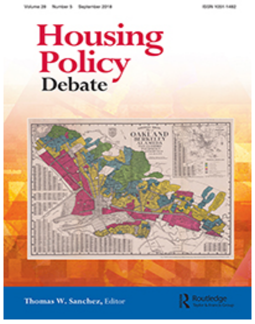

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FORUM: BEYOND OPPORTUNITY HOARDING

Beyond Opportunity Hoarding: Interrogating Its Limits as an Account of Urban Inequalities

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ABSTRACT

To account for the extensive inequalities manifest within urban (or metropolitan) areas in the United States, the idea of "opportunity hoarding" has garnered increasing salience. When applied to explain urban inequalities, the focus of opportunity hoarding is on places—especially how residents of affluent, predominantly White residential neighborhoods or political jurisdictions are able to secure a plethora of opportunities for themselves and especially their children, at the expense of those living in less privileged places. I interrogate the account of American urban inequalities embedded within the idea of opportunity hoarding, finding it to be limited in significant ways. In light of these findings, I discuss what a superior account of urban inequalities might look like, and suggest how this account points toward potentially more efficacious strategies to attack these inequalities, perhaps ushering in a more just future for American cities and metros.

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In the analysis of American urban or (intra)metropolitan inequality, the idea of "opportunity hoarding" has, especially of late, played a central explanatory role.[1] The idea, most prominently developed by the sociologist Charles Tilly in his book *Durable Inequality,* becomes operative as a generator of social inequality when members of what he calls "a categorically bounded network" obtain "access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi" (Tilly 1998, p. 10). For Tilly, this resource could be many things—an occupational designation, a lifestyle classification, or an educational credential, as well as "other categories that convey distinction" and thus work to exclude outside groups (Rury & Rife, 2018, p. 88).

But for most scholars applying the idea of opportunity hoarding to explain American urban (or metropolitan) inequality, intense focus is given to *places*—affluent, predominantly White (and increasingly Asian[2]) residential neighborhoods or political jurisdictions within metro areas. These places are themselves the valuable and renewable resource that is held in exclusive ways by the "categorically bounded network," a network that is in turn comprised by those inhabiting such privileged neighborhoods or jurisdictions. These inhabitants then use their near-monopolistic access to the valuable resource—the affluent, White-dominated place—to hoard most of its benefits for themselves or, especially, their children. High-performing schools, productive social networks, elite cultural capital, pleasing and healthy environments (both natural and built), and safe and secure public and private spaces all constitute and demarcate these privileged places, from which flow a veritable fountain of social and economic opportunities to their residents.

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In conceptual terms, this place-based opportunity hoarding (sometimes alternatively referred to as "resource hoarding") is effectuated via two distinct institutional mechanisms. In the first, affluent, predominantly White groups separate (or segregate) themselves spatially from the rest of the metropolitan population by inhabiting their own jurisdictions (or neighborhoods) while actively "limit[ing] *entry* into the area through [exclusionary] zoning," allowing them to "admit only [other] wealthy inhabitants" (Freemark et al., 2020, p. 240, emphasis added; also see Anderson, 2010; Lens & Monkkonen, 2016). The result is that the opportunities they and, most importantly, their children enjoy from residing in these spatially separate enclaves are hoarded—kept all to themselves—as the artificially high housing costs that exclusionary zoning (and related land-use restrictions) begets *block* less affluent others from moving in. Such spaces are, as the title of Richard Rothstein's (2020) recent editorial in *The New York Times* put it, "the neighborhoods we will not share," using the first-person pronoun to speak directly to these affluent "[American] dream hoarders" (Reeves, 2017) who form the backbone of the newspaper's readership.

Although in the first mechanism, affluent, predominantly White residents limit *entry* into their privileged jurisdictions or neighborhoods, in the second mechanism they effectuate opportunity hoarding by limiting the *exit* of their resources—primarily their high incomes and large wealth holdings (see Anderson, 2010; Freemark et al., 2020; Trounstine, 2018). These resources notably include potential "property-tax revenues, which, were they collected by metropolitan-scale entities, could be distributed for broader needs" (Freemark et al., 2020, p. 240). Added to this are the tax revenues potentially collected by higher-scaled governments, especially on the national or federal level, and transferred to disadvantaged places or people (see, e.g., Dreier et al., 2014; Kantor, 2016; Weir & King, 2021). Again, the result is that, by not sharing their abundant resources—through allowing their "exit" (or redistribution)—the opportunities that flow from those resources are hoarded by affluent, predominantly White groups that primarily reside in privileged jurisdictions.

Taken together, these two opportunity hoarding mechanisms—the strong limits on both *entry* (into affluent jurisdictions and neighborhoods) and *exit* (of resources, primarily potential tax revenues)—paint a powerful picture of gross injustice: Selfish, rich (predominantly White) families keeping all of the prime opportunities for themselves and their children, and in the process denying those same opportunities to the (especially Black and Brown) children of the poor and near-poor. These practices are seen to, in turn, result in the generation, reproduction, and solidification of massive inequalities within American cities and metros, as the widespread hoarding of opportunities translates into extremely unequal social and economic outcomes (See, for example, Reeves, 2017; Cashin, 2021; Freemark et al., 2020; Anderson, 2010; Trounstine, 2018).

The central thesis of what is to follow challenges this widely held, orthodox view. Although the opportunity hoarding account of metropolitan inequalities is superficially compelling, deeper analysis and interrogation demonstrates its tenuousness. Specifically, as I first explicate below, efforts (or what I call pathways) to mitigate opportunity hoarding's adverse effects (from both its entry mechanism and its exit mechanism) confront stark limits, clearly revealing the weaknesses of this account. More fundamentally, I also explicate how the idea of opportunity hoarding is rooted in a faulty conception of why and how metropolitan inequalities are generated and sustained—that is, in colloquial terms, I explicate why and how the idea of opportunity hoarding is based on *the wrong theory of the case*. Finally, I discuss how a proper understanding of why and how metropolitan inequalities are generated and sustained—the correct theory of the case—points us toward potentially more efficacious strategies to attack these inequalities. These strategies better comport with the demands of social justice organizations such as the Movement for Black Lives, while perhaps ushering in a more just future for American cities.

