

Etienne, H. F. (2012). *Pushing back the gates: Neighborhood perspectives on university-driven revitalization in West Philadelphia*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 170 pp.

Review by Lakshman Yapa

It is a curious fact of geography that many large urban universities in the United States are located within or adjacent to very poor neighborhoods largely occupied by racial minorities. Mutual distrust, fear, and tension are too often abiding themes of this “town and gown” dual economy and spatial pattern. Long-time residents of the surrounding neighborhoods fear displacement through academic gentrification; the resource-rich universities, although massive engines of economic growth, have not provided an education for their children nor good jobs for the parents. Residents also feel a deep sense of exclusion from “university space,” carrying, as they do, markers of their class and racial identity. On the other side, the university is responsible for the safety of its students. Local newspapers frequently report muggings, theft, and even murder. The growth of the university requires real estate and lots of it: for building classrooms and research facilities, for housing students and for nearby homes for faculty and staff, for providing walking-access retail space, and for beautifying and landscaping the campus. This is the context in which “town and gown” relations play out at the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Drexel University, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, Yale, and a host of other urban universities.

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is often singled out as a model of an institution that has navigated these rugged shoals rather successfully. The history of Penn’s community outreach—called the West Philadelphia Initiative—is the subject of Harley Etienne’s *Pushing Back the Gates: Neighborhood Perspectives on University-Driven Revitalization in West Philadelphia*, a short book with 130 pages of text and another 40 pages of endnotes and bibliography. The notes and bibliography alone reveal the author’s deep knowledge of and passion for the subject. Etienne is a professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan. His Ph.D. is from Cornell. The book grew out of his master’s research at Temple University, yet surprisingly, the book makes no mention of Temple, which, located as it is in North Philadelphia, faces a situation almost identical to that of Penn in West Philadelphia.

To begin, I am a little puzzled by the title “Pushing Back the Gates.” The reference to a gate implies, figuratively speaking, that

the university is enclosed by a wall or a fence, and that there is some pressure being applied from the outside to get in by “pushing back the gates.” I have not seen anything in or around Penn that evokes that image. University City is an administrative unit carved out of West Philadelphia and is home to Penn, Drexel, and the University of the Sciences, along with a few hospitals and medical complexes. Penn is by far the dominant player in University City, which is the “gown” part of the larger West Philadelphia “town.” It is possible to drive unimpeded through University City along any of the east–west or north–south streets. I have no personal knowledge of any community movement in which residents from Parkside or Belmont-Mantua neighborhoods tried to enter Penn by “pushing back the gates.” If anything, the pressure is the other way around, with Penn expanding its facilities into neighborhood spaces. The most egregious instance of such expansion entails the story of the Black Bottom from the 1960s, when a large number of Blacks living around 40th and Chestnut were displaced and the area subsequently transferred to Penn control. The expansion referred to as “Penntification” by local cynics goes on to this day. Drexel for its part is expanding into the northern neighborhoods of Belmont and Mantua.

Chapter 1 of the book is titled “Cities and Their Universities: Logical Places to Search for Hope.” The idea of hope comes from viewing the university as a public place serving a public purpose, along the lines of John Dewey’s (1970) concepts of democracy, education, and public service. However, Dewey is not invoked in the chapter. Etienne’s skepticism of Dewey’s notion of a public service university is already evident in the opening chapter when he asks, “For whom did Penn save West Philadelphia?” (p. 6). However, rather than a Deweyan notion of a public university serving a universal public good, Etienne advances a political economy perspective of his subject. He claims that impoverished neighborhoods cannot be revitalized without recognizing the role of such larger issues as economic restructuring, jobs, class, and race in America.

Chapters 2 and 3 make a detailed presentation of the history of Penn and its community outreach. Etienne reports on his case study of Penn, the creation of University City, Penn community outreach, and the West Philadelphia Initiative. Here he recounts events beginning in the 1950s when, with national economic restructuring and the massive loss of blue-collar industrial jobs, Penn found itself in the midst of an economically distressed area. Places like West Philadelphia underwent profound economic and demographic changes with the double migrations of southern

Blacks seeking jobs in the industrial north and White flight from the city to suburbs.

In the 1990s, under the presidential leadership of Judith Rodin (1994–2004), and later, under Amy Gutman (2004–), there was a period of unprecedented growth in the university. At the same time, however, a series of well-publicized crimes on university grounds helped to push the issue of the town and gown divide to a prominent place on Penn's agenda. The university made a strong commitment to community development in West Philadelphia. Under the leadership of Ira Harkavy, a professor of history and urban studies, the Netter Center for Community Partnerships played a vital role in linking undergraduate education to the needs of the community. Service-learning courses, participatory action research, and internships were all part of the plan, and today the Netter Center is considered a national model for university service-learning.

Chapter 4 reviews the literature on neighborhood revitalization with a focus on three texts: Elijah's Anderson's *Streetwise*, Brett Williams's *Upscaling Downtown*, and Julius Wilson and Richard Taub's *There Goes the Neighborhood*. Etienne concludes the chapter by expressing his support for a political economy perspective, arguing that it best explains the dual nature of revitalization wherein low-income communities become increasingly removed from affordable housing and marginalized from affordable services that are primarily geared toward affluent university faculty and students. The Fresh Grocer, the grocery store at the corner of 40th and Walnut, with its pricey groceries, is certainly a case that illustrates Etienne's point.

