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On the Right to the University in Urban Capitalism

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Abstract

This manifesto examines the integration of the US university into processes of urban capitalism and argues its administrative and ideological functions are critical to maintaining urban hegemony. Using the relationship between the University of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia as an exemplar, I base my analysis upon three bodies of empirical evidence: the interlocking directorates of university regents; publicly available urban planning reports; and newspaper coverage of development in Philadelphia. I show that the university is essential to a social process that has as its aim the erasure – both physical and symbolic – of Black and Brown bodies from urban space. In addition to its role in the bureaucracies of urban power, the university is central within strategic narratives that mythologize the white savior and legitimize crude forms of capital accumulation. Finally, I explore the university as a site for counterhegemonic urban practice, calling on academics to integrate the notion of the Right to the University with the politics of the Right to the City.

Keywords

hegemony, ideology, right to the city, universities, urban development

It is a banal truth of our times that we live in *crisis*. Economic crisis, political crisis, ecological crisis. Crises of leadership and of conscience and, crucially, of imagination. This manifesto is about urban crisis in relation to the current moment and, specifically, the role of the university within it.

The urban crisis I refer to here has been discussed at length by the likes of Henri Lefebvre,¹ David Harvey,² Thomas Sugrue,³ and many others. But it should be

evident that we do not require sages and oracles to see what plainly screams out to us in our everyday existence – that the cities we live in express so clearly the ills under which the majority suffer, and that the processes of violence, exclusion, exploitation, and dispossession are so entrenched in our society as to be inscribed in physical space and physical bodies. Our cities, now and always, express our fundamental struggles, the social confrontations that are at once existential and mundane.

To see this confrontation in action, one can take as an example the areas surrounding the University of Pennsylvania, my home institution. Let's begin at the intersection of 40th Street and Walnut Street, the northwest border of campus, the meeting place of two very different Philadelphias.⁴ On any given day, one can observe hordes of Penn students, among the wealthiest young people on earth,⁵ as they try desperately to ignore the very presence of the poor and working-class people around them, almost all of them Black. The intersection also happens to lie on the route of the westbound PennBus, a parallel transportation infrastructure exclusively for use by Penn students and employees and composed of routes utterly redundant to the chronically underfunded SEPTA public transit.

Directly across from my office at the Annenberg School for Communication, also on Walnut Street, loom block after block of tasteless mixed-use commercial developments – the chain stores and student high-rises that have become all too familiar across city landscapes. Broken up only by the occasional row of fraternity houses, the development extends virtually the entire length of campus, foreclosing public space and cutting off the flow of people between north and south. And what, incidentally, lies on the other side? Public housing. And Black people.

Consider that here in Philadelphia, America's poorest major city, one can always look up to find Comcast headquarters towering over the skyline. While upwards of half the city lacks home internet access,⁶ at least we can find hope in our city's monument to a company that, despite bringing in more than \$80 billion in revenue last year, received tens of millions of dollars in city abatements.⁷ Comcast Tower, Philadelphia's very own north star.

This is not just a musing about segregation or gentrification, an increasingly abused term. Instead I am concerned with the larger process out of which segregation and gentrification emerge, indeed the very process of urban capitalism. I argue and will demonstrate that in the current moment and form in the United States, urban capitalism has as a primary strategic goal the systematic erasure of its revolting subjects, who in the case of American cities are overwhelmingly poor people of color.

One can see such erasure take form in decades of urban disinvestment and, more recently, selective reinvestment. One can see it in strategies of policing, in the distinction between who merits protection and who merits scrutiny. One can see it in the dismantling of cherished public institutions, chief among them public schools. And finally, one can see it most crudely in housing – in patterns of squalor, displacement, and segregation. This is, after all, fundamentally a class struggle over territory, over land and over space. And that some have little is itself too much for those who want more.

But oh, the naïf might respond, is this not just the natural order of things? Things are nicer, our cities are getting richer. Cities change, people move, what is old is replaced by the new. This is how free markets work, and while there may *sometimes* be negative consequences for *some* people, such is the nature of progress itself. Disruption! Innovation! To fight against the current moment is not only counterproductive, it is downright reactionary!

To such protests, no doubt reflecting the dominant view among apologists, I have two responses. First, do not misunderstand me – I *welcome* change. It stands as a certain fact of history that cities are continually transforming. As Harvey points out, the “freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is one of the most precious yet neglected of our human rights.”⁸ But it is a right that belongs to us all. The question isn’t whether our cities will change, it is *how* our cities will change. I ask only that we exercise greater *imagination*, that we consider alternative and fundamentally democratic ways of remaking our cities, and that we recognize that

our current approach to urban development can be called progress only in the most perverse sense.