The Limits of Mitigating Opportunity Hoarding's Two Mechanisms

Mitigating the impacts of the two institutional mechanisms that effectuate opportunity hoarding can be (potentially) realized via two corresponding pathways—an entry pathway and an exit pathway. Each is examined below.

The Entry Pathway: An Ontological Fallacy

The notion of opening up privileged places so that disadvantaged families can have access to the abundant place-based opportunities that flow from residing in them has been a near-obsession of American urban policy scholars and analysts for over a half century (see, e.g., Downs, 1973). The goal of this pathway is to facilitate the entry of residents of poorer places into these areas of "high opportunity" (see, e.g., Turner, 2012), something that in turn lessens the degree to which these abundant opportunities are hoarded by their current affluent residents.

Although the logic of combatting opportunity hoarding via this entry pathway is inherently appealing—both normatively and programmatically—it faces an insurmountable obstacle that leaves it able to reduce opportunity hoarding in only marginal ways: Namely, the use of the entry pathway is built upon (what might be thought of as) an *ontological fallacy*, where the essential qualities (or ontology) of the thing in question—in this case, "opportunity"—are fallaciously conceptualized. In specific terms, concentrations of affluent White residents in privileged areas do not *have* (or possess) "opportunity," in the sense that, ontologically, it is characterized by the property of something that can be alienated or estranged from them. Rather they *are*—in essential terms—the "opportunity" itself. Simply put, in a society where affluent whiteness conveys massive privilege—and, indeed, outright supremacy—the reason affluent White areas are such depositories of opportunity is because they have a plethora of affluent and White people living in them.

Although not explicitly specifying it as such, Edward Goetz's (2019) compelling critique of the so-called *opportunity paradigm* derives (in part at least) from an astute appreciation of the key dynamic at work. In a collective sense, people do not follow opportunity, he points out; rather, "opportunity follows people." Certain people. Specifically, affluent White people collectively do not move in order to occupy "high opportunity" neighborhoods; rather, such neighborhoods gain their high-opportunity-essence because their inhabitants, in the aggregate, are overwhelmingly White and affluent. To wit, Goetz (2019) invites us to consider all of the "previously favored places" that have lost their opportunity over the last century as affluent White people have fled—including, most notably, central cities followed by many inner-ring suburbs (also see Goetz et al., 2020; Orfield & Luce, 2012; Shapiro, 2017). To Goetz's list we can add those neighborhoods transformed by gentrification, where we see the same phenomenon, just in reverse: Once the population collectively changes to White and affluent, opportunity almost magically reappears in places that were just a decade or so ago condemned by territorial stigmatization and deemed to be utterly lacking in it (see, e.g., Brummet & Reed, 2019; Dastrup & Ellen, 2016; Lees et al., 2008).

By recognizing this ontological fallacy, we come to better understand some of the inherent limits of opportunity hoarding as an explanation for urban inequalities. Of particular importance here is the *inalienability of opportunity* in ontological terms. Because the collective *concentration* of affluent White people *is* (the essence of this) opportunity—most notably into what Goetz and his colleagues (2019) classify as *racially concentrated areas of affluence* (RCAAs)[3]—anything that lessens that concentration in any significant way alters the ontological makeup of the thing itself in question (i.e., opportunity). Metaphorically, then, the deconcentration of affluent White people within these areas of high opportunity kills the goose that lays the golden eggs.

As noted above, over much of the 20th century and now into the 21st, we saw this phenomenon play out in stark empirical terms over and over as the sociodemographics of various American urban places have radically transformed. Places once of high opportunity became places of low opportunity as their concentration of affluent White residents became adulterated (see, e.g., Dreier et al., 2014; Orfield & Luce, 2012; Shapiro, 2017). As long as the numbers of the disadvantaged entering to experience now-hoarded opportunity (and those fleeing as result) remain small enough, the essential ontological properties of that opportunity remain intact. But when those numbers become too great, and affluent White people become less dominant—often because, both historically and presently, the increased entry of opportunity-seekers triggers flight[4]—opportunity dissipates.[5] Although the thresholds involved will vary in different contexts, the limits to reducing opportunity hoarding via the entry pathway are undoubtedly (and punishingly) real.

Examining the inalienability of opportunity in schooling—the key institutional arena via which opportunity hoarding is practiced in American metros—helps specify what these ontological limits might be. Consider the justifiably celebrated and longstanding inclusionary zoning (IZ) program of Montgomery County, Maryland. As an effort to reduce opportunity hoarding, this program allows some children to live in public housing within some of the county's most affluent (suburban Washington, DC) neighborhoods, affording them access (i.e., entry) to very low-poverty schools (Dreier et al., 2014). And, as to be expected, these children perform significantly better academically than their peers who attend higher-poverty schools (Schwartz, 2011). But when children living in public housing attend schools with just a moderate level of poverty—where between 20% and 35% of children are poor[6]—they perform no better than those children living in public housing who attend schools that are much poorer (with poverty rates between 35% and 85%). Thus, at a mere 20–35%, the IZ program's attempt to reduce opportunity hoarding via the entry pathway is stymied. No opportunity gains (in terms of academic performance) are realized once the school poverty rate reaches that moderate level (Schwartz, 2011).

