



INTO THE STACKS: BOOK LAUNCH: THE BLACK TAX

# Localized Racism, Legalized Theft, and the Long Dispossession of U.S. Cities

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Andrew Kahrl's *The Black Tax* is a sweeping and insightful history of the local property tax in the United States from Reconstruction onward that speaks eloquently to urban history, tax history, and histories of capitalism and race in the United States. Kahrl exposes the relentless process of dispossession and exploitation, captive taxpayers and fiscal apartheid within the local property tax that has overtaxed Black Americans by over \$275 billion, cost \$326 billion in land loss, and created a generational wealth difference compounded into trillions. But Kahrl is not focused only on individual loss or even community dispossession, but on entrenched systems of legalized theft built into the local property tax that have reinforced themselves over time through the most localized bureaucratic subjectivity and bias, such that poor cities are now left with few fiscally sustaining options other than preying on their poorest citizens.

By the end of the book, we see not only the inefficiencies of localized tax raising, spending, and enforcement systems but also their white supremacist and undemocratic foundations that fuel continuing inequality and division, and which lead, finally, to the need for federal fiscal equity remedies. Part of the skill in this book is that, while drawing from deep work in previously untapped archives and firsthand interviews on the most local of issues, it is not a case study of a single place or community, which can be effective but also is well represented in the field. *The Black Tax* instead brings to life and personalizes the chilling ubiquity of the over-assessment of Black property over time in myriad towns and cities, as well as the aftermath of dispossession through the appalling system of tax lien sales. Within a policy area that is highly variable and specific to each town or city, Kahrl connects with historians of education, housing, and welfare to show the consistency across the variability. The threads Kahrl persuasively ties together include the continuous predation of wealth and whiteness on poverty and Blackness in order to generate yet more wealth; the presumptive sheen of “authority” that local systems and structures benefit from which in many cases barely conceals incompetence, corruption, and/or malice; and the relentlessly unequal local infrastructure spending that lies at the foundation of so many systemic inequalities today.

The nature of the book's structure, divided among five time periods into consistent subchapters on tax administration/assessments, tax spending, and tax enforcement, will help guide future scholars of the fiscal turn within United States history to frame arguments in a field that always grapples with ever-accreting layers of complex administrative details. The minutiae of fiscal policy history often (intentionally) lack transparency and legibility, perhaps especially so on the local level when assessors' formulas can be so quixotic and individual. This book does a massive service in the very act of synthesizing, structuring, and guiding readers through the potentially thorny thickets of local property tax policies confidently and capably through this five-part/three-part structure. *The Black Tax* also helps open the door for future investigations

of local property tax assessment, spending, and enforcement systems, in other regions and examining the impacts on other populations.

A key overarching argument *The Black Tax* makes that will help shape future work is showing how a combination of low assessments in wealthy white areas, tax breaks for corporations and industry, and other wealth-building benefits are inextricably *reliant* on hyperinflated assessments in poor and often Black areas of town, abusive and unconscionably privatized forms of tax enforcement, and ultimately, the politics of austerity. Wealth relies on poverty for its existence and for its creation, and this book falls into the field of poverty scholarship along with Matthew Desmond's classic *Evicted*, as well as other histories of capitalism, in showing that poverty in and of itself serves as a crucial wealth-generating system for the rich.<sup>1</sup> It also is in close dialogue with legal histories of taxation and race, from Dorothy Brown's work to my own, illustrating the resiliency and impenetrability of tax policy in constantly re-entrenching structures of white supremacy and inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Kahrl argues that the property tax's "local nature is key to understanding how it works and how it became a force of bureaucratic racism and structural inequality" (5). This local quality, he shows, has also served as an alibi for the logic of neoliberal austerity today, which has been built into the local fiscal structures of white supremacist land predation from the Civil War on. The tools of this logic range from consistent and often perverse myth-making around "who pays" the greatest amount in property taxes as a tool to defund virtually every local government responsibility (particularly in poor and Black neighborhoods), to the tax lien investment market that facilitates wealthy white accumulation through dispossession on the tax auction block, to the counter-redistributive effects of long-term underassessment of white residential areas and the overassessment of Black and low-income areas. These ideas critically develop and engage with important recent interventions in histories of capitalism, race, housing, poverty, and more from Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Devin Fergus, and others, and Kahrl's detailed and accessible unravelling of the predatory tax lien market alone is enough to put this book on the syllabi for many U.S. history courses.<sup>3</sup>

The clarity this work offers around the insidious history of the local property tax highlights that impoverishment, dispossession, and exploitation are lucrative policy choices for amoral actors who then utilize their perversely accumulated wealth to "persuade" struggling cities to double down on even more cruel and inequitable tax administration, spending, and enforcement choices. And it illustrates that middle class white neighborhoods have consistently paid less historically for better city services and infrastructure precisely *because* Black people paid more, leaving cities over time with few choices if the federal government abandons them (307–15).