Second, to this point about the *free* market, any thinking person truly concerned with *freedom* must reject the notion of the market as a suitable logic for human development. However, for our purposes here, let us put that objection aside. I will show that in the case of urban capitalism in American cities, there is at play not a market but a cabal. The symptoms of our urban pathologies are not emergent but engineered. The powers of finance and real estate (i.e. land speculation) fashion themselves as our gods, and in capturing the indispensable roles of the state, the non-profit industrial complex, and universities, they seek to recreate the city in their own image, warts and all.

My focus here is on the special role and operation of the university in this process. While I am discussing Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania, this could just as well be about Chicago or Boston or Detroit or Pittsburgh or Baltimore or St. Louis or any number of other cities.

Let's start, reasonably enough, by looking at the structure of the university. It has always struck me as rather perverse that a woman who charted a distinguished academic career as a theorist of democracy went on to become president of the University of Pennsylvania, an institution with utter contempt for the *demos*. But, of course, we must remember that Amy Gutmann is but a highly competent (and extremely well rewarded⁹) functionary of a larger structure. Despite her title, Gutmann presides over the university only at the pleasure of Penn's Board of Trustees. As an official matter, governing responsibilities and fiduciary control of the university belong solely to them.¹⁰

Who, then, are these people that truly hold the university's reins? Surely, they must be distinguished professors like Dr. Gutmann – educators and researchers and statesmen whose experiences and public service endow them as the rightful caretakers of our beloved institution. Their title, after all, suggests they are at the very least worthy of our trust. And, therefore, the duty lies with the most trustworthy bunch of them all. Bankers.

Of the 54 Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 43 have made their careers in the fields of financial services or real estate. Yet even that observation understates the extent of narrow capitalist control over the university. Among the eleven other trustees are Dr. Gutmann, a Nicaraguan oligarch, the CEO of a corporation specializing in water privatization, the leaders of the luxury goods companies Tiffany & Co. and Estée Lauder, several corporate lawyers, Comcast executive David Cohen (who is the Trustee Chair), and, crucially, the head of Philadelphia's largest philanthropic foundation, the William Penn Foundation.¹¹

While it is evident the university (and with it, the university's influence and resources) lies firmly in the hands of a narrow financial class, it is useful still to examine not only the trustees' primary affiliations but the spaces they occupy across Philadelphia's political and economic landscape. That is, even a cursory analysis of interlocking directorates reveals the extent to which Penn's trustees are integral to an elite and highly organized network across multiple local sectors.

For example, Amy Gutmann (the president), David Cohen (the Comcast executive and Trustee Chair), and Michael Gerber (a senior executive at FS Investments and trustee) all sit on the executive committee of the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia.¹² As in other cities, Philadelphia's chamber of commerce is an example of organized class power par excellence. In the summer of 2017, when the City of Philadelphia passed a wage equity law aimed at closing the gender pay gap, the Chamber sued to block its enactment. Among the businesses the lawsuit claimed would be adversely affected by the law were Comcast, FS Investments, and the Children's Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania.¹³ For years the Chamber also blocked, and eventually watered down, the city's effort to mandate paid sick leave for wage earners.¹⁴ These events lay bare the deep integration of the University of Pennsylvania within one side of a class war, wherein Penn is a chief sponsor of elite disdain for the city's working class.

The university in this context is not merely a peripheral actor in the political economy of urban power but is itself a central site for its operation, playing a crucial

role in the accumulation of urban wealth by a self-appointed few. “Eds and Meds,”¹⁵ the fashionable slogan of urban development, places universities and hospitals – organizations once thought to bear some sort of public interest responsibilities (how quaint!) – at the vanguard of this process. The capture of the university by finance capital is essential, as the university becomes the vehicle and symbol by which the ruling class remakes the city at their discretion. It functions as an institutional, bureaucratic, and ideological engine for the reconstitution of the city.

These are engineered takeovers. They consist of highly coordinated efforts of investment and encroachment on surrounding neighborhoods, accompanied by a complex social process of settlement, displacement, and policing. Some may suggest I am positing a conspiracy here. *I am*. But fortunately for my musings, those in power have neither the shame nor respect to conceal their misdeeds. They conspire in plain sight! Take, as an example, a recent public report prepared by the prestigious Brookings Institution.¹⁶ The report presents a series of recommendations for how to make Philadelphia a “top-tier city,” calling for the creation of an “innovation district” in the areas surrounding the University of Pennsylvania. Unsurprisingly the report calls for coordinated, targeted investments in Grays Ferry, the working-class neighborhood just south of the university. For several years Penn has been laying the groundwork for the gentrification of Grays Ferry, most notably with the recent construction of Pennovation, a 23-acre “innovation hub” for entrepreneurs.