Hence we see a clear manifestation of the punishing ontological bounds faced by efforts to reduce opportunity hoarding via entry. Low-poverty schools, even when defined at a less strict standard (less than 25% poor), are now quite uncommon, with a mere one in five public school students attending them (Hussar et al., 2020). Moreover, in large American metropolitan areas, many of the best of these schools are in RCAAs, but these areas constitute, on average, just 2.19% of census tracts (Goetz et al., 2019). Using a somewhat more relaxed standard still shows that only about 18% of residents of large metros live in suburbs that are both White (more than 80%) and affluent (defined as those showing little fiscal/social stress; Orfield & Luce, 2012). Yet these relatively scarce places are exactly the kinds of jurisdictions that almost always have low-poverty schools, and thus are the key target of the entry pathway. Combine this scarceness with the fact that, by 2013, *over half* of *all* public children were poor (approximately 25 million students) (NCES, 2014), and it is clear that the number of poor children the relatively few extant low-poverty schools can accommodate *without withering the essential ontological properties of opportunity* is remarkably low. Thus, although it is certainly the case that a fortunate—in relative terms—few of those millions of students currently attending high- to moderate-poverty schools can be shifted to low-poverty ones via the entry pathway, the limits are sobering. As a result, the commonsensical notion that, as Rothstein (2020) put it, neighborhoods (and by extension schools) of high opportunity can readily be widely "shared"—either by state action, affluent White beneficence, or some combination of both—turns out to be inherently specious (especially in a nation where some 43.5% of people are poor or low-income) (Barnes, 2019).

Finally, beyond these ontological problems, the entry pathway to reduce opportunity hoarding faces additional obstacles. Again, the strong role played by race and racism (especially anti-blackness) is particularly confounding. For example, even in "truly advantaged" neighborhoods, the benefits conferred to Black residents are considerably less than those conferred to White residents, as Junia Howell's (2019, p. 420) excellent longitudinal analysis of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) data shows. Remarkably, Howell (2019, p. 430) finds that "Blacks with comparable families complete the same level of education no matter whether they grew up in the most or least disadvantaged neighborhoods." To explain why privileged neighborhoods benefit White residents much more than their Black neighbors, Howell (2019, p. 433) points to the existence of "racially segregated networks, racialized tracking in public schools, and racially separate peer groups" that funnel the associated opportunities "to White children even when their Black peers are in the same neighborhoods and schools." For similar reasons, in their intensive examination of a so-called "good school," Lewis and Diamond (2015) demonstrate how, despite the best intensions of school administrators and its wider progressive community, racial inequality continued to thrive there. More broadly, the Harvard researcher Raj Chetty, discussing the findings of his comprehensive study tracking the lives of millions of children (see Chetty et al., 2018), had to admit that the quest to find neighborhoods where poor Black male children experience good outcomes was largely futile. "There are essentially no such neighborhoods in America," he reported (as quoted in Badger et al., 2018). Entry, then, at least when race is a salient factor, can do only so much to ensure that opportunities are, in reality, substantially less hoarded.

The Exit Pathway: Formidable Barriers and Unintended Results

If the entry pathway as a means of reducing opportunity hoarding is exceedingly problematic, that leaves the (resource) exit pathway. Through this pathway, the resources hoarded by affluent White people secluded in privileged metropolitan jurisdictions are taxed away and transferred (or "exited") to poorer jurisdictions. This transfer can occur either directly on the metropolitan regional scale (via metropolitan-wide institutions with progressive taxing powers) or, more commonly, by higher-scaled governments (especially the federal level; see, e.g., Dreier et al., 2014). The reduction of place-based opportunity hoarding is attempted as transferred (or "exited") resources are marshaled to create the same "well-financed and high-performing schools, well-tended parks, safe streets, and other public goods" that "are [now] denied [hoarded], or at least made less accessible, to people in nearby [and poorer] jurisdictions" (Freemark et al., 2020, p. 240; also see Cashin, 2021). More generally, public investment—whether direct or indirect (such as via tax incentives to spur private investment)—is channeled to poorer places now experiencing significant underdevelopment in order to, again, disperse presently hoarded opportunities to their disadvantaged populations.

Like the entry pathway, the exit pathway is inherently appealing in a normative sense. At work here is a Robin-Hood-like rough justice—taking from the rich and giving to the poor. And, indeed, there is much to laud in this kind of "tax and transfer" redistribution (see Kantor, 2016; Weir & King, 2021). Nevertheless, and in parallel to the entry pathway, whereas the exit pathway can create some reduction in opportunity hoarding, its limits are similarly sobering (at least as it is normally employed as a means to this end).

As with the entry pathway, a key target of the exit pathway is also the improvement of educational outcomes. The resources taxed away from the affluent, who (mostly) reside in privileged jurisdictions, are transferred ("exited") to schools in underfunded jurisdictions serving a high percentage of impoverished students. This action is designed to make opportunity less hoarded as the exit pathway employs these additional resources to—in theory—improve the quality of education in high-poverty schools, in turn spreading opportunity to their mostly disadvantaged students.

The limits here stem from the enormous difficulties with improving educational outcomes in such schools, especially if they are overwhelmingly segregated by race. As the education researcher Richard Kahlenberg (2012, p. 2) points out, despite the media attention focused on isolated cases like some charter schools, which are unlikely to be reproduced on a large scale,[7] "the fact remains that it is extremely difficult to make high-poverty schools work on a systemwide basis." Accordingly, Douglas Harris (2007) examined a massive data set of some 60,000 schools and found that those that were both low poverty and low minority were almost 90 times more likely to be high performing compared to those that were high poverty and high minority. Moreover, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the long-standing federal program designed to funnel resources to high-poverty schools, was, as Haskins and Sawhill (2009, p. 140) of the Brookings Institution report, "a policy that after four decades showed virtually no success." Likewise, its successor, No Child Left Behind, which attempted to hold schools receiving enhanced federal resources accountable (via standardized testing) for improving the academic performance of even their most disadvantaged students, was discontinued after the failure rate among schools was immense (reaching above 50% in several states) (Klein, 2015).

