

Neil Smith: A tribute from Berlin

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Neil Smith's sudden death has left far-flung communities of scholars and activists bereft – friends, comrades, and colleagues of mine from the US and Canada, Western as well as Eastern European countries are reaching out to each other sharing their grief and sorrow. It is awe-inspiring to see, in this moment of loss, how many different people -- across ages, across continents, across disciplines, and across intellectual and political divides -- he has inspired and touched with his brilliant and incisive analysis and with his passionate fervor for working towards a better world.

Many wonderful tributes and *in memoriams* have been published (see <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/10/05/neil-smith-in-antipode/> and <http://pcp.gc.cuny.edu/2012/09/neil-r-smith-1954-2012/> and especially <http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/homes/tslater/tributetoNeilSmith.html>) appreciating Neil's rich contributions to critical geography, the politics of place and space, the history and contemporary dynamics of imperialism, globalization, and neoliberalism, and his sharp and unrelenting critiques of inconsistent theories or contradictory research – most often of mainstream urban scholarship where it fails to provide adequate explanation, but equally of trends emerging from within leftist academic communities if they were sloppy or failed to account for social interests underlying their arguments.

Since Neil – until the very end of his life – was "present" at so many places simultaneously, and intervened into debates as well as struggles taking place across an amazing array of places, we can hardly capture the full spirit and the wealth of legacy he is leaving behind – though thankfully "continued inspiration can always be found in his writings", as Tom Slater aptly put it in his tribute to Neil Smith (referenced above) – "and in the memories of all who knew him."

My memories go back to 1990 when I taught for a term at the New School and did research on urban movements in Germany and the US. Since I had devoured his writings on the Tompkins Square Park struggles and his early work on gentrification, I was thrilled when he gave me a tour of the Lower East Side – which was not only insightful, dazzling and eye-opening, but also delightful, fun, and without a trace of the know-it-all one often gets when shown around by experts.

In the following years, Neil did not hesitate to follow German invitations to apply his perspective to post-unification developments of Berlin and neoliberalizing trends in German cities more broadly: he joined our conference on the 'Americanization of the European City?' in 1997 (see the photo of the speakers on the steps of the JFK-Institute of Freie Universität, Neil easily identifiable with his shock of curly red hair: <http://www.luc.edu/sociology/faculty/berlin.shtml>) to extend his argument from *The New Urban Frontier* to "speculate a bit", as he called it, about the Americanization of European cities with regard to gentrification, homelessness and revanchism. As it turned out, the "speculations" had tremendous resonance, and the following fall (Sept 1998) Berlin activists invited him to a workshop "No New Berlin" to apply his analysis more concretely to how Berlin city government was inserting revanchist strategies in the development plans of the unified city.

And he came repeatedly to work with the PhD students in the Transatlantic Graduate Program at the Center for Metropolitan Studies, both, for student-organized workshops (e.g. in May 2007 "Local Space and Social Conflict", where he was "the invited mentor") and to contribute to lecture series such as the one on 'The Network City', which I remember in particular for his challenging Berlin's assembled urbanists seduced by the paradigm of the network society. He asked uncomfortable questions such as: "at what point, perhaps quite contrary to scholars' intentions, does network theory become part of the apparatus of social power itself? ... At what point does a paradigm of network cities work to strengthen rather than attack the political and spatial rationalities of neoliberal governance?" Here, as always, he directed his critical questions in both directions, and was just as concerned that "we do not commit the corollary mistake to the 'fetishism of form,' namely to assume that networks, by their nature, are somehow inimical to a progressive politics."

He would also come, repeatedly, to work with tenant organizations, left-wing activists (<http://www.policing-crowds.org/urbanization/urban/neil-smith-gentrification-in-berlin-and-the-revanchist-state/>) (in German: <http://www.bmgev.de/mietercho/324/09-gentrifizierung-neil-smith.html>), and the foundation of the Left Party (the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, see <http://www.rosalux.de/event/17347/after-bush.html> and http://ifg.rosalux.de/wp-content//nld-nov_9_berlin-reader.pdf).