*The Black Tax* also tells the story of people who fought back against a system that, in the words of one (regretful) former tax-lien buyer, consisted of "picking pennies off a dead man's eyes" (113). Civil rights activists knew "property tax relief was inseparable from the broader struggle for tax equity and justice" (230), which in many cases led to a deeper entrenchment of key local property tax policies as well as individualized persecution. Activists understood property rights as civil rights and were often punished for their activism by even more inflated assessments on their own homes and other actions designed to remove them from their communities. As Kahrl argues, Black political power posed the direct threat of fair taxation and full government responsiveness to the needs of the *entire* community, and

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy A. Brown, *The Whiteness of Wealth: How the Tax System Impoverishes Black Americans – And How We Can Fix It* (New York, 2022); Camille Walsh, *Racial Taxation: Schools, Segregation, and Taxpayer Citizenship, 1869–1973* (Chapel Hill, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Devin Fergus, *Land of the Free: Hidden Costs and the Decline of the American Middle Class* (New York, 2018); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill, 2019).

white taxpayer backlash against the perceived loss of accumulated privilege was often vicious. Kahrl shows us that few things emerged so astonishingly unscathed from the political shifts of the 1960s as these local taxing powers. In this he opens the door wider for emerging scholars of local tax systems, from Esther Cyna to Matthew Kelly, showing that local policies that in many cases were instituted after the Civil War pointedly to keep Black people from achieving property ownership, education, or equality are still in action today, doing virtually the same work.<sup>4</sup> This entire book, as he returns to in the conclusion, shows the emptiness of the homevoter hypothesis in policy fields, and few stories emphasize that emptiness as much as the slow but relentless process of forcing out Black property owners in Beaufort, South Carolina, in order to make room for white-owned vacation resort investments (291–9).

We see throughout how these structures became old wine in new bottles, given that the sheen of neutrality often undeservedly attaches itself to many fiscal policies, because the deep, dispossessing capability of government's taxing power does not always require using explicitly racist language to enact its ends. And despite the hopes that cross-racial coalitions would emerge from tax resistance movements, Kahrl traces the shift in tax politics in the 1970s from tax justice to tax cuts and laws like Prop 13 in California as in part an outcome built into the dynamics of unequal local property tax assessment and spending. For Black activists, property tax relief was inseparable from the struggle for tax equity and justice, but because property assessment systems in constrained local spending structures created a zero-sum framework in which a heavier burden on one group ameliorated the burden and even provided a subsidy to another group, white movements used taxpayer rights language to reject the social compact and embrace austerity rather than restructuring or correcting inequities (243).

The widespread tax-lien investing market, an egregious policy thread Kahrl follows throughout the book, is one of the most blatant examples of the process of redistributing wealth and property from the poor to the rich, a particularly unconscionable one that nonetheless has endured decades of media and legal challenges essentially intact. And as he shows, in the end stage of real estate cycles of extraction, tax lien buyers that presented themselves to local governments as bulwarks against insolvency and providers of public funds have, in Kahrl's words, "like parasites ... died with their hosts," leaving local governments with little recourse in a hostile federal funding climate (264). Even reforms, like those made in many places in the 1970s that were intended to address corruption and favoritism within local property tax assessments, shifting instead to adoption of computerized assessment systems, have then structurally disadvantaged longtime residents by conflating both longtime and recent populations into one gentrified market for assessment.

One might assume that a history of local property tax policy might be dry or so numerically dense as to only be suited to tax scholars, but this book is quite the opposite. While guiding the reader through the complexities in clear prose, Kahrl draws on not only myriad archival sources, but an impressive array of oral histories to expertly tell very personal and human stories. Some of the most appalling stories involve the loss of individual homes and properties, long since paid off, by elderly people who either missed a miniscule tax bill or never even received it. But each section—administration, spending, and enforcement—has its haunting stories that personalize what could otherwise be impersonal fiscal material and highlight the outsized impact a seemingly small detail of unequal local property tax assessment or expenditure can have.

In Shaw, Mississippi, the differential size of the water main pipes—six-inch water mains were installed on the white side of town, one and one-quarter-inch mains were placed on the Black side of town—led to extremely low water pressure and disastrously more deadly fires, compounding inequality and painful loss over time (49). And when recent graduate

<sup>4</sup>Esther Cyna, *Plunder: A History of Racism and School Finance in the South* (Chapel Hill, Forthcoming); Matthew G. Kelly, *Dividing the Public: School Finance and the Creation of Structural Inequity* (Ithaca, 2024).

Barbara Phillips came to early 1970s Mississippi as an assistant to the newly elected Black tax assessor, she discovered to her astonishment that “antebellum era mansions ‘were paying in dollars less than those little two- and three-bedroom brick shacks that Black people had’” (161). She looked through all the office’s records for Claiborne County’s formulas and “discovered there were none.” Rather than any documents, records, or formulas, there was just an obviously unwritten tradition of applying the lowest assessments to the wealthiest residents (161). The feeling in these stories—of peeking behind the curtain of a ledger page to find that the seemingly prosaic functions of local tax administration have been concealing the most appalling inequalities—is prevalent throughout this excellent book.

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