None of this should be terribly surprising. As Kahlenberg (2012, p. 1) nicely summarizes, the famous Coleman report conducted almost six decades ago had much the same conclusion—that "the most powerful predictor of academic achievement is the socioeconomic status [SES] of a child's family," whereas "the second most important predictor is the socioeconomic status of the classmates in her school" (for a recent confirmation of these findings, see Hanushek et al., 2020). Decades of subsequent research attributes only about 20% of the achievement gap to school-based factors (including per-pupil spending), with 60% driven by these SES variables and 20% left unexplained (Spielberg, 2016). Although recent studies show that consistently spending significantly more money on low-income school districts over several years can definitely make a difference in student performance, the results are limited. For example, estimates are that such spending led students in a lower-income district to close the test score gap with students in a median-income district by only 3.5 points. This pales in comparison to, for example, the gap in math scores between Black and White eighth-graders, which stands at almost 10 times that number (Dynarski, 2017).

Beyond these efforts to improve schooling, the (resource) exit pathway to lessen opportunity hoarding also seeks to enhance the amount of public investment going to poor places in other arenas. Most significantly, it seeks to employ the resources taxed away (or "exited") from privileged places (and people) to improve a range of (other) local public goods while, more generally, stimulating economic revitalization.

The major limit here on dispersing (or unhoarding) opportunities is that the current structure of property holdings in impoverished, majority-minority urban communities—especially the excessive rates of either absentee or precarious ownership—makes it probable that this investment will have deleterious consequences (see, e.g., Burrowes et al., 2022). In particular, rather than enhancing opportunities for their impoverished minority residents on a broad scale, the result is more likely to fuel further dispossession, especially via gentrification and the resulting residential displacement.

Along these lines, in their recent study of thousands of formerly redlined areas (those D-graded by Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) maps from the 1930s), Robertson et al. (2022) found that—in accordance with (what I have identified as) the exit pathway—these areas did in fact receive a great deal of federal place-based funding from 1990 to 2015 (over six times the amount received by A-graded areas, for example). Yet the strong "compensatory impact" this investment had via the significant (26%) increase in neighborhood property values also "had an exclusionary impact on the racial composition of homeowners" (Robertson et al., 2022, p. 17). Namely, in D-graded areas, "10% more federal place-based funding was associated with an 8.7% reduction in the share of homeowners who were Black." Thus, place-based investments "may not have reduced racial wealth inequalities as much as advocates of such policies may have hoped." Instead, this additional investment spurred "outsized impacts on property values," triggering the dispossessing effects associated with gentrification processes (Robertson et al., 2022, p. 17).

Similarly, a broader literature documents how major increases in public investment going to poorer areas to improve the quality of local public goods and services (and other amenities)—such as mass transit, parks and open spaces, schools, and public safety—also often drives gentrification and displacement, with rail transit being an particularly powerful accelerant (for reviews, see Florida, 2015; Zhang & Kahn, 2013; Zuk et al., 2015). Although, as noted above, increased spending on high-poverty school districts is unlikely to have much impact system-wide (see Kahlenberg, 2012), more targeted investments to create magnet and charters schools often attract new, gentrifying high-income families to poorer urban neighborhoods (see Florida, 2015; Pearman & Swain, 2017). In addition, so called "green gentrification" is an especially acute problem. It is triggered by the development or upgrading of parks and greenways, major pollution remediation, enhanced flood mitigation, restored waterways, improved sewer and stormwater infrastructure, or the creation of new large-scale tree canopies (Arnold & Resilience Justice Project Researchers, 2021; also see, e.g., Burrowes et al., 2022; Checker, 2011; Curran & Hamilton, 2018; Gould & Lewis, 2017). As Craig (Tony) Arnold and his collaborators (2021, pp. 684–685) nicely summarize: the documentation of green gentrification and displacement "has increased substantially in recent years," including many "notorious examples" such as "the Anacostia area of Washington, DC, the Atlanta Beltline Project, the Harlem neighborhood in New York City, Philadelphia's watershed and stormwater green infrastructure, and community gardens in Brooklyn, New York."

Finally, even if the (resource) exit pathway's efforts to direct public investment into impoverished areas do not spark widespread gentrification, which is the probable outcome especially in weaker-market cities (see Mallach, 2019), it seems just as unlikely to reduce opportunity hoarding significantly. Rather than generating significant increases in opportunity, the results of community development efforts undertaken during the last several decades have been mixed at best, with the overall story arguably being one of failure (see, e.g., Dreier et al., 2014; Fiss, 2003; Lemann, 1994; Rusk, 1999). Critics maintain that such efforts merely "gild the ghetto," where living conditions are modestly improved but structural economic and social deficiencies remain unaltered. Although the phenomenon of "ghetto gilding" has been recognized for almost as long as the (resource) exit pathway has been tried (see Kain & Persky, 1969), the normal corrective has been to use the entry pathway to disperse so-called "ghetto" residents into affluent neighborhoods (see, e.g., Polikoff, 2000). Yet as we saw above, this pathway to lessen opportunity hoarding also faces serious constraints and limitations. What is required, then, is to find a means by which the structural economic and social deficiencies of "ghettos"—that is, areas of low wealth and systemic (often highly racialized) disadvantage—can be remediated in ways that at once progress significantly beyond mere "gilding" while not sparking gentrification and the accompanying dispossession.

Deeper Problem: Wrong Theory of the Case

To summarize what has been presented thus far, efforts to reduce urban (or metropolitan) inequalities via the reduction of opportunity hoarding, although not totally inefficacious, produce only minimal advances toward social and racial justice. Efforts (or pathways) targeting opportunity hoarding's entry mechanism face severe ontological limitations, whereas those targeting its exit mechanism leads to marginal extensions of opportunity, at best, with the strong likelihood of engendering deleterious consequences.

This reality points to a deeper problem with the idea of opportunity hoarding: it is rooted in a profound misunderstanding of why and how metropolitan inequalities are generated and sustained in the first place. Put colloquially, we might say that the idea is based on *the wrong theory of the case*.

