

Neil Smith 1954 – 2012

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) and a graduate of St Andrews University, died in New York on 29 September 2012.



Neil graduated from St Andrews University in 1977 with an outstanding first class honours degree in Geography and completed his PhD 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 and in 1990 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 5 substantive, and frequently seminal, articles per year; he was the sole author of four distinguished books and the joint author /editor of 6 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 as do the several visiting professorships he held across the world: including 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 started 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 some refinement in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* in 1979. In the same year, a synthetic overview on 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 PhD), established the foundations for two of the three main areas of investigation in which Neil secured his reputation as a scholar of international repute: namely, the study of urbanism and the study of the history and philosophy of geography. 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 PhD 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 'sea-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* proved to be a landmark publication, a second edition was published in 1990 and a third in 2010; 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 over 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, the processes of gentrification. Following the publication of the findings of his undergraduate dissertation in 1979, Neil published over 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 life-style choices made by affluent urban dwellers to an appreciation of the central and crucial role played by the agents of capital. This theory has been subjected to intense and continuous scrutiny by urban scholars and in response to some of this scrutiny and in the light of his own further research, Neil refined and extended his theory. Some of the results are to be found in his 1996 book *New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, as well as later publications. Rent gap theory is now an established concept and firmly embedded in the lexicons of social science research and teaching.

Neil's third area of research interest was the history and philosophy of Geography. By one interpretation this could be seen as a 'minor' theme of his research output, yet, following his synthetic essay of 1979, Neil published over 30 articles in this area. 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 (President Truman's advisor and a prominent participant in the American plan for post war peace settlement and reconstruction in Europe) - 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 formidable 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 and was willing to interrelate with the knowledgeable and less knowledgeable alike. He had a life long commitment to the pursuit of social justice, based on a critical and detailed engagement with Marxist and socialist thought. Capable, when necessary, of delivering robust critiques, he was more commonly supportive and respectful of all serious academics. 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.

