle" in the male (and conservative female) view of women is part of an argument that rendered them untrustworthy—something which can also be observed in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

Historians of the female reform movements have demonstrated in detail how political and institutional factors led to the weakening of the "sepa-

Figure 3: James Montgomery Flagg: "We Don't Want A Thing—We Are Just Showing Off"



Flagg 1907

rate sphere" ideology (Buechler 2013; Langley 1998; Schöler 2018; Dubois et al 2019). Although trust in women outside the home did not appear overnight, there are only a few cursory discussions of the dynamic of trust relationships in the historiography of the women's movement, and none at all, as far as I can find, in theoretical discussions of scholars writing about trust.²² In spite of the fact that the changing perception of women is related to various established trust-related analytical categories (for example, to the role of social

22 In her comparative study on women's movement and social reform, Anja Schöler refers to the conviction of early German reformers such as Alice Salomon and other, less known activists, that social reform is not conceivable without trust in the helping hand, which is even more effective if it is offered by a female to a female (Schöler 2004: 197, 202). But this relationship concerns charity, not the public perception of women in general. In other recent studies by Denney (2018), and Rosenblatt (1999) the role of trust is of course implicit, but not explicitly discussed. Other influential studies on trust have been silent on the subject (Hardin 2002; Frevert 2013; Hosking 2016; Hartmann 2020).

capital, to institutional trust, or to the definition of trust relationships as encapsulated interest, etc.) it seems that neither philosophers, nor historians, nor sociologists have undertaken a study of trust with respect to gender, or for short, “gender trust.”²³ The existing research on trust and gender is currently centered on empirical surveys or on case studies comparing female to male behavior when it comes to well-defined, mostly institutional, political, sociological, psychological, and economic interactions (Jeanquart-Barone/Sekaran 1994).²⁴

The historical study of changing dimensions and limits of gender trust faces two major methodological problems: First, it is not possible to conduct surveys in the past, a popular—although often problematic—way to collect data about trust. Second, since “trust” is not an established analytical category in historical gender studies, it is also not possible to gather systematically scholarly observations from previous work. Here, it is again literature that we can turn to, and, in particular, returning to Howells’s novels of manners, we can see that the question of trust and trustworthiness was indeed of relevance when the most momentous changes in gender relations first began to manifest themselves in public contexts.

Howells wrote a fair amount about the changing role of women in the cultural sphere of the late nineteenth century. The “feminization” of the realist artist has been discussed elsewhere (Miller 1990), and there are also several studies about the female figures in his works. Some of these results and conclusions are, however, distorted by what we now recognize as an underlying and unresolved category error: the definitions of the “essence” of femininity (historical view), as opposed to the implicit denial that such an “essence” exists in the first place (the contemporary, performative view of gender) are often not sufficiently acknowledged. It is easy to find statements in Howells’s

23 For example, a recent publication on the “Invisible Power of Trust,” by philosopher Martin Hartmann (2020), discusses a great number of interpretations of trust relationships, but there is no reference to the significant historical change in gender trust, i.e. how the perception of women’s trustworthiness in public and professional life has changed. Or on how it perhaps has not changed: As a commentary on this point see Deborah Blachor’s satirical “I Don’t Hate Women Candidates—I Just Hated Hillary and Coincidentally I’m Starting to Hate Elizabeth Warren” (2019).

24 Peters’s 2018 monograph *Trust Women* carries the term “trust” in the title, but it discusses current debates on reproductive justice. A similarly promising paper with the title “A Feminist Re-Reading of Theories of Late Modernity: Beck, Giddens, and the Location of Gender” by Mulinari and Sandell does not discuss trust at all.

work which, from today's perspective, sound antiquated and are dominated by stereotypes of how women supposedly "are."²⁵ But the representations of polyphonic opinions in his novels automatically provide views on both conservative and progressive developments side by side. Additionally, his liminal status as observer of social change accounts for his insights into details of the *processes* of societal transformation.

Margaret Vance's rite of passage from a young and beautiful socialite to her involvement in the social gospel movement helping the poor presupposes an urban environment and takes place before the backdrop of the countless reform and charitable organizations existing in New York at the time (Boyer 1978; Boehm/Corey 2017:141–182). Her "case" as a thought-experiment with respect to trust and trustworthiness in the perception of women is low-key at the beginning, but towards the end of the book she steps into the foreground, and her controversial role in the plot becomes apparent.

Miss Vance's function in the final section of the novel is tied to the strike of the streetcar workers discussed above. She is sympathetic to the strike and the plight of the workers (even calling them even "true heroes"), and is concerned about their fate in the violent conflicts with the police. She thinks somebody should try to act as an intermediary and considers going herself to the scene of the fighting, but decides against it, as she explains to her friend Conrad: "I have wanted to go and try; but I am a woman, and I mustn't! I shouldn't be afraid of the strikers, but *I'm afraid of what people would say!*" (468, my emphasis). Thus, her conflict is caused by the rules of expected gender behavior: she wants to go, and has no reason to be afraid of the strikers, but she is too worried about public perception. Conrad, as a conventional male, is not capable of distinguishing "fear of conflict" from "fear of public censure." Overcome by infatuation and the "trust she had shown him" Conrad approaches the scene of the fighting (ibid. 469). Following public gender expectations, Conrad should be there, yet as a meek and rather passive individual, he should not. Before he can say or do anything, he is killed, without affecting the outcome of the fight.