There are two major (and interrelated) reasons why: First, as we saw above, key to the idea of opportunity hoarding, in both its entry and exit mechanisms, is the supposition that what principally drives unequal outcomes is the paucity of educational opportunities. Yet there is a large body of evidence suggesting that the link between contemporary economic inequalities and educational achievement is weak. Second, in a broader sense, embedded within the notion of opportunity hoarding is a strong emphasis on the processes of *consumption* rather than those of *production*. Although (unequal) consumption patterns—of, for example, public and private goods, services, and other amenities or disamenities—play some role in generating and sustaining metropolitan inequalities, their impacts pale compared with those stemming from (exploitative) production practices.

Education and Inequality

Nothing is more central to opportunity hoarding than education. At the core of the idea is the belief that metropolitan inequalities emerge and gather rigidity because educational opportunities are hoarded by the wealthy for the benefit of their own children, at the expense of those who are less privileged (see, e.g., Cashin, 2021; Reeves, 2017). Although this claim seems eminently plausible, the inequality machine that is the contemporary American political economy relies considerably less on differing levels of education/skills to generate its malignant results than is often understood.

In fact, whereas opportunity hoarding explanations have yet to take account of recent developments in research, there is a strong scholarly consensus that the so-called "skills gap" fails to explain why inequalities in the U.S. have exploded over the past half century. Illustrative of this now conventional wisdom, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman's (2022) recent summary appeared under the pointed headline, "Education Has Less To Do With Inequality Than You Think." The documentation of this phenomenon at the metropolitan level notably includes Jesse Rothstein's (2017) close examination of varying intergenerational mobility rates between commuting zones (roughly metro areas) of high and low opportunity. These variations, he found, were significantly less driven by K–12 school quality than by the characteristics of local labor markets and marriage patterns. Things like job networks affording access to good jobs within local industries, and, more generally, local labor markets with less stratification as well as higher union density, were found to be much more important for boosting individuals' overall economic well-being than the quality of schooling (Rothstein, 2017; also see Cohen, 2017).

Of the many educational inequalities central to the idea of opportunity hoarding, perhaps none is as significant as how unequal schooling at lower levels ultimately affects the ability to obtain a four-year college degree.[8] This focus is so crucial because the completion of college is seen as the ticket to upward mobility—and, ostensibly at least, for good reason: Those who have completed college earn 75% more than those with just a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2021), whereas those with at least a bachelor's degree or more are about four times more likely to be upper income (again, compared to high school graduates; Kochhar & Sechopoulos, 2020). Indeed, much of American inequality is framed as the dichotomous disparity between the college educated and everyone else (see, e.g., Case & Deaton, 2020).

Yet the problem with equating college completion with upward mobility is another disparity—the wide differences among those with college degrees. Although 40 years ago it made sense to think of the expansion of college education as an effective means to lessen opportunity hoarding, for the last three decades the so-called "college wage premium" has dramatically slowed. This slowing has been especially sharp after the turn of the century, when the demand for cognitive abilities attendant to higher education dropped off significantly, whereas the supply of those highly educated grew, also significantly (Beaudry et al., 2016). In fact, by 2016 about a full 40% of the US workforce held at least a college degree (about twice the number in the 1970s) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). As a result, during the years 2000 to 2018, the college wage premium grew by less than a tenth as much as it had from 1979 to 2000, with considerable slowing as early as the 1990s. Although college graduates at the top end of the wage scale continue to do well, even those in the middle (at the 50th percentile wage rate) actually saw their wages decline by almost 2.5% from 2000 to 2018 (with losses approaching double for those at the bottom of the wage scale). These losses have left many earning less than the typical (or median) high school graduate (Abel et al., 2014; Gould, 2019). Notably, the phenomenon of "job gentrification" and the resultant "mal-employment," where the college graduates end up working in jobs well below their skill and education level, has emerged as a significant problem in the American economy (Edsall, 2021; Mock, 2015).

When we look at the specific key issue for lessening opportunity hoarding—the ability of a college education to elevate the well-being of the poor in significant ways—the prospects seem particularly challenging. In fact, college graduates born into poverty earn on average just slightly more than those with high school degrees born into the middle class (Shell, 2018). More generally, as Witteveen and Attewell (2020, p. 28) find in their recent comprehensive examination of the issue, a college degree can bring some equalization among those born wealthy or poor "but it is not nearly enough to erase the influence of social origin," as even with it in hand, a poor individual "does not escape [these origins]."

In addition, the impacts of race and racism, especially antiblackness, are once again especially confounding. For example, college education (and beyond) has failed to reduce the Black–White wage gap over the past decades. Instead, there has been an expansion in this gap. Black males, for instance, with at least a college degree entering the workforce in the 1980s experienced *only* a 10% deficit in earnings. But by 2014 this deficit had almost doubled, growing to 18% (Wilson & Rodgers, 2016). Similarly, as the Federal Reserve of St. Louis found, higher education (in the form of a college degree) also failed to "protect" the wealth of Black families during the period 1992–2013. These families experienced a drop of approximately 56% in their wealth holdings, whereas comparable White and Asian families realized gains in the 85–90% range (Emmons & Noeth, 2015). Moreover, and perhaps most illustrative, a Black household headed by someone college educated has less wealth on average than a White household headed by someone without even a high school degree (Darity et al., 2018).

Confronting this reality, those analysts embracing the opportunity-hoarding standpoint hold that the key problem at work here is that too many poor and/or Black students fail to attend the *right* colleges—those selective and prestigious—often because admission to such institutions is hoarded by affluent White and Asian students (see Reeves, 2017). And, without a doubt, (marginally) more can be done to open up selective colleges to the disadvantaged and underrepresented (see, e.g., Leonhardt, 2013). Yet, by definition, this tactic can only be used *selectively*—that is, in narrow ways—given the very nature of these (selective) institutions, especially their status as intensely *positional goods* (see Hirsch, 1976). Thus we once again see the profound limits to lessening inequality via a reduction in opportunity hoarding.

