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Neil Robert Smith: 18 July 1954-29 September 2012

Noel Castree

University of Manchester, ncastree@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Neil Smith's tragic early death has robbed geography of one of its finest minds and most inspirational characters.

Disciplines

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Obituary

NEIL ROBERT SMITH

18 July 1954–29 September 2012



Neil Smith in Gothenburg, October 2010

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Neil Smith's tragic early death has robbed geography of one of its finest minds and most inspirational characters. He was one of four children born to a school teacher father and full-time mother. His early years were spent in Dalkeith, an old market town on the fringes of Edinburgh. By his teens he had developed a strong interest in, and love of, the volcanic, glacial and fluvial landscapes of southeast Scotland. In large part, this led him to study Geography at St Andrews University. Two important things happened to him there. First, he was inspired by the teachings of a young human geographer, Joe Doherty. Joe, by all accounts, was sympathetic to the stirrings of left-wing politics and critical theory evident in human geography after the worldwide 'revolutions' of 1968. Second, a study abroad year in Philadelphia made Neil notice the fault-lines cleaving the human landscape more than ever before. Why did poor inner city neighbourhoods in a single American city seem to be gentrifying rapidly in ways similar to those he already knew in Edinburgh? Were there larger forces at work, notwithstanding the differences of geographical detail?

His answer was affirmative. The 'take over' of working-class urban neighbourhoods did not reflect some general 'rationality' found in the individual minds of middle-class consumers. Instead, Neil argued, it reflected an historically specific form of class power orchestrated by property developers and state officials. These arguments were articulated in his undergraduate thesis and subsequently published in *Antipode*, Geography's still young radical journal (Smith 1979a). He graduated with BSc Honours First Class in 1977 and flew across the Atlantic to pursue doctoral research at Johns Hopkins University.

Neil's many publications on inner city gentrification constitute one of his enduring intellectual legacies. They were a blend of Marxist theory and empirical data designed to test and finesse it. His concept of the 'rent gap' remains a touchstone for gentrification researchers. It describes the eventually large difference between the *actual* ground rent received by property owners in declining neighbourhoods and the *potential* ground rent achievable through judicious reinvestment (Smith 1979b 1987). However, to make gentrification happen, and to

legitimate the process, Neil argued that reference to political economy was insufficient. We must also, he argued, pay analytical attention to the associated 'moral economy'. This was fleshed-out in his influential book *The new urban frontier* (1996a), in which he detailed the new middle-class 'revanchism' against the urban poor evident in New York and elsewhere.

Neil's gentrification research was nestled within a larger project designed to comprehend the compound geographies of capitalism. The project was pursued at Hopkins and subsequently published as a landmark book *Uneven development* (1984). Its central argument was that spatially 'even development' is a fantasy because capitalism *depends upon* a dialectic of spatial equalisation and differentiation. The book also presented two other ideas – both initially seen as counterintuitive. The first is that geographical scale is not a fixed metric of the sort used to present maps. Instead, Neil argued, it is materially produced by political economic forces as part of the dynamics of uneven development and class power. The second is that 'nature', the material bedrock of human existence, is also produced rather than given. This is because capital accumulation depends upon, but constantly seeks to work around, the opportunities and constraints offered by biophysical phenomena. He developed and debated both ideas in a string of influential later publications.

In all these contributions Neil wanted not only to understand the world but to change it. As his later writings showed, he remained a life-long believer that revolution is not only necessary but possible – even when the odds are unfavourable (e.g. see Smith 2007). He devoted considerable energy to understanding why and how geographical knowledge was routinely used in counter-revolutionary ways. In part, this took him into the history of the discipline in America, with a particular focus on the geopolitical imagination of Isaiah Bowman (Smith 2002). In part, it involved him taking issue with his contemporaries, including those who considered themselves to be on the political Left (for instance, see Smith 2005). No dogmatist, his mind was always open. But he would offer principled criticism, often laced with biting humour, if he thought you had taken a wrong turn (e.g. see Smith 1996b). The onus was then on you to defend your ground or concede the power of his arguments.

For those who worked with Neil the experience was usually formative. He was a major contributor to the vibrancy of the Rutgers Geography Department for many years (and Head of Department for a spell too). There he mentored several exceptionally talented PhD students, including Don Mitchell and Andy Herod. Neil also edited *Antipode* (briefly), and later, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (where he helped build bridges between political economy and social theory). When he moved to the City University of New York (CUNY) in 2000 – where he was a

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography – he established the Center for Place, Culture and Politics. Neil also helped to create a human geography PhD programme at CUNY. Additionally, he was a tireless presenter seen frequently at academic meetings worldwide, and the recipient of endless speaking invitations. Most recently, he spent part of each year in his native Scotland as Sixth Century Professor of Geography and Social Theory at Aberdeen University.

As many others will attest, Neil Smith was warm, engaging and had a terrific sense of humour. He created important ideas, presented them eloquently (he was a superb writer), and was a model for all those who aspire to politically engaged scholarship. He kept the flame of Marxist scholarship alive through difficult times and persuaded Marxists of all stripes that geography matters. Even those whose ideas he excoriated respected him. He was awarded Distinguished Scholarship Honours by the Association of American Geographers in recognition of the quality and influence of his published writings. Geography as a whole is all the poorer for the passing of this remarkable man. But his legacy will, undoubtedly, be long-lasting.

Neil Smith died on 29 September 2012 in New York City as a result of kidney and liver failure. Alcohol was his undoing. He is survived by his sister Sheila Voas, his brothers Derek and Harvey Smith, and his partner of many years Deborah Cowen.

Acknowledgement

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NOEL CASTREE
University of Manchester

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