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BOOK REVIEW

# Matthew Gardner Kelly. Dividing the Public: School Finance and the Creation of Structural Inequality

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Matthew Gardner Kelly's *Dividing the Public: School Finance and the Creation of Structural Inequality* argues that the "notorious inequalities produced by localized funding were not by default but by design" (p. 4). He argues that the school finance policy narrative constructed in twentieth-century California that local control and taxation was natural and inevitable also simultaneously facilitated the belief that "other people's children" were not everyone's responsibility, and it absolved the state of its own actions in constructing, designing, and maintaining unequal systems intentionally over time. The seeming naturality and inevitability of unequal educational resources as a result of the seeming desirability of local funding systems was an ideological project from the beginning, a project that Kelly argues was concomitant with the rise of school finance as a scholarly discipline. Through the book's journey, which begins with the mid-nineteenth-century colonization project that sought to convert Indigenous and Mexican land into resources for white schools and ends with the post-World War II redirection of state aid to build up the funding of suburban white districts, Kelly illustrates the consistency of California's political decision-making over more than a century. These decisions, he shows, were not accidents of historical happenstance or natural byproducts of some innate predisposition of public schooling toward local funding systems; rather, they were always contingent and always choices that were made by state and local policymakers to prioritize racial segregation and exclusion as well as class and economic inequality and division in the structure of California public education.

Kelly draws from myriad sources in building his argument, including education budgets and financial data from many states and school districts over time; federal, state, and local laws and policy debates; state constitutional proceedings; newspapers; court cases; community organization records; and school district-level records. One of the important contributions of Kelly's work is his organization of data, which bridges quantitative and qualitative methods in a way that many works on the subject do not attempt. In particular, he provides an estimate of the amount of expropriated land that was sold to be used as surplus revenue to finance schools in the 1830s, a significant contribution to future work on decolonizing the historiography of education.

Additionally, he takes on the often inconsistent and partial records of state-level school finance expenditures and revenue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as California and district-level finance data and provides datasets and figures that help rationalize and offer context to these complex and often opaque numbers while always acknowledging that the data is inconsistent and sometimes even illegible. These quantitative contributions are themselves extremely valuable for future historians of educational finance and inequality, particularly in California but also more broadly.

The portion of Kelly's argument based on qualitative data builds on the existing literature on school funding inequality examining the racial and economic decisions to design and maintain school segregation at multiple levels. He does this by showing the arguments and debates California state policymakers used to justify and continue these racially and fiscally disparate systems even when they departed from past practice or precedent. He also explores the contestations over the meaning of the word *public* over time, as well as the expansion of district-level property taxation as a school funding source in the early twentieth century, an expansion that has been underexamined in western US states, as so much historical study of that period focuses on segregated southern schools. As he traces this expansion, Kelly also identifies the rise of school finance as a discipline, explaining how it has done "profound ideological work to make school funding disparities seem both natural and desirable" (p. 139). This "rationalized inequality" became a self-propelling engine, rooted in an unwillingness to tax corporations and the need to justify inequities in local finance by linking schools to the benefit theory of taxation and emphasizing the local benefits of such a tax policy. Part of this policy shift was given cover by the emerging "science" of school finance, which framed local funding as simply a natural form of healthy competition among communities. Simultaneously, in response to the critiques of many educational activists that schools were being defunded at the state level, school finance scholars helped reframe the issue as instead a problem of supposedly wasteful spending in the schools themselves.

Kelly also emphasizes the way in which public education was a central component of unequal development and segregation on dispossessed land. He argues that "the imagined connection between whiteness, educational institutions, and land encouraged a localist political ideology with a narrow sense of shared responsibility for the education of other people's children—racially, economically, and geographically" (p. 49). In short, in California and other states, the contested concept of "the public" was fought partially through the debate over whether state or local funding models would take precedence. Kelly ties the earliest elements of this debate in California to the extractivist impulses that had led many white settlers to move west to plunder wealth, resources, and land from Indigenous and Mexican communities. The same colonialist sentiments informed the way in which, he argues, many nineteenth-century policymakers and reformers treated "schools like a magnet for white settlement and a tool for increasing land values" (p. 73). The vision of schools as a quasi-private good for economic growth in the early stages of a settler economy in the West was never uncontested, however, and Kelly illustrates throughout the book that these narrow and exclusionary frameworks received constant pushback, even as they developed into their own fields of justification in early school finance research.

*Dividing the Public* highlights the importance of focusing on state lawmaking as the original source of the development of education funding and taxation policies that established the racially, economically, and geographically fragmented postwar public school in California. Kelly argues that state lawmakers created "a sprawling system of redistribution" that served as "a subsidy for segregated development; as an extractive tax on low-income renters of color; as a sprawling hidden welfare state for white suburbanites; and, finally, as a way for banks and corporations to minimize their tax liabilities and push the cost of government onto others" (p. 171). This system of unequal redistribution subsequently became its own self-fulfilling prophecy as some school finance scholars continued to justify and naturalize the system as a historical inevitability throughout the twentieth century.

This significant book provides key data on, and offers a compelling argument about, the development of structures of educational inequality and segregation in the US. Although the argument is rooted in California, it could be applicable to many other regional and state developments, and it would be interesting to see more work focusing on similar state budgetary decisions in other states and different contexts. The book is well suited for use in programs on education, education policy and leadership, public policy, urban studies, and general US history. Kelly's focus on state fiscal policy and the deliberate choices made by manifold people in high positions over so many decades—choices that built the profoundly segregated and fragmented school funding system we have today—powerfully pushes back against a historical narrative that too often has exonerated state governments of the cruelties of local tax funding.

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