In sum, then, whereas those advancing opportunity hoarding as a key source of metropolitan inequality see differential educational achievements as the linchpin of this inequality, it turns out that those differentials are much less impactful than they presume. Instead, the real driver of this inequality lies deeper—namely, within the wider structure and dynamics of the American political economy (cf. DeFilippis, 2013; Slater, 2021).

Consumption, Production, and Inequality

To say that the source of inequality lies within the structure and dynamics of the American political economy is to say that it is largely the processes of *production*—specifically, on what terms goods and services are produced—that drive distributional outcomes for individuals and families. In contrast, in the understanding of metropolitan inequalities emerging from the opportunity hoarding idea, the focus instead is on differential patterns of *consumption* as both the cause and manifestation of these inequalities.

Within these patterns of consumption, the role played by public goods and services is seen as especially important—with, as noted above, schooling being central (see, especially, Anderson, 2010). But beyond schooling, the differential consumption of other public (as well as private) goods and amenities is seen as crucial as well. For example, as noted above, Freemark et al.'s (2020, p. 240) specification of opportunity (or resource) hoarding identifies not only "well-financed and high-performing schools," but also "well-tended parks, safe streets, and other public goods," and notes that hoarding "jurisdictions benefit from extensive services while others continue on the edge of survival." Similarly, in another high-profile statement of the opportunity-hoarding idea, Acevedo-Garcia et al. (2020) point out that, in addition to high-poverty schools, low-opportunity neighborhoods are beset by a "lack [of] access to parks, playgrounds and other green spaces." Likewise, in her important new book-length treatment of the subject, Sheryll Cashin (2021, p. 111) notes that, under conditions of opportunity hoarding, "the most affluent neighborhoods enjoy the best public services, environmental quality, and private, public, and natural amenities … ." Further specifying, Cashin (2021, p. 120) draws on the findings of Jessica Trounstine (2018) to emphasize how White property owners use racial segregation practices to hoard "exclusive access to high-quality amenities," while denying Black Americans basics such as "adequate sewers, roads, garbage collection, and/or public health services" (also see Weir & King, 2021).

To a degree, this focus on differential consumption patterns is warranted. The hoarding of these goods, services, and amenities by some at the expense of others clearly diminishes the latter's opportunity for a good life and hence both generates and sustains inequalities (see Anderson, 2010; Trounstine, 2018). Nonetheless, it also tends to distract analytic attention away from the much more consequential processes of production—that is, the highly exploitative terms (or conditions) upon which goods and services are produced within the political economy. Two of these terms are especially decisive: (a) the relative strength or weakness of labor (especially at median wage levels) vis-à-vis capital in determining the distribution of national income, and (b) the degree to which capital asset ownership is dispersed or concentrated within the broader society (see, e.g., Alperovitz, 2011; Piketty, 2014).

Regarding the former, from 1961 to 2019, labor's share of national income declined from approximately 65.5% to 56.5%, about a 14% drop, which transferred trillions of dollars from workers to the owners of capital (Manyika et al., 2019). And within this massive shift most of the gains that labor did receive were concentrated at the very high end. For example, during the last four decades, from 1979 to 2019, workers at the 50th percentile saw just a 15% rise in wages, whereas those at the 95th percentile saw an increase of over 63% (Gould, 2019). Moreover, by the end of this period, wages for the entire bottom 90% of workers averaged just about $39,000, whereas those in the top 1% averaged over $750,000 (Davidson, 2020). It is estimated that some 44% of *all* workers aged 18–64 earn low wages (Ross and Bateman, 2019).

Regarding the ownership of capital assets (i.e., wealth holdings), Matt Bruenig (2017) reports that, in 2014, the top 1% averaged over 16 million dollars in such holdings, whereas those in the bottom 50% owned basically nothing ($349 on average). Moreover, as Bruenig notes, "this extraordinarily unequal distribution of wealth causes the nation's capital income to also be distributed in a very uneven matter," with the bottom half averaging just $826 in earnings, compared with over three-quarters of a million dollars for the top 1%. Thus, in light of a production process that distributes a disproportionate amount of its gains to capital rather than labor (and mostly to labor at the very high end), combined with the fact that the ownership of that capital is massively concentrated at the top, immense metropolitan inequalities are bound to materialize irrespective of whether the practices of opportunity hoarding are present or not.

When those applying the opportunity hoarding idea do focus on production, they take these deeper structural factors largely as a given. Instead, attention is almost exclusively given to the spatial differentials between high- and low-opportunity areas—regarding factors such as education quality, productive social networks, and cultural transmission—and how these differentials impact the (largely zero-sum) competitive access to well-paid employment (and, to a certain extent, the ownership of capital assets, especially high-value owner-occupied housing) (See, for example, Reeves, 2017; Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2020; Anderson, 2010; Cashin, 2021). This focus leads to a *fetishization of space*, meaning that the assignment of its causal power gets amplified beyond what is empirically warranted. Most notably, space is fetishized as a cause because much of what actually drives metropolitan inequalities is omitted from serious analytical consideration. What is underappreciated most is that space can be as much *an effect as a cause*: The wider structural dynamics within exploitative production processes inevitably take on a spatial form (see DeFilippis, 2017; Slater, 2021). And, as these structural dynamics have driven modern American inequalities to extreme levels, the economic segregation of neighborhoods and communities has, in tandem, seen a parallel level of extreme increase.[9] Although the idea of opportunity hoarding illuminates how this highly segregated spatial form can exacerbate inequalities, to focus on it is to miss the forest for the trees.

Toward Equality and Justice in America's Metros

Because the idea of opportunity hoarding is based on *the wrong theory of the case*—it misunderstands why and how metropolitan inequalities are generated and sustained—any strategy to move beyond it in a way that makes more significant reductions in these inequalities needs to eschew the key elements of this theory. That means, first, renouncing the so-called *education gospel*/rejecting the ideology of *educationism* (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Hanauer, 2019; also see Katz, 1997), which is so deeply embedded within the opportunity-hoarding framework. Second, it means focusing less on unequal consumption patterns and more on the underlying exploitative processes of production, especially in ways that get at the fundamentals of the American political economy rather than merely fetishizing spatial disparities.