In August 2007, a task force of Berlin police arrested three men for supposedly attempting an arson attack on a truck of the German Federal Armed Forces. One of the three men had purportedly met five months before with scholar-activist Andrej Holm, who had been publishing on the gentrification of German cities. This contact was sufficient evidence for the federal attorney to arrest Andrej and charge him with terrorist activities based on paragraph 129a along with the three suspected arsonists. Andrej was released on bail after three weeks in prison, not least due to international protests, which Neil helped us mobilize on his side of the Atlantic. Not only was he among the first to sign and spread our Open letter of protest against the arrest of Andrej, but he immediately wrote up the case himself to create broader publicity in the English-speaking world (see "German GWOT Misfire" published in *The Nation* 9/24/2007, available here: <http://einstellung.so36.net/en/ps/292>).

A highlight of the German-American connectivity was the scholar-activist conference in honor of Peter Marcuse's 80th birthday in Berlin in 2006. It could not have occurred without THE preeminent scholar-activist: Neil presented a captivating lecture on "Urbanization after Neoliberalism: City Building and the Right to the City" (http://multimedia.metropolitanstudies.de/RTTC_Conference/Freitag/12-NeilSmith.mp3) and was constantly mobbed by young scholars/activists seeking – and getting – his advice and guidance.

The topic of the right to the city – both as analytical endeavor and as support for the urban activism under this label – has of course been close to CUNY's Center for Place, Culture and Politics. Here, Neil had, together with David Harvey and Peter Marcuse, established the Right to the City reading & discussion group where "urban intellectuals" from all over New York met regularly to engage with each other's work and see how they might harness their combined expertise to make a difference in local developments. I was privileged to participate in this group's discussions during a semester I spent at NYU in 2006, and quickly learned that, like most groups made up of academics, it

encompassed different shades of political predilections. Neil tried very hard over the years to move the group into a Lefebvrian direction, whose vision – he wrote in an email to the group when travel kept him from participating in the meeting – we cannot remain true to "without muddying our academic Birkenstocks in the grubbiness of political movements and organization. Academics may have the luxury of standing aloof from all of this, but a luxury it is and I think we need to eschew it, while at the same time contributing what we can by doing the very hard work of translating the theory into practical (not policy) approaches" (Sept 20, 2008).

Nobody embodied and realized this hard work of translating our theory into practice as consistently and successfully as Neil did, which is why he has become such a powerful role model for politically committed scholars. Organic intellectuals that combine brilliant scholarship and pungent critique with activist engagement and unwavering support for oppositional movement groups AND with incredible generosity and kindness towards searching students and young scholars without name recognition are a rare species.

Neil Smith was just such an unusual species: scholar, teacher, activist, who made us see the rent gap when no one was talking about gentrification yet; whose brilliant, laser-sharp critique cut right through mainstream obfuscations; who assured and supported grad students from around the world in their quest for meaningful explanation and instilled confidence in them that such analysis matters more than academic reputations; and who inspired and assisted fledgling movements to grow into more clear-sighted and more forceful challengers – not just around New York and Toronto, but also in Berlin. And when, in 2011, fledgling movements around the world began to erupt in massive protest against dictatorships and the austerity measures with which governments seek to "resolve" the financial crisis, he began to focus his work even more on strategic questions, how the "dead but dominant" neoliberal regime might be overcome, how a post-capitalist world can be brought about. He shared this work with Berliners as well – in February of this year (2012) to a packed room full of students, colleagues and activists – gaining hope from the "confluence of revolts", from the unfolding Arab Spring, Chilean and continuing European anti-austerity revolts, Chinese strikes and the global Occupy movement. At the AAG a month later, he even turned a panel on "The Housing Question Revisited: Land, Property, Capitalism, Socialism" into a strategy debate, in which he took the lead arguing that "it is not our job to tinker with redistributive measures or with taxes. Rather, it is our job to organize movements that are able to create such revolutionary moments as of Tahrir Square!" Of course there was much disagreement about the division of labor he suggested between building prefigurative alternatives to neoliberal society, and preparing the "spring offensive" at this panel. However, it is exactly his passionate, exhilarating and inspirational performance in such debates which we are sorely missing now.