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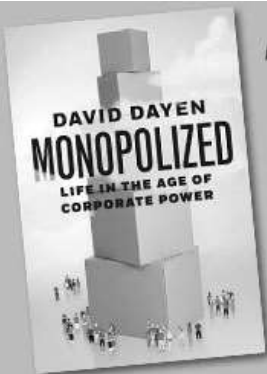
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# The Structural Violence of Municipal Hoarding

High-wealth communities segregate and protect their treasure from municipal redistribution.

BY  HIGHSMITH JULY 6, 2020





LAURIE SKRIVAN/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH VIA AP FILE

The enduring visual represents a real form of violence.

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The images were striking: two white homeowners, Mark and Patricia McCloskey, one in belted khakis and a pink polo, the other in capri pants, both clumsily brandishing lethal weapons at Black Lives Matter protesters marching by their palatial estate in St. Louis, Missouri. Although no shots were fired, the enduring visual represents a real form of violence, distinct from the homeowners' guns but deployed with the same goals: hoarding white wealth from redistribution for democratic use.

The scene unfolded on one of St. Louis' private "lanes"—self-owned, mostly white enclaves set apart from the city by physical fencing and legal provisions. This gated community, Portland Place, lies just eight miles from the intersection where Ferguson police killed Michael Brown six years ago.

But the economic resources of this neighborhood and others like it are shielded from the mostly Black residents of Ferguson, with devastating consequences.

Investigating Brown's death, the U.S. Department of Justice documented the communitywide terror resulting from local officials' efforts to generate revenue through over-policing: the administration of fines and fees on Ferguson's poor, predominantly Black residents. The public high school from which Brown graduated draws about 40 percent of its funding from local sources. But its budget cannot access the property-tax revenue assessed from the gun-wielding McCloskeys' estate, what *St. Louis Magazine* described as a "Midwestern palazzo," just a few miles away.

The laws and individual actions that shield accumulated wealth from redistribution inflict structural harm on our country's Black communities. These structures of municipal hoarding take different forms in different places but are connected through a common goal of racialized exclusion. Against the backdrop of residential segregation, local funding structures deprive excluded communities of the services needed to meet basic human needs. They also contribute to violent over-policing, as officers harass residents for onerous fines and fees to cover resulting budgetary shortfalls.

Under our system, local communities bear the re-




Redistribution stops at the city limit, allowing municipal boundaries to function effectively as tax



shelters for white residents of segregated neighborhoods. As personal and corporate wealth has become increasingly concentrated, more of the country's potential tax base now lies beyond reach to anyone outside the segregated neighborhoods where our uber-wealthy reside. White wealth passed down across generations—over decades in which families of color were systematically excluded from economic opportunity—is thus shielded from the needs of neighboring families of color.

Partly as a result, local governments underinvest in critical public infrastructure and redistributive programs. When they do provide public goods, municipalities increasingly use monetary sanctions or regressive “user-fee” financing models to shift the budget costs of public spending onto vulnerable residents. In Pennsylvania, for example, poor students with unpaid school lunch debt have been threatened with foster care placement. Poor mothers in Mississippi are coerced into low-wage labor, the entirety of their wages garnished by the state to pay legal debts. These ripple effects of our municipal funding design undermine opportunity and inflict new traumas in the communities long targeted by historical oppression.

Such structures also help explain why American municipalities are so splintered along spatial patterns of residential wealth and race. St. Louis County illustrates this well, containing 88 municipalities, 91 special districts, and 23 school districts. The city of St. Louis is divided even further, through  private neighborhoods that exist within the city limits but are physically cordoned off from the outside world. Their residents live on private streets,



which often are protected from trespassing outsiders by private security forces. Their children are diverted away from underfunded public schools and into elite private institutions. In the words of the homeowner, Mark McCloskey: “There’s no public anything in Portland Place.”

One scholar noted that over St. Louis’s history, “protection of white property and privilege guided nearly all decisions about law and policies that promoted the establishment of new small and exclusive suburban municipalities with restrictive zoning codes.” In 1916, city voters overwhelmingly passed the country’s first referendum to impose racial segregation in housing. After this ordinance was struck, white residents for decades used restrictive racial covenants to achieve the same purpose, until the Supreme Court made them illegal.

White residents have used various methods to protect their wealth from public efforts to equitably provide education, infrastructure, public safety, and other critical services. For example, limits on property taxes in Missouri restrict the ability of local communities to fund services through redistributive taxation; they were originally adopted during the so-called “Redeemer period”—when Reconstruction opponents enacted laws to protect white wealth and power. These efforts also took the form of literal violence: In 1949, a white mob surrounded Fairgrounds Park on the first day that Black children were allowed to swim in the public pools, eventually breaking into riot.



The fears animating these historical actions endure today. Justifying his threats to a local news station, Mark McCloskey explained: “I really thought it was [a] storming of the Bastille.” (The analogy was apt for multiple reasons: The couple’s home features an antique “standing man” French armoire, so named for its ability to hide a member of the aristocracy during the Reign of Terror.) While his mansion was never in danger, the current uprisings do represent a reaction not only to lawless police violence, but also to the racialized violence and structural inequities that pervade our social order.

From predatory policing to school funding, a new generation of activists is now challenging the laws and fiscal structures—long taken to be intractable—that facilitate municipal hoarding. Last month, a prominent collective of abolitionist organizers centered the connections between these different forms of structural violence, demanding that states not only defund their punishment bureaucracies but also move to “[d]isconnect property taxes from school funding.” This could be done by having the federal government—which uniquely can redistribute from wealthy enclaves to geographic pockets of oppression—assume responsibility for the funding of local goods, either directly or through an aggressive program of new transfer spending.

California’s Local Control Funding Formula attempts to execute this—albeit imperfectly—by distributing disproportionately more state-centralized education resources to high-need K-12



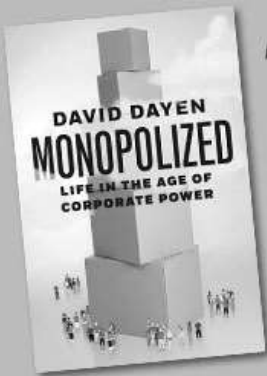
The weapons that perpetuate the structural harms of municipal hoarding do not appear on our screens



in the same visceral way. They take the form of a regressive property tax limitation, not a semi-automatic; a municipal charter, rather than a handgun. But we must understand these routine tools of racial exclusion as brutal violence just the same.

## **BRIAN HIGHSMITH**

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