To reiterate, these fundamentals are: (a) the systemic weakness of labor vis-à-vis capital, especially at median wage levels or below; and (b) the extreme concentration of capital ownership (and the income from it) at the top of the wealth distribution. Any real progress toward greater equality and justice in America's metros requires a serious confrontation with both.

What might such a strategy look like? To bolster labor's power, the strengthening of labor unions is a long-standing conventional approach. And, of late, it has shown some possible renewed strength, although private-sector unionization rates remain stubbornly low, stuck at about 6% (Johnston, 2022). A more direct and fundamental vehicle for worker empowerment is to make employees the owners of capital facilities (i.e., businesses), via, for example, the creation of worker cooperatives. In these enterprises, worker-owners exercise democratic control over their businesses, while receiving a portion of capital's profits to augment overall labor compensation. One promising nascent example is found in Cleveland, Ohio, where the purchasing power of the city's anchor institutions (such as hospitals) was used to build a network of cooperatives that pay as high as 25% more than their competitors (Duong, 2021). Another prominent effort is occurring in Jackson, Mississippi (Joy & Vogel, 2021) and, more generally, we have seen the emergence of so-called *cooperative cities* in America—where municipal governments provide support to nurture these types of economic enterprises (Sutton, 2019; also see Camou, 2016). Overall, on a nationwide basis, worker cooperatives appear to be growing rapidly, with a 35.7% net growth between 2013 and 2019 (Prushinskaya, 2020). Cooperatives basically transform labor into capital via a transformation in the structure of enterprise ownership. In essence, the workers themselves become the capitalists, correcting for the inherent imbalance between the two formerly adversarial factors of production. One key result is the dramatically lower pay ratios found in worker cooperatives compared with conventional investor-owned businesses (Rieger, 2016).

Turning workers into owners also, by design, addresses the second fundamental problem in the American political economy: the extreme concentration of capital (or asset) ownership at the top. Worker cooperatives (and other forms of worker ownership such as properly-structured employee stock ownership plans) are themselves key institutional vehicles to counter this pernicious phenomenon. This is because they, by design, diffuse capital more widely—to the many (workers) from the few (conventional investor-owners; see, e.g., Alperovitz, 2011). In addition, there exist a variety of other well-known, bottom-up and decentralized alternative institutional forms that also broaden capital ownership. Prominent here are community land trusts (CLTs), public and community-owned financial institutions (such as community development financial institutions and public banks), consumer (including housing) cooperatives, and municipal enterprises of various sorts (including public utilities and other publicly-owned businesses; see Williamson et al., 2002).

Taken together with worker cooperatives, this array of variegated institutional forms has been conceptualized as a strategy of *community wealth building*, centered on the idea of building a local economy based increasingly on "democratic collective ownership" (Guinan & O'Neill, 2020, p. 2; also see Spicer & Casper-Futterman, 2020). As Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill explicate, community wealth building provides "the local building blocks by which we can set about a transformation of our economy." Most notably, "instead of [facilitating] the ongoing concentration of wealth in the hands of a narrow elite," it "pursues a broad dispersal of the ownership of assets" (Guinan & O'Neill, 2020, p. 2). The Democracy Collaborative, a Washington, DC-based research organization, has documented and categorized hundreds if not thousands of on-the-ground examples of community wealth building efforts in the United States (see, e.g., Alperovitz, 2013; Dubb, 2016).[10] In Europe, a major movement of a similar nature has been dubbed *the new municipalism*, much of which stems from the rise of a network of so-called *fearless cities* (see, e.g., Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021).

Given the significant role it plays in the building of wealth, housing is correspondingly significant in the community wealth building approach. As noted above, CLTs and housing cooperatives, especially limited equity cooperatives (LECs), are prominent among the approach's alternative institutional forms that broaden the dispersal of asset ownership. From the perspective of community wealth building, the aim is to facilitate "the community control of land and housing" (Green & Hanna, 2018, p. 4). For example, by retaining ownership of land, CLTs build community wealth by keeping housing permanently affordable for residents, who would likely otherwise pay exorbitant rents to private (often absentee) landlords, draining the local community of vital resources. And, on the individual level, although the amount of home value appreciation CLT homeowners can accrue is limited—because part of that appreciation redounds to the CLT for the wider community's benefit—compared to traditional low-income homeowners they "appear to fare better … in terms of wealth accumulation, homeownership durability, and subsequent ownership opportunities" (Ehlenz, 2018, p. 286; also see Schneider et al., 2022 on the even more positive comparison with low-income renters). In addition, the community control of land and housing afforded by CLTs can, as the title of one account recently put it, "stop … gentrification in its tracks" (Loh, 2015; also see Burrowes et al., 2022), further building community wealth by averting its probable plunder (see, e.g., Lees et al., 2008).

Community wealth building institutions and policies stand as an alternative to the effort to combat opportunity hoarding, in that the approach deemphasizes both "educationism" and differential consumption patterns, in favor of a restructuring of local production processes. Nonetheless, community wealth building also can work synergistically with anti-opportunity hoarding efforts in ways that make the latter less problematic.

