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Neil Smith

Key urban writings

Smith, N. (1979) "Gentrification and Capital: Theory, Practice and Ideology in Society Hill," *Antipode* 11(3): 24-35.

Smith, N. (1979) "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People", *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45: 538-48.

Smith, N. (1982) "Gentrification and Uneven Development", *Economic Geography* 58: 139-55.

Smith, N. (1996) *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge)

Smith, N. (1998) "Giuliani Time," *Social Text* 57: 1-20

Introduction

Neil Smith (1954-2012) was a Scottish geographer and activist intellectual, whose prolific, passionate and politically engaged writings played a significant role in shaping the present day landscape of urban studies, human geography, and indeed the entire spectrum of the social sciences. Whilst best known for his contributions to the study of cities and particularly the process of gentrification, his work extended to a thorough dissection of the political and economic processes of uneven development (where a robust formulation of the production of geographical scale became central to much urban scholarship), and also the study of geography's history and philosophy. Based on a critical and detailed engagement with Marxist and socialist thought, Smith had a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of social justice and was an active participant in many social movements, particularly around housing issues in New York City, where he was based for much of his career.

Following Smith's first tenured appointment at Columbia University, he moved to Rutgers University in 1986. In 2000 he was appointed Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York where he founded and led the Centre for Place, Culture and Politics (which remains a hotbed of radical intellectual thought and critical dialogue with activists from far and wide). He died in September 2012, aged just 58.

Academic biography and research focus

Smith was born in Leith, Scotland, but spent nearly all his childhood in Dalkeith, a working class town south-east of Edinburgh. As a teenager he became fascinated in the sharp contrasts and divisions in the glaciated and volcanic landscapes of the Lothians. Armed with a natural flair for mathematics, he

enrolled at St. Andrews University on track to become a glacial geomorphologist. However, on a student exchange program in Philadelphia he observed the contrasts and divisions within Philadelphia's Center City and began to realise that *social* forces carved up urban landscapes with the same awesome power and precision as the physical forces that carved the backyard of his youth. Politics, class struggle and flows of capital etched their way onto buildings and streets, and for Smith this became even more compelling to study than the physical forces that scratch and sculpt glacial environments.

Back at St. Andrews, in his final year of undergraduate study, Smith was particularly moved by the teachings of Joe Doherty, who proved instrumental in opening his eyes to the radical potential of urban geographical inquiry. Doherty supervised Smith's undergraduate dissertation (1977) which tracked those abovementioned social forces via an investigation of the process of gentrification in the Philadelphia neighbourhood of Society Hill. Having first noticed gentrification earlier in 1972, on Rose Street in Edinburgh, when a trendy new bar called *The Galloping Major* distinguished itself from neighbouring pubs by serving 'quite appetizing lunches adorned with salad' (Smith, 1996, p.xviii), Smith retained an interest in the process throughout his career, producing over 45 original articles and two books on the topic.

After graduating from St. Andrews, Smith moved to Baltimore in 1978 to pursue doctoral studies under **David Harvey** at Johns Hopkins University. Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* and its deep engagement with Marxist thought had galvanised a generation, reorienting urban studies away from positivist spatial science towards more normative concerns about what societies might look like if profit-seeking as a direct and socially accepted goal were to be replaced by a 'genuinely humanizing urbanism'. Smith's writings are best understood in the context of these revolutionary changes in geographical and urban thought, of which he was both student and teacher. His Ph.D. thesis (1982) became his masterwork: *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (1984). The influence of this book goes far beyond urban studies; Smith's argument that 'nature' is not just transformed under but *produced by* the logic of capitalist accumulation was an insight foundational for the entire field of political ecology. Two other books are worth noting for scholars of cities: *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996) which continues to be mined by scholars for its penetrating insights on capitalist state power and its effects on cities (see below); and *The Endgame of Globalization* (2005), a spirited critique of the violence of American-led, capitalist globalization just a few years before that project collapsed via the 2008 financial crisis.