Chapter 5 is a rapid survey of several other notable universities facing situations similar to that of Penn: Columbia University, Northeastern University, University of Southern California, and Harvard University. After comparing similarities and differences in their approaches to the community, Etienne points to the importance of university leadership as a driver in community relations. He closes the chapter with an ambitious hope:

university's decision makers . . . should consider what the long-term impacts of university-driven real estate development might be. If successful, programs to support public education, affordable housing and housing enhancement programs, historic preservation of neighborhood institutions, and workforce development can have transformative effects on places. (p. 108)

This wish list, both ambitious and unrealistic, is, however, inconsistent with a political economy analysis. Etienne states that a modern urban university like Penn is not in the practice of producing public citizens, à la John Dewey, but rather in the business of the commodification of Penn products—its degrees, its research, its outreach, and its reputation. It even produces the physical landscape and surrounding space to serve those needs; witness, for instance, the branding of “University City,” with the Penn logo appearing on street signs, bridges, and landmarks.

Chapter 6, which concludes the book with “Lessons from West Philadelphia,” is a disappointing chapter. First, it is not at all a chapter on “lessons learned,” but rather a summary of the pressures and competing goals that face modern urban universities, namely: (1) to promote the profitable knowledge-driven growth technologies; (2) to retain “star power” in both faculty and administration; (3) to meet the demands of student clientele; (4) to respond to the urban crisis of deindustrialization and its impact on local communities; and (5) to act as a driver of national and regional economic growth and to serve as a responsible real estate developer. Second, although Etienne began by using a political economy framework, in this concluding chapter he does not relate the pressures faced by a modern urban university to the framework he had invoked so approvingly in earlier chapters. On page 127, he says that the ecology of why urban universities are located near poverty areas has not received enough attention in the planning literature and needs further study. This is certainly true and potentially the subject for a large number of doctoral dissertations. Nevertheless, I had hoped to discover—in a chapter titled “Lessons”—what we could learn from Etienne’s analysis of Penn’s outreach initiatives for improving the lives of poor people in West Philadelphia. In that sense the book disappointed me.

Regarding Etienne’s methodology, his account of Penn’s West Philadelphia Initiative is based on library research and several interviews he conducted with Penn staff and community residents. I believe an assessment of Penn’s impact on the community should begin with a listing of indicators (variables that measure impact) and follow that up with statistical and cartographic analyses using a technique such as Geographic Information System (GIS). In the absence of any metrics, we are left with subjective claims that may simply reflect the respondents’ standpoints, as the total number of interviews was quite small. A Penn staff member seems unlikely to say anything negative about Penn’s impact. Similarly, it would not be surprising if the views of a displaced resident were very dif-

ferent from those of a landlord who benefited from neighborhood revitalization. As part of this book review, I did a very preliminary GIS analysis of poverty levels and household income from 2010 in the census tracts in and around University City. This analysis, showed a pattern of roughly concentric rings around the core of University City. Poverty rates were low in core areas of Census Tract 369 in University City and also in an inner-ring neighborhood that contained Spruce Hill, Woodland Terrace, Cedar Park, and Powelton Village, but they reached values exceeding 40% or even 60% in some census tracts in an outer ring of neighborhoods that included East Parkside, Belmont-Mantua, Haddington, and Mill Creek. To comprehend the geographical impact of Penn on West Philadelphia, it would have been instructive to map data for poverty, household incomes, employment, rents, real estate values, and grocery costs at the level of census blocks for several years going back to about 1970. In the absence of such an analysis it is difficult to make an objective assessment of Penn on its surroundings.

My next observation regards the theoretical framework of the book. A political economy analysis would have revealed that the production of space by a university requires a program of massive real-estate development for classes, research, housing, retail, sports, recreation, and entertainment. Invariably that space will come from the university's surroundings, a space that will also need to be carefully controlled and policed. It follows that the university can more readily expand if the residents of that space are poor, politically weak, dependent, and powerless. No amount of community sensitivity, sophisticated thinking, service-learning, and student internships can overcome that stark basic contradiction.

This work of Etienne, amplified by my own experience when I ran a Penn State service-learning course in West Philadelphia titled "The Philadelphia Field Project" (1998 and 2010), leads to fundamental questions. What role can the urban university play in developing a service-learning curriculum that is not about helping to expand the middle class (which cannot be done) but rather focuses on helping communities meet their basic needs so people can live their lives in health and dignity? Can universities like Penn serve such a vision? Would that simply be a matter of enlightened leaders being in the right place at the right time? Or is there an irreconcilable contradiction between the two missions—producing "knowledge" as a commodity in a capitalist economy and producing knowledge to serve a basic needs economy of the poor?

Reference

Dewey, J. (1930). *Democracy and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

About the Reviewer

Lakshman Yapa is currently serving as professor of geography at Pennsylvania State University. His research interests focus on poverty, economic development, and service-learning. He earned his Ph.D. from Syracuse University in New York.