Consider, for example, the (resource) exit pathway's effort to lessen opportunity hoarding by directing public investment into impoverished neighborhoods. As pointed out above, these revitalization efforts usually produce one of two outcomes, both deleterious: Either they lead to gentrification and generalized dispossession or, at best, they merely "gild the ghetto" (i.e., marginally ameliorating problematic living conditions while structural economic and social deficiencies remain unabated). In contrast, by altering the patterns of asset ownership in ways that make assets widely (collectively) shared by community members, the chief aim of community wealth building is to ensure that the benefits of revitalization and the value it produces can be better captured by current community residents, as the owners and controllers of these assets (Green & Hanna, 2018; Guinan & O'Neill, 2020). As a result, rather than the norm of either spurring gentrification-induced displacement or yielding only marginal gains, enhanced public investment can actually work as intended as a means to make opportunities more widespread—that is, less hoarded (see, e.g., Alperovitz, 2013; Burrowes et al., 2022; Imbroscio, 2010). And, moreover, with these processes at work, the entry pathway to lessen opportunity hoarding also can be made more efficacious. Recall that its major obstacle was the strict ontological limits faced when opportunity dissipates as excessive entry makes previously privileged areas less White and affluent. Yet with opportunities less unevenly distributed in the first place due to the build-up of community wealth in areas that are currently of low income/wealth, the need to relocate their residents to so-called "high-opportunity" areas ratchets downward. This dynamic, in turn, reduces the likelihood the entry pathway will confront its ontological bounds.

Finally, perhaps nothing has confounded efforts to lessen opportunity hoarding more than race and racism (especially antiblackness). As just noted, the ontological limits of the entry pathway emerge as affluent whiteness (and the massive privilege flowing from it) is diluted (see Goetz, 2019), and even if those limits are not breached, the benefits accruing to the children of Black families from high-opportunity environments, although real, are circumscribed (see Badger et al., 2018; Howell, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Likewise, as also noted above, the (resource) exit pathway tends to spur gentrification and displacement, processes often highly (and adversely) racialized (see Arnold & Resilience Justice Project Researchers, 2021; Florida, 2015; Lees et al., 2008), while making only marginal improvements in majority-minority—especially predominantly Black—neighborhoods and schools (see Dreier et al., 2014; Fiss, 2003; Kahlenberg, 2012).

To comprehend why race is so fundamental to the enduring nature of inequality, a large body of sophisticated recent work centers the idea of *racial capitalism* (see, e.g., Dantzler, 2021; Dantzler et al., 2022; Williams, 2020). Vital to this idea is the understanding that racial hierarchy is an essential feature (rather than a bug) of capitalist accumulation because, as Jodi Melamed (2015, p. 77) succinctly elucidates, this hierarchy "enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires" (also see Bonds, 2019; Pulido, 2017). In contrast, community wealth building efforts are designed to counter the key dynamic of racial capitalism (cf. Bledsoe et al., 2022) by promoting accumulation strategies, not—again, as usefully expressed by Melamed (2015, p. 77)—dependent on "loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value." Instead, the values of equality and direct democratic control by communities of color are explicitly built into the model (see Green & Hanna, 2018; Nembhard, 2015; also see Nembhard, 2014). Illustrative here is the strong affinity between some key elements of the Movement for Black Lives policy platform and community wealth building (see Brown, 2016).

Of course, just as there are formidable barriers and constraints faced by the efforts to lessen opportunity hoarding, much the same must be said of the alternative community wealth building approach. Future work needs to interrogate more fully its barriers and constraints as well, so that we can have a better understanding of whether the robust pursuit of community wealth building will indeed bend the arc toward equality and justice. There is little doubt that, although likely superior to the feebleness of the anti-opportunity hoarding efforts I have exposed above, this alternative strategy is almost certainly not a panacea for the entrenched inequalities and deprivations that plague and disfigure contemporary American cities and metros. Nonetheless, as I have discussed, the community wealth building prescription does seem to come much closer to being rooted in a proper diagnosis of the problem (i.e., the more correct theory of the case), as I have framed it. This fact suggests that serious consideration be given to a long-term refocusing of American urban policy in community wealth building directions.

Notes

1. For a sampling of recent literature employing the idea, see Acevedo-Garcia et al. (2020), Anderson (2010), Cashin (2021), Freemark et al. (2020), Gordon (2019), Hacker et al. (2022), Lens and Monkkonen (2016), Massey (2007), Reeves (2017), Rury (2020), Rury and Rife (2018), Sharkey (2019), and Steil (2022).
2. See Massey and Rugh (2021, pp. 161, 183), who document how "within metropolitan America … whites and Asians benefit disproportionately from the increasing spatial concentration of affluence … ." They report that, by 2010, the average affluent Asian lived in a neighborhood that was 50.5% affluent, while the same figure for affluent Whites was 45.3%.
3. Defined as census tracts where 80% or more of the population is White, with median incomes of at least $125,000.
4. On the persistence and pervasiveness of contemporary White flight, see Kye (2018), Lichter et al. (2015), and Orfield and Stancil (2018).
5. Note that some policy designs spawned from the *opportunity paradigm* are structured in ways that explicitly acknowledge and take account of this reality. For example, the designers and implementers of the now legendary Gautreaux program in Chicago—which established the model for the federal Move to Opportunity (MTO) experiment as well as, arguably, most efforts to use the entry pathway to reduce opportunity hoarding (see, e.g., Anderson, 2010)—very self-consciously attempted to limit the number of Chicago public housing families moved to any single neighborhood for this exact reason (see Fiss, 2003; I thank Ed Goetz for this point; see especially Goetz, 2018).
6. Defined by the qualification for free or reduced-price lunch (see Schwartz, 2011).
7. See, for example, Curto, Fryer, and Howard (2011), Duncan and Murnane (2011), and Ravitch (2010).
8. For example, "greater college enrollment" was one the key findings of the so-called "Chetty Study" (that finally showed some positive results from the 1990s Moving to Opportunity experiment; see Goetz, 2018, p. 45)—a piece of research much trumpeted by those seeking to lessen opportunity hoarding (see, e.g., Anderson, 2010; Cashin, 2021).
9. As Richard Florida (2016) reports, the share of American families living in middle-class neighborhoods dropped from 65% to 40% between 1970 and 2012, while the share living in either all-poor or all-affluent neighborhoods increased from only about 15% to over a third.
10. See https://democracycollaborative.org/

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