It is illustrative of Philadelphia’s power structure to note who was involved in the development of the report. It was sponsored by ten local institutions: Comcast, Drexel University, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, FMC (a chemical manufacturer), Independence Blue Cross, PECO (the private energy utility), the University City Science Center, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania Health System, and Vanguard (a capital investment group).¹⁷ It is even more interesting to consider who was not involved: civic and neighborhood associations, local clergy, block captains, local public schools, or any other relevant person or organization actually residing within Grays Ferry. Such disjuncture reflects the extent to which a highly organized class structure has monopolized the institutional process of urban development.¹⁸

A related report, called the Lower Schuylkill Master Plan, was spearheaded by the Chamber of Commerce and funded largely by the William Penn Foundation (led by Penn trustee Janet Haas). Adopted by the City of Philadelphia Planning Commission in 2013, the report laid out the development plan that is now underway – that is, the private takeover of the “Lower Schuylkill” area south of Penn, comprising the neighborhoods of Grays Ferry and Bartram’s Village. As in the Brookings report, it is the omissions that are most striking. The report makes no mention of the poor and working-class, mostly Black residents that currently reside in the area. It offers no recommendations to support the people who will inevitably be displaced. It does not bother to concern itself with their prosperity or potential. Instead, those whose neighborhoods were under discussion are rendered invisible. Even in the most generous instances, neighborhood residents are understood merely as peripheral recipients of trickledown benefits, never the center of the urban future. This is not development insofar as any kind of human progress is concerned; it’s a dressed up landgrab.

In each of the cases illustrated here, the expansion and prosperity of the university serves as a principal motivating factor. In the context of urban power, the justifying function of the university is quite practical. University administrators are satisfied because, operating under logics of capitalist expansion and abandoning any pretense of social responsibility, they grow bigger and richer, their sole metric of success. City officials feel the same, in part because they are so handsomely rewarded for their submissive compliance. And of course, developers get rich.

This is fundamentally about wealth accumulation; however, the ideological dimension surrounding such practices is worth our attention. We should not doubt that the Penn Trustees and their whole network of organized capital are in fact sincere in their belief they are performing an important public service. That is, after all, a primary purpose of ideology – to justify the exercise of illegitimate power.¹⁹ A critical task, then, is to understand how that ideology is produced and the purposes it serves.

The university performs several ideological functions that are crucial to the normalization and reproduction of urban social relations. For one, it provides cover to financial interests by embedding the pursuit of those interests in a seemingly benevolent, trusted public institution. More subtly and significantly, though, the university is essential to a process of narrativization that formulates the urban subject in a highly specific way. Hegemony sits upon collective mythmaking, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what conflicts we face, and where we are going. For urban development in the current moment, the hegemonic story is familiar: an entrepreneur – almost always young, white, male, highly educated, and able-bodied – who, supported by the enlightened self-interest of finance capital, *innovates* his way to prosperity and as a fortunate afterthought of capitalism makes the city rich. Such stories are essential to how urban development is imagined and regularly invoke the university as an essential device.²⁰ These narratives underlie the logic of “Eds and Meds” and farcical initiatives like Pennovation (the “innovation hub”), and they were on excruciating display in the national race to the bottom for Amazon’s new headquarters.²¹

Yet, in privileging one story, we erase others. Convenient to the desired outcomes of those in power, it envisions the future of Philadelphia without heeding those who live there. In practice, such mythmaking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, legitimizing a preordained political and economic program that administers the erasure of the revolting subject. Poor people of color are erased from the stories elite power tells about the city, they are erased from the urban imaginary, they are erased from their own neighborhoods. In that sense, the dialectic of erasure is at once physical and symbolic.

Within the context of the class war underlying this discussion, a fundamental battle is necessarily the ideological determination of the urban protagonist. Here, it is useful to turn to Guy Standing’s elaboration of the *precarariat*, the precarious “class-in-the-making.”²² By this formulation, the precariat is a diverse amalgamation of (im)migrants, temporary and contract workers, students, women laborers, the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, and other categories unified by unstable and fragmented labor. In the US context, we can further specify the concept’s racialization, whereby the precariat consists overwhelmingly (though not entirely) of

Brown and Black peoples under conditions of structured white supremacy. The term is both specific and inclusive, capturing the realities of modern capitalist relations, particularly in urban settings. The precariat, therefore, provides a fitting protagonist for urban counterhegemony. That is, a key task of political action – both embodied and ideological – must be to reassert the precariat multitude as the rightful protagonist of the city.