In the aftermath of Conrad's death, Miss Vance has the vague and undefined worry that she was somehow responsible for it. Since the readers have been granted insight into Conrad's thought, they know that yes, indeed, she

25 In her essay "The Feminization of American Realist Theory," Elise Miller has done just that and gathered many of his statements about women in general, and female writers in particular (Miller 1990).

was responsible—but not in the way she thinks. Conrad went to the demonstration out of the wish to impress *her*, to honor her “trust” in him, but therein lies a fatal misunderstanding on his part. Miss Vance expressed just general “gender trust” in his masculine role, while Conrad carried it into the realm of individual, interpersonal trust, hoping to impress her: “Was not that what she meant when she bewailed her woman’s helplessness? She must have wished him to try if he, being a man could not do something ... thinking of her pleasure in what he was going to do, *he forgot almost what it was*” (469, my emphasis).

The differences are crucial: Miss Vance did not think she was not capable, but she worried about how breaking the conventions of expected gender performance would look. The momentous role of a *visible* performance is expressed again after Conrad’s funeral and a meeting with the March couple. Especially Isabel March is perplexed and unsure about her: “She is a strange being; such a mixture of the society girl and the saint” (482). The “riddle” continues when, in a later encounter, the Marches see Miss Vance again, this time at the deathbed of the anarchist Lindau:

They both stopped. Lindau’s grand, patriarchal head, foreshortened to their view, lay white upon the pillow, and his broad, white beard flowed upon the sheet, which heaved with those long last breaths. Beside his bed Margaret Vance was kneeling; her veil was thrown back and her face was lifted; she had clasped between her hands the hand of the dying man she moved her lips inaudibly (493).

This scene, which remains uncommented upon, is like a *tableau vivant*, i.e. a live recreation of a painting. The description is also painterly, talking about foreshortening, describing the visible surfaces of expression; it is a “word-picture” that emphasizes Miss Vance’s appearance. And, indeed, a couple of pages later, Isabel March returns to the question of “how did she look” (503), because: “[Isabel March] had her feminine misgivings; she was not sure but the girl was something of a *poseuse*, and enjoyed the *picturesqueness*, as well as the pain” (503, my emphasis). Her husband indicates he does not agree, but it seems that he does not want to get into an argument with his conservative wife, who worries that too much female public reform work would be “rather dismal for the homes” (504).²⁶

26 Howells references here the well-known phenomenon of conservative female anti-suffrage attitudes (Perry 2002:37).

The final scene of the novel, when the Marches meet a joyful Miss Vance in the uniform of a charitable "sisterhood" on the street, provides closure to the thought experiment whether women can be trusted to take on roles outside their "womanly" and domestic circles; for example, as social reformers. As in the caricatures mentioned earlier in this chapter, or in the scenes in which Isabel March accuses Miss Vance of being a vain "poseuse," it is again the interpretation of a visible social performance which is at stake. In this final case, however, there is an added extra complexity, because this time, Miss Vance looks back at the Marches, who "felt that the peace that passeth understanding had looked at them from her eyes"²⁷ implying that she no longer feels guilty about Conrad's death. Still, Isabel March is not entirely convinced, but this time her husband has the final word: "Well, we must trust that look of hers" (552). "Look" can mean two things here: Miss Vance's own active gaze, but also "how she looks"—in other words, her appearance as a woman that had previously invited so much negative, distrustful commentary from Isabel March's conservative perspective. The phrasing of the sentence, especially the use of the modal "must," implies, moreover, a general *imperative* to trust.²⁸ Trust theory suggests that cultural trust-networks stabilize situations of uncertainty (Hartmann 2020: 145), yet Mr. March's statement returns to a moment of self-authorization, a crucial component in dynamic situations where epistemological questions ("how can we know whom or what to trust") also play a role.

Conclusion

Trust is often said to be in a crisis today,²⁹ but, in fact, there is nothing new about crises of trust. Indeed, not only are such crises a recurring feature in the history of the developed democracies, but they are invariably accompanied (in fact documented) by contemporary analytic commentary—that commentary being a valuable resource for social history. In his novels, Howells was not just a prolific chronicler of his milieu; he was one of the most socio-politically aware authors of his time, and, in particular, a careful analyst of

27 The phrase refers to a biblical quotation, Philippians 4:7, but the context distances it from a religious interpretation.

28 For a discussion of trust as something we can always rightfully demand from others, see Hertzberg (1988).

29 See the most recent results of the Edelman Trust Barometer project (Edelman, 2019).

the ways particular social disruptions challenged “incorporated” America. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he applies his realist poetics to the problem of describing—and analyzing—the phenomena of trust and trustworthiness in the first American metropolis, New York. Although Howells never presents an explicit analytical framework (there is no reason why, as a novelist, he should), we can clearly discern a theory of trust that is remarkably congruent with later theoretical frameworks (such as the “thick/thin,” “weak/strong” classification of Hosking), and that can be viewed as a sophisticated attempt to investigate both the dynamics and the limits of “strong, thin,” trust relationships and their importance for an understanding of 19th century American urban society.

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