

# **Baldwin, Davarian (2021) *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*. Bold Type Books.**

**Review by Gabriel Winant**

Almost as long as there have been universities, there has been social conflict between town and gown. The University of Cambridge, after all, was founded in 1209 by scholars fleeing the hostile environment of Oxford, where three of their colleagues had been hanged in an act of semi-vigilantism by town officials in punishment for their role in the death of a young townswoman. From then until now, the general logic of the conflict has stayed the same, even if the particulars have varied widely. Universities have a profound historical connection to the reproduction of ruling elites, manifest most darkly in the historical discovery in the last generation of the connection many hold to slavery and the slave trade. Students and scholars are linked up to national institutions that carry their own status and prestige and may access distinct pools of economic resources. Especially at more elite institutions, they may occupy a quite different social position from their neighbors, but (except for online colleges) they must exist in physical space and interact with the social geography around them.

Still, it is not enough to say ‘twas ever thus. The fact that colleges and universities enjoy different, and often superior, institutional positions to the people and organizations that share geographies with them tells us little about the complex relationships that link these unequal neighbors: relationships mediated through employment and labor markets, real estate and housing markets, policing and exclusion, schools and local taxes, hospitals and health care provision—and beneath all these, the grinding tectonic plates of race and class in America. In his new book *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*, historian Davarian L. Baldwin examines this dynamic across numerous campuses and cities. What he finds is not pretty.

Baldwin takes in a wide range of examples of town-gown frictions. SUNY Buffalo in its eponymous city; Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh; University of Chicago and its South Side surrounds; Yale in New Haven; University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia; Columbia and Barnard in Harlem; NYU in Greenwich Village; Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; his own Trinity College in Hartford. ‘By the 1970s,’ Baldwin writes, ‘most elite universities had become islands of wealth amid a sea of poverty. These institutions gobbled up land and envisioned themselves increasingly as the hubs of a new urban knowledge economy, in which their assets might form the basis for revitalization in these abandoned communities. Indeed, it is true that they have attracted investment to these cities, Baldwin writes, and thereby expanded their footprint. ‘More and more people are part of a university’s ecosystem.’ Yet this ecosystem is an unequal regime, consisting of unequal labor relations, lack of access to medical services, displacement from gentrifying neighborhoods, and policing by institutional forces. As he notes of Hyde Park (where I live), ‘In 2018 Black drivers made up nearly three-quarters of all the drivers stopped by university police.’

This is not, however, simply a relationship of one-sided oppression and exploitation. In city after city, the townspeople caught up with the university in one of these many capacities have organized and resisted, generating the possibility of a more democratic relationship between themselves and the institutions they abut. This too is an old tradition, and has often involved students as well: the 1968 revolt at Columbia, recall, was sparked by the plan for the university to build a gym in Morningside Park with semi-segregated access for community members. In New Haven, decades of workers' organizing on campus have spilled out into the neighborhoods in a formation called New Haven Rising: a labor-community coalition that has fought (and won significant victories) over the university's tax exemption, its failure to hire locally from working-class neighborhoods of color, and the hospital's cruel medical debt collection practices. (Full disclosure, I was active in this coalition from 2010 to 2018.) In Chicago, in addition to years of struggles against housing displacement and racist policing, a student-labor-community alliance compelled the University of Chicago Hospital to reopen its trauma center, now the only one on the South Side.

Baldwin emphasizes the increasing prominence of such struggles, exemplified best by India Walton, the former nurse and surprise winner of Buffalo's mayoral Democratic primary in 2021. Walton has a long activist history, but one key moment came in 2016 when an expanding medical school campus caused parking to overspill into her neighborhood, making it difficult for her elderly neighbors to park in front of their homes and carry out daily tasks. Walton began 'barricading open parking spots' with caution tape. Eventually, she went on to run a community land trust, participate in the 2020 George Floyd protests, and finally enter electoral politics.

Cases like these abound across the country with increasing frequency as universities themselves have become both engines of urban growth and sites of economic and racial inequality. Class and racial formation are not just studied at the university, they are happening increasingly at the university. While this is often upsetting for those of us committed to egalitarian racial and class politics to witness, as it makes us in some way complicit in the exploitation that attends this process, it also generates opportunities and obligations for us to participate. The rapid expansion of academic labor unionism and the eruption of racial justice struggles on campus, both in the last decade, represent the meeting of these obligations and opportunities.

As universities and hospitals step into the role once played by great mills and factories, Baldwin is emphatic that universities' role might be a positive one. He cites the experience of University of Winnipeg, whose expansion has been far more inclusive and egalitarian. It has created affordable housing, terminated its relationship with food service subcontractors, practiced systematic affirmative action in hiring, and taken care to incorporate indigenous culture and indigenous people into its expansion plans. This, of course, has happened in the context of a far more social-democratic society than ours. To follow Winnipeg's example, we will have to fight far harder: still, as Baldwin shows us, the university's unequal social, economic, and geographical expansion itself creates the material for such political struggles.

### Reviewer Bio

**Gabriel Winant** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Chicago and author of *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*, which won WCSA's C.L.R. James Award for best book for academic or general audiences in 2021.