Key ideas

Smith's earliest writings on cities are hard-hitting Marxist critiques of the highly influential neoclassical economic land use models of the Chicago School. Smith was skeptical of those models because of the consumer sovereignty paradigm undergirding them, which held that the rational choices of individual consumers of land and housing determined the morphology of cities. Middle-class consumer demand for space apparently 'explained' suburbanisation, a process seen by

many neoclassical scholars to be the future of all urban places. But the empirical reality of Society Hill – gentrification – seemed to call that paradigm into question. Smith could not accept that consumers were suddenly demanding *en masse* the opposite to what had been predicted, and ‘choosing’ to gentrify central city areas instead. In Society Hill he unearthed data showing that a majority of middle class people had never left for Philadelphia’s suburbs *because space was being produced for them* via state-sponsored private sector development. This created handsome profits for developers at the expense of working-class people who were displaced from central city space. His undergraduate dissertation was modified and published in *Antipode* in 1979, and that same year it was refined further in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (JAPA) where the pivotal theory of the *rent gap* was first articulated.

A starting point for Smith’s rent gap theory is that as disinvestment in a particular district intensifies, it creates lucrative profit opportunities for developers, investors, homebuyers and local government. To understand the much-lauded American ‘urban renaissance’ of the 1970s, the argument and title of the JAPA essay went, it was much more important to track the movement of capital rather than the movement of people (the latter movement was the exclusive focus of the ‘back to the city’ rhetoric and scholarship of the time). In 1920s Chicago, Homer Hoyt had identified a “valley in the land-value curve between the Loop and outer residential areas....[which] indicates the location of these sections where the buildings are mostly forty years old and where the residents rank lowest in rent-paying ability” (Hoyt 1933, p.356-8). For Smith, this “capital depreciation in the inner city” (p.543), means that there is likely to be an increasing divergence between *capitalized ground rent* (the actual quantity of ground rent that is appropriated by the landowner, given the present land use) and *potential ground rent* (the maximum that could be appropriated under the land’s ‘highest and best use’, as economists often put it). So, Hoyt’s land value valley, radically analysed and reconceptualised, “can now be understood in large part as the rent gap” (Smith, 1979, p.543).

For Smith, abandoned urban buildings are not the outcome of any naturally-occurring neighbourhood ‘decay’ – they are *actively produced* by clearing out existing residents via all manner of tactics and legal instruments such as landlord harassment, massive rent increases, redlining, arson, the withdrawal of public services, and eminent domain. Closing the rent gap requires separating people currently obtaining use values from the present land use providing those use values in order to capitalise the land to the perceived highest and best use. The role of the state in regards to these actors is far from *laissez-faire*, but rather one of direct facilitator (e.g. via public mortgage financing and the development of public-private institutions to direct that financing). The rent gap theory highlights specific social (class) interests, where the quest for profit and economic growth takes precedence over the need for shelter. The rent gap must also be understood within Smith’s larger body of work on uneven development, where he added a geographical, spatial dimension to something that had fascinated Marx – the powerful contradictions of capital investment and accumulation. For Smith, capital investment is always animated by a geographical tension: between the need to *equalise* conditions and seek out new

markets in new places, versus the need for *differentiation* (and particularly a division of labour that is matched to various places' comparative advantage). The result is what Smith (1982) called a locational "see-saw" of investment and disinvestment over time and across space. The rent gap theory of gentrification helps us to view that see-saw in motion.