I am concerned here with the role of academics in such a program, not because they are particularly well suited to the forefront of urban class struggle, but because they occupy strategically important positions in relation to the university. What, concretely, is to be done about their amoral and insatiable employers? As I have described, the university serves two essential functions in urban capitalism – the administrative and the ideological – and academics must agitate against both.

The history of struggle in American cities is centuries long and has multiple and intersecting continuities, from organized labor to Black liberation. The strategic questions for a viable program of action must ask where is the place of academics within that history and where should it be within infrastructures of resistance today? The latter question becomes increasingly relevant when we consider the exploitation and alienation of intellectual labor and the widening contradiction between academics and the universities they serve. And yet, at the same time, we must recognize the enormous class privilege most academics enjoy, and with it, the visibility and protection not afforded to most sectors of precariat labor.

It is the responsibility of academics to exploit that privilege in the service of conscientious struggle. They must use their resources and power to support democratic urban politics in solidarity and coalition with existing efforts. But their primary contribution to the struggle must be to reclaim the university – to seize the physical and symbolic reins of their institutions and to reoccupy and reimagine their democratic potential. In effect, I am calling for the joining of two political projects – the Right to the City and the Right to the University.²³

At the forefront of these efforts must be tenured faculty members, who are least vulnerable to retribution. They must lead the way in building alternative governance structures by leveraging unions, committees, and other organizational bodies to fight back against the corporatized university. They must again embrace tactics of direct action, such as strikes and teach-ins, to redirect educational institutions to their moral purpose.

As for ideological resistance, there are multiple avenues not only for disruption but for the building of more just and creative alternatives. It may be deeper critical scholarship on urban issues, multimodal projects that engage counterhegemonic narratives, or strategic research in coordination with movement organizations. At York University in Toronto, for example, faculty members created an alternative media relations office to counter the university's corporate public relations efforts.²⁴ What York illustrates is the need for academics to commit their intellectual energies to creative and well organized political praxis. While I cannot determine what form such resistance will take, I *am* quite certain the revolution will not be read in a journal article.

What I am proposing here is not an easy or simple path. The committed organization of academic labor and its solidarity with urban struggle is an immense task and if successful would provoke ruthless reaction from capitalist power. Cynicism, however, is not an option, for it is merely the failure of imagination and the abandonment of intellectual responsibility. If academics are feckless and inured in the face of unrelenting urban crisis, they may as well fall back into the earth. Their fight for the university – their courage and creativity and sacrifice – is necessary to the larger struggle over the urban future. At stake is not just institutional power, but democratic control over the physical city and, for some, the right to be at all.

Notes

¹ Henri Lefebvre, "The right to the city," in *Writings on Cities*, eds. Eleonore Kofman & Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge: 1996).

² David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (September 2008): 23-40.

³ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴ See, "The Last Store Standing," *Daily Pennsylvanian*, February 27, 2011, <http://www.thedp.com/multimedia/18907>. After two decades of intense gentrification efforts by the university, among the gelato cafes and luxury student apartments are just two remnants of a different past, a public library and a McDonald's restaurant. Incidentally, the University of Pennsylvania has for years tried to shut down the McDonald's. The article quotes local pastor Larry Falcon: "It brought undesirables into the campus community," he said, referring to black West Philadelphia youth. "The safety issue is just a veil...It's racism."

⁵ See, "Economic diversity and student outcomes at the University of Pennsylvania," *The Upshot*, *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-pennsylvania>.

⁶ Brian James Kirk, "55 percent of Philadelphia households lack access to Internet," *Technical.ly Philly*, April 4, 2012, <https://technical.ly/philly/2012/04/04/55-percent-of-philadelphia-households-lack-access-to-internet-new-early-data-shows-rate-higher-than-previously-thought>.

⁷ Ryan Briggs, "The Cost of Doing Business," *Next City*, December 7, 2014, <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/The-Cost-of-Doing-Business>.

⁸ Harvey, "Right to the City," 23.

⁹ See, Dan Spinelli, "Amy Gutmann's salary is now over \$3.5 million," *Daily Pennsylvanian*, May 24, 2017, <http://www.thedp.com/article/2017/05/gutmann-salary-increase-2015>.

