

## Neil Smith: 1954-2012

**Date :** October 4, 2012

Originally published in the [SocialistWorker.org](http://SocialistWorker.org) on October 2, 2012

[Neil Smith](#): A Passionate Scholar and Socialist

*Bill Roberts, a founding member of the ISO, and Hector Agredano, a doctoral student at the CUNY Graduate Center, remember the life of a determined activist.*

Neil Smith, the renowned scholar, beloved teacher and devoted activist, died on September 29 at the age of 58.

Neil is best known for his academic work. He was a professor of anthropology and geography at City University of New York. In particular, his writings on the patterns of social development in cities--drawing on history, economics, political and social theory, and ecological studies--are among the most prominent left- wing views on the subject.

But Neil will also be remembered as a committed socialist and activist. He came to the U.S. from his native Scotland in early 1977 to complete his graduate studies with David Harvey at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He wasted no time becoming an activist on campus, helping to establish the Graduate Representative Organization.

In 1978, Neil joined the International Socialist Organization (ISO), then only newly formed, and helped to build a campus chapter at John Hopkins of a dozen committed socialists. Neil became a frequent contributor to Socialist Worker, then a monthly newspaper. One memorable article of his in 1981, titled "It's Right to Rebel," put the London urban riots of that summer in the context of the severe economic recession and the hopelessness it produced.

As Kathy Ogren, a fellow student at the time and now a recognized scholar in her own right, remembered, Neil was "a great popularizer of Marxist ideas...and a good listener to a person's evolving political consciousness. He could help one sort out the connections between personal and structural questions and conditions."

Though Neil left the ISO in 1984, his comrades and students remember the humor and fearlessness he brought to his political organizing. "Neil was one of the most creative thinkers I've ever met," Ogren said. "He saw connections, applied his prodigious energy to researching an answer, and then found innovative ways to write or speak about what he had learned."

\*\*

As a scholar, Neil's intellect was evident from early in his academic career. In 1979, he wrote an influential article titled "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People." More than scholarly research, this was a political intervention in the field of urban geography at a time when questions on urban decay and ghettoization were riddled with inconsistent theories and contradictory research.

His most important theoretical contribution to the understanding of the geography of capitalism is outlined in *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Here, Neil laid out a coherent explanation for the unevenness and distortion of economic development, specifically in urban areas, because of investment and disinvestment in the built environment by capital markets.

Inspired by insights from Lenin and Trotsky, Neil's thesis is based on the contradictions of capitalism outlined by Karl Marx in *Capital*. However, in applying these ideas, he helped to anchor disparate theories from disciplines that often remain separated in the academy.

Neil would expand on these theories to develop analyses on the commodification of nature under capitalism, politics in the study of geography, and U.S. imperialism. One of his most celebrated books, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*--for which he received the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Biography for 2002--traces American military interventionism through the age of globalization. The book would prove prophetic when, one year later, the U.S. launched its invasion of Iraq.

Upon his arrival at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, Smith's scholarship and sharp politics attracted a crowd of activists, intellectuals and radicals of all stripes to his courses. From seasoned anti-gentrification activists of Washington, D.C., to peasant organizers from Costa Rica, and the curious from everywhere in between, they all found a seat at the table. His classes were lively with dissension and debate, and it was alright to be political; in fact, it was encouraged.

During the last years of his life, one of Neil's main concerns was that radicals and revolutionaries were losing hope. He was frustrated that it was easier for radicals to imagine an environmental apocalypse than a triumphant revolutionary movement against capitalism. During class and in meetings, he would raise the concern that one of the victims of the ruling class offensive had been the utopian imagination of the left.

This was one of the most inspiring things about Neil-- he never gave up hope. And when the Occupy movement burst on the scene last fall, he welcomed it with open arms. Class discussion would turn into strategy debates--he encouraged students to participate, and would hold class at the Occupy encampment in Zuccotti Park or cancel them to allow us to

participate in major demonstrations.

Neil leaves a lasting legacy of scholarship and dedication to geography and to Marxism. As a socialist, he always placed himself in the revolutionary tradition--he spent his last years trying to raise revolution to the agenda in people's imagination and political frontiers. He left us too soon and will be sorely missed by friends, colleagues, students and loved ones.

Neil Smith, Â¡presente!