
Joe Doherty
Department of Geography & Sustainable Development
University of St. Andrews
St. Andrews, Scotland

Neil Smith, Gothenburg, Sweden, October 2010
(photograph courtesy of Tom Slater).

Neil Smith, Distinguished Professor of Geography and Anthropology, and founding Director of the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the City University of New York (CUNY), died in New York on 29 September 2012.

Neil graduated from St. Andrews University in 1977 with an outstanding first class honors degree in geography and completed his Ph.D. with David Harvey at Johns Hopkins University in 1982. Following his first tenured appointment in geography at Columbia University, he moved to Rutgers in 1986; in 1990 he was promoted to a full professorship. In 2000 he was appointed Distinguished Professor at CUNY, and in 2009 was additionally appointed as the Sixth Century Chair in Geography and Social Theory at the University of Aberdeen. During his all too brief life, Neil published at least five substantive, and

1Professor Emeritus of Geography; email: jd@st-andrews.ac.uk
frequently seminal, articles per year. He was the sole author of four distinguished books and the joint author/editor of six further monographs. His contributions to the advancement of knowledge, while emanating from an established base within the discipline of geography, ranged across the entire spectrum of the social sciences. His 1994 appointment as a Senior Fellow in the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers University, the award of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1995, his Distinguished Scholar award from the Association of American Geographers in 2000, and his directorship of the Centre for Place, Culture and Politics at CUNY all illustrate the recognition of this wider role by the academy. So do the several visiting professorships he held across the world, at the Universities of Sao Paulo, Princeton, Utrecht, Queensland, and more recently the Universities of Oregon, Toronto, Oslo, and Belfast.

Neil’s career as an academic researcher began early. His student dissertation on gentrification in Philadelphia’s Society Hill, a wholly original and extraordinary piece of research for an undergraduate, was published with refinement in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* in 1979. In the same year, a synthetic overview of the philosophy and methodology of geography, also derived from undergraduate work, was published in *Progress in Human Geography*. These two articles, together with six further peer-reviewed publications (all completed before he obtained his Ph.D.), established the foundations for two of the three main areas of investigation in which Neil secured his reputation as a scholar of international repute: the study of urbanism and the study of geography’s history and philosophy.

Neil’s third area of expertise was in the study of the political and economic processes of uneven development. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, Neil’s published Ph.D. dissertation, broke on the academic community in 1984. A remarkable *tour de force*, this book was lauded by reviewers as a work of exemplary erudition and originality. The presentation and elaboration of the concept of “the production of nature” and the deceptively simply named “see-saw” theory of uneven development provided a penetrating analysis and understanding of the roles of space and “nature” in the processes of capitalist development and underdevelopment. *Uneven Development* remains a landmark: a second edition was published in 1990, and a third in 2008. It continues to be mined by scholars both as a source of ideas for new research and for inspiration and insight into the workings of “late” capitalism. In the years following 1984, Neil extended and elaborated his understanding of the processes of uneven development in more than 35 articles and most recently in a further book: *The Endgame of Globalisation* (2005).

Yet, significant as Neil’s contributions have been to our understanding of uneven development, he was possibly better known for his work in the related but more focused study of urbanism and, within this, processes of gentrification. Following the publication of the findings of his undergraduate dissertation in 1979, Neil published more than 45 original articles and two books on this topic. His most significant contribution was the elaboration of “rent gap” theory. This theory extended our understanding of gentrification beyond that of lifestyle choices made by affluent urban dwellers to an appreciation of the central and crucial role played by the agents of capital. In response to continuous and intense scrutiny by urban scholars, and in the light of his own further research, Neil refined and extended his theory to explore the interplay between economic and socio-cultural processes, and the connections between neighborhood change and broader circuits of capital investment. Some of the results are to be found in his 1996 book *The New Urban Frontier:*
Gentrification and the Revanchist City, as well as later publications. Rent gap theory is now an established concept, firmly embedded in the lexicons of social science research and teaching.

Neil’s work also transformed the history and philosophy of geography. From a grounded position within political economy and based on a thorough and detailed understanding of the history of the discipline, Neil monitored and understood the nature of poststructuralist and postmodernist challenges. His responses to these challenges were characteristically forthright, but far from dismissive. Through a process of subtle adoption and adaptation, he made several central contributions (as illustrated in his work on the importance of scale) that in a fundamental manner shaped the philosophical and methodological landscape of present-day geography. Neil’s 2003 monograph American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization, which is based on the life and work of the geographer and politician Isaiah Bowman, drew together the two research themes of uneven development and the history and philosophy of geography. In linking the philosophical and political past with the philosophical and political present, this work proved to be a pivotal publication both in terms of Neil’s own research and in terms of our understanding of the interrelationships between geography, politics, and economic development during the “American Century”; American Empire was awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Award in 2004.

Neil, exceptionally for one so lauded and cited, combined a formable intellect and brilliant scholarship with a caring and generous temperament. True to his Scottish roots to the last, he combined a thoroughly congenial personality with boundless energy. He taught and learned with prominent scholars around the world, but he also listened carefully to students, workers, and organizers. He had a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of social justice, based on a critical and detailed engagement with Marxist and socialist thought. He delivered robust critiques whenever necessary, but always in a spirit of support, respect, and passionate debate to make better theory for a better world.

Neil had a profound influence on the careers of many. He was an exemplary mentor and an inspirational figure to students and colleagues alike. He will be sorely missed. His inspiration and commitment live on in the lives and work of those he transformed and inspired: students, colleagues, workers, activists, artists, poets, and all the many other urbanites of the world Neil spoke to in his Manifesto for the Poetry of the Future, exhibited in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the Spring of 2011:

Urbanites—all who dwell in cities from Vancouver to Mumbai, Prince George to Prague, Boston Bar to Bogata—where will revolution begin? … [I]f a full life is now called utopianism or unrealistic, then let’s hold on to it! Suddenly the social and political future looks radically open…. It is now time to end “utopian anti-utopianism” and jump-start history again! (Smith, 2011)

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2Bowman served as President Truman’s advisor and was a prominent participant in the American plan for postwar peace settlement and reconstruction in Europe.
REFERENCES


