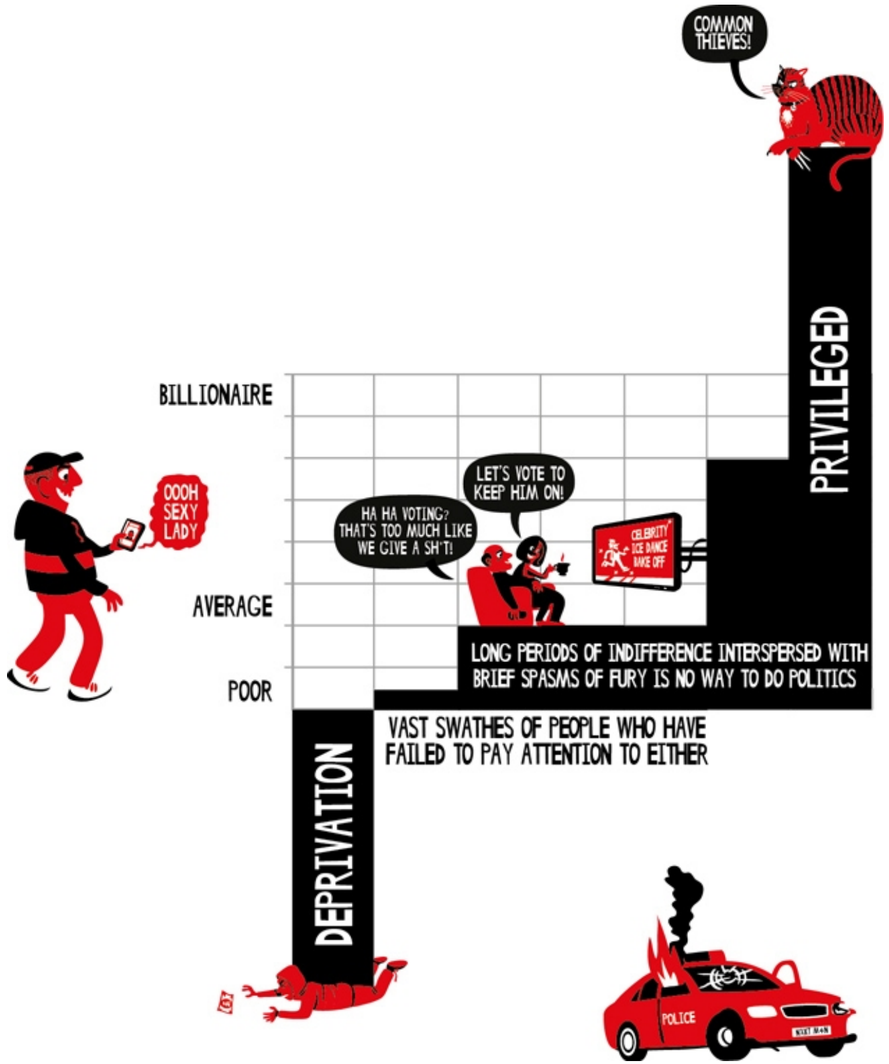

Yet the disagreements between Americans about the instruments of violence are trumped by a long-standing agreement about how to resolve those differences. America is still much more like Denmark than it is like Syria. The proof is that the competing sides in the United States do not resort to violence to settle their political disputes, even though those disputes are passionate, intractable and often fuelled by religion. In the political contest over gun ownership, there is an obvious imbalance between the parties: one – the pro-gun lobby – has more guns than its opponents. This extends to other political divisions: Republicans are on the whole better-armed than Democrats. It ought to be a recipe for civil war. But it isn't. The minimalist definition of modern representative democracy says that it is a proxy for civil war: i.e., it is the conflict without the violence. When one side loses an election, it lets the other side take power, despite the fact that the losers possess the weapons to fight (and all defeated incumbents have weaponry to resist on election day, because they still control the army). On this account, stable politics simply requires that people with access to guns choose not to use them.

Has the threat of civil war vanished altogether in these societies? It certainly seems pretty remote, even in the United States, whose political system was only secured in the nineteenth century by one of the most terrible civil wars in history. The 2000 presidential election that resulted in an effective tie between Al Gore and George W. Bush provoked a furious political disagreement about who the real winner was. Some excitable journalists started to wonder whether violence would be needed to settle the outcome. Instead, it was settled by the Supreme Court (though it helped that the court decided in favour of the candidate whose supporters were more likely to be armed). The