



The Future is Radically Open

Neil Smith¹

Introduction (By Don Mitchell)

The paper that follows – “The Future is Radically Open” – is the English script for the last presentation Neil Smith made – only a week before his death in late September 2012. The occasion for the presentation was the conference in Paris that Anne Clerval, Antoine Fleury, Julien Rebotier and Serge Weber describe in the short piece below. Neil was a keynote speaker. A French version of the paper has just been published,² but we thought there would be sufficient interest among non-French speaking scholars and activists that an English presentation in *ACME* was warranted. I have only lightly edited the paper (fixing occasional lapses of syntax, for example); the goal has been to retain its conference flavor. There are no citations (though many readers will recognize both his targets of critique and the sorts of critical interventions he is drawing on). As a relatively brief conference talk points are more often asserted than substantiated, but that is in part the paper’s value; it is a provocation.

“The future is radically open:” this was one of Neil’s key themes in the last years of his life.³ He was thrilled by the global uprisings – from the so-called Arab Spring to Occupy – that marked 2011. He sought at every turn to instill a sense of the possible – the possibility of radical change. Though neoliberalism remained dominant, it was now dead, bereft of ideas and a mere (but still powerful) husk. As he liked to say, ten or so years ago the future looked foreclosed, but capital’s implosion in beginning in 2007-2008 and the global uprisings that accompanied it



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² Neil Smith, “L’avenir est radicalement ouvert,” in Anne Clerval, Antoine Fleury, Julien Rebotier and Serge