Neil Smith’s tragic early death has robbed Geography of one of its finest minds and most inspirational characters. He was a Marxist and a geographer in equal measure. For him, capitalism’s geographies were part of its DNA, no mere epiphenomena. It follows, as he argued consistently for over 30 years, that any revolutionary politics must itself be profoundly geographical from the get-go. The implications of this for academic Geography were (and remain) significant. Neil argued that the knowledge geographers produce is necessarily political. It’s a participant in the drama of modern life, rather than a neutral commentary on it. Therefore, we must decide where we stand and what ends our research and teaching are designed to serve. Universities are not just places where we get to study the world. They should, Neil insisted, self-consciously contribute to its transformation and improvement. As his PhD thesis supervisor David Harvey once memorably argued, we must ask of our knowledges not whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’ but, rather, “what it is that produces them and what they serve to produce’” (1973: 162).

Neil 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’d developed a strong interest in, and love of, the volcanic, glacial and fluvial landscapes of south east Scotland. In large part, this led him to study Geography at St. Andrews University in the early 1970s. Two important things happened to him there. First, he was inspired by the lectures, tutorials and observations 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. Joe’s instincts chimed with Neil’s. He once said that a formative political experience as a youngster was seeing black Americans being beaten by police on TV for doing no more than exercising their civil rights. Secondly, a study abroad year in Philadelphia made him notice the fault-lines cleaving the human landscape more than ever before. Specifically, he asked himself why poor inner city neighbourhoods in a single American city seemed 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?
He answered in the affirmative. However, he dissented from the arguments contained in location theory and its derivatives. 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 that was able to remake urban morphology in its own image. These arguments were articulated in his undergraduate thesis and subsequently published in Antipode, Geography’s still young – and at the time only – 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 from the late 1970s onwards 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, even those who have little time for Marxism. 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’ – more conventionally called ‘ideology’ by Marxists. This was fleshed-out in his influential book The New Urban Frontier (1996a), where he detailed the new middle-class ‘revanchism’ against the urban poor evident in New York and other Western cities.

Neil’s insistence that gentrification is all about class power and flows of profit-hungry capital 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) and several related essays (e.g. Smith, 1982; 1986). This theoretical monograph was reissued twice. 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 counter-intuitive – that would subsequently prove highly influential within and beyond human geography. The first is that geographical scale is not a fixed metric of the sort used to present maps. Instead, Neil argued, it’s 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 (for instance: 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). Throughout, Neil’s consistency and courage was inspirational to a great many. No dogmatist, his mind was always open. But he would offer principled criticism, often laced with biting humour, if he thought you’d taken a wrong-turn (for instance: 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 & 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 & Geography – he established the Center for Place, Culture & Politics. The Center allowed cross-disciplinary conversations to flourish and attracted talented doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers. 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 took the opportunity to spend part of the year in his native Scotland as Sixth Century Professor of Geography and Social Theory at Aberdeen University.

I first encountered Neil’s writings while an undergraduate in the mid-1980s. So inspired by them was I that I subsequently applied to do a PhD at Rutgers with him, though lack of funding made the move from Oxford impossible. Later, I met him at conferences and workshops. Most recently, I recall a happy evening at his Toronto home (with Deb Cowen and several graduate students) eating, drinking and talking politics until
even he had to call it quits and go to bed. 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 September 29th 2012 in New York City as a result of kidney and liver failure. Alcohol was his undoing. Should we frown upon his addiction? I cannot say, though it’s put-paid to two members of my own family in recent years. Perhaps the important thing is simply to acknowledge that, whatever benefits it brings to those who consume it, alcohol can wreak serious havoc. It’s robbed Neil’s family, his colleagues and numerous admirers of a singular human being. Neil is survived by his sister Sheila Voas, his brothers Derek and Harvey Smith, and his partner of many years Deborah Cowen.

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Selected publications


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