¹⁰ See, "Penn: Office of the University Secretary: Board of Trustees," University of Pennsylvania, accessed December 18, 2017, <https://secure.www.upenn.edu/secretary/trustees>. "The trustees delegate the responsibility for the day-to-day management of the University of Pennsylvania to the administration and, in particular, to the president...The trustees, however, seek to support and reinforce the administration in several ways. They serve as a bridge between the University and the world; on the one hand, interpreting the institution to the public, and on the other hand, bringing in experience and perceptions gained outside the University. The trustees provide leadership in the identification and development of financial resources. They oversee the University's relations with other institutions, the private sector, government bodies, and the media. In consultation with the president, the trustees determine the long-range allocation of resources, making decisions in the context of the needs and expectations of the University's constituencies and of society."

¹¹ "Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania," University of Pennsylvania, accessed December 18, 2017, <https://secure.www.upenn.edu/secretary/trustees/TrusteeBluePages.pdf>.

¹² "The Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia | Board of Directors," Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://chamberphl.com/about/board-of-directors>. The names mentioned above do not even begin to probe Penn's intertwinement with the Chamber of Commerce. Madeline Bell is on the Chamber's executive committee and is the CEO of Penn's Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Nicholas Benedictus is the former CEO of Aqua America, a water privatization company. His successor and protegee, Christopher Franklin, is a Penn trustee. And perhaps most significantly, the Chamber's chair is John Fry, president of Drexel University and architect of Penn's urban development efforts in the 1990s.

¹³ Fabiola Cineas, "Chamber Says CHOP, Drexel Would Suffer Under Philadelphia's Wage Equity Law," *Philadelphia Magazine*, June 15, 2017, <http://www.phillymag.com/business/2017/06/15/philadelphia-wage-equity-law-chamber-of-commerce-chop-drexel>.

¹⁴ Tricia Nadolny, "Paid sick leave signed into Philadelphia law," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, http://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/20150213_Paid_sick_leave_signed_into_Philadelphia_law.html.

¹⁵ See, Ira Harkavy and Harmon Zuckerman, "Eds and Meds: Cities' Hidden Assets," *Center for Urban and Metropolitan Policy*, *Brookings Institution* (August 1999).

¹⁶ Jennifer S. Vey, Scott Andes, Jason Hachadorian, and Bruce Katz, "Connect to compete: Philadelphia's University City-Center City innovation district," *Brookings Institution*, (May 2017), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/csi_20170511_philadelphia_innovationdistrict_report1.pdf.

¹⁷ Ibid, 3-4.

¹⁸ If such monopoly control were not clear enough, the report singles out two individuals to thank for making the report possible: “Brookings wants to express its gratitude to David L. Cohen (senior executive vice president of Comcast) and John Fry (president of Drexel) for their ongoing leadership throughout this project and their commitment to ensuring that it catalyzes impactful and enduring actions and outcomes for Philadelphia and its citizens.” Ibid, 4.

¹⁹ While the “benevolent intentions” of the elite are often used to justify the status quo, in reality they should terrify us. In their visions of the urban future, they are gods, creating the city in their own image. And evidently their image consists of luxury high rises, chain stores, and artisan cafes. That’s sad! These people are so deep in their own shit, their imaginations so bound up by what capitalism renders possible, that even after hijacking our democracy, even after fashioning themselves as urban deities, they are utterly incapable of creativity or ambition, of even considering alternative ways of doing things. You have unchecked power, and you build an Urban Outfitters!?! At least Paris’s Haussmann and New York’s Moses, contemptible as they were, had some vision beyond maximizing revenue per square foot.

²⁰ As illustrations see, John Grossman, “After Starting 4 Businesses, College Entrepreneur Decides on Degree” *New York Times*, December 10, 2014,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/11/business/smallbusiness/daniel-fine-of-glass-u-decides-that-the-degree-matters.html>, and, Jon Hurdle, “Drexel Works to Build Up Philadelphia,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/business/drexel-works-to-build-up-philadelphia.html>.

²¹ See, Ben Johnson, “Boosting Philadelphia for Amazon’s HQ2,” *Penn Current*, October 19, 2017, <https://penncurrent.upenn.edu/features/boosting-philadelphia-for-amazon-s-hq2>.

²² Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

²³ See, Brenna Bhandar, “A Right to the University,” *London Review of Books Blog*, December 10, 2013, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/12/10/brenna-bhandar/a-right-to-the-university>.

²⁴ Mike Smith, “York U’s Radical New Brand,” *Toronto Now*, September 15, 2015. <https://nowtoronto.com/news/york-us-radical-new-brand>.

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