The political activation of that see-saw was the subject of Smith's 1996 book *The New Urban Frontier*. Revanchists (from the French word *revanche*, meaning revenge) were a group of bourgeois nationalist reactionaries opposed to the liberalism of the Second Republic and the socialist uprising of the Paris Commune. The revanchists were determined to reinstate the bourgeois order with a strategy that fused militarism and moralism with claims about restoring public order on the streets. They hunted down enemies with a noxious blend of hatred and viciousness, intent on exacting revenge upon all those who had 'stolen' their vision of French society from them. In the late 1980s, Smith was disturbed by the developments in New York City that had emerged to fill the vacuum left by the disintegration of 1960s/70s liberal urban policy. He coined the concept of *the revanchist city* to capture a seismic political shift: whereas the liberal era of the post-1960s period was characterised by redistributive policy, affirmative action and antipoverty legislation, the era of neoliberal revanchism was characterised by a discourse of revenge against minorities, the working class, feminists, environmental activists, and recent immigrants: the 'public enemies' of the bourgeois political elite and their supporters. Under the Rudolph Giuliani mayoral administration, New York City in the 1990s became an arena for concerted attacks on affirmative action and immigration policy, street violence against homeless people, and aggressive policing techniques. Just as the bourgeois order was perceived as under threat by the revanchists of 1890s Paris, in 1990s New York a particular, exclusionary vision of 'civil society' was being reinstated with a vengeance – an attempt to banish those not part of that vision from the city altogether. Smith argued that gentrification was the leading edge of a state strategy of revenge - an attempt to retake the city from the working class.

Smith's later work on gentrification was concerned with how the process was changing from its 1960s and 1970s localised urban anomaly to a thoroughly generalised urban strategy affecting cities all over the world, and he wrote several essays to that effect inspired by **Henri Lefebvre's** (1970) *La Révolution Urbaine* (e.g. Smith, 2002). He also wrote about how we are witnessing the dawn of a 'revanchist planet' (Smith, 2009), a new class struggle fuelled by a 'dead but dominant' neoliberal ideology. Given the 2008 financial crisis and waves of foreclosures and evictions, the emergence of austerity measures and their cumulative effects on cities, the 2011 'Arab Spring' and Occupy uprisings, he was thinking and writing even more deeply about urban revolution in the years and months before his death.

Contributions to urban studies

Smith's writings on gentrification thoroughly shaped the theoretical and empirical discourse of debates on gentrification and urban displacement. As well as spawning a series of riveting empirical tests (e.g. Clark, 1987; Lopez-Morales,

2011), the rent gap theory led to some heated exchanges between urban scholars who saw gentrification as the product of the postindustrial expansion of middle-class professionals with a preference for central city living (Ley, 1986; Hamnett, 1991) and scholars who felt that Smith's focus on gentrification 'from above' was inattentive to human agency and the views of gentrification at ground level (Rose, 1984). But for Smith, the rent gap is fundamentally about class struggle, about the structural violence visited upon so many working class people in contexts that are usually described as 'regenerating' or 'revitalizing'. Smith's writings teach us that, contrary to journalistic portraits of white 'hipsters' versus working class minorities, the class struggle in gentrification is between those at risk of displacement and the agents of capital who produce and exploit rent gaps. For this reason, the rent gap theory has proved especially useful to urban social movements dedicated to elevating housing to the level of a human right and securing community control over land (Rameau, 2012). To understand struggles under capitalism, Smith argued, we have to understand the way capitalism produces the very spaces and scales that make its existence possible. Long cycles of accumulation demand that capital has to devalue land in order to reinvent investment opportunity. The violence and human consequences of varying cycles of building and destroying, of creating and tearing apart, makes the rent gap of lasting purchase and relevance (analytically and politically) in grasping the basic function of rent: to underpin investment and reinvestment opportunity, which in turn underpin uneven development under capitalism.

Smith's thesis on the revanchist city, whilst criticized by some as inapplicable to the lives of homeless people in countries with stronger welfare states and for neglecting the mediating role of third sector organisations (Cloke et al. 2010), offered a challenge for scholars to expose and critique the vengeful tactics used by developers, owners and agents of capital and policy elites as they stalk potential ground rent. A focus on revenge can also shed light upon the ways in which profitable returns are justified among those actors and to the wider public; raise legitimate and serious concerns about the fate of those urban dwellers not seen to be putting urban land to its 'highest and best use'; point to the darkly troubling downsides of reinvestment in the name of 'economic growth' and 'job creation'; and carve the path for the reinstatement of the use values (actual or potential) of the land, streets, buildings and homes that constitute an urban community. Neil Smith never gave up hope that another, post-capitalist world is possible; that radical and revolutionary change can happen if the political will is there to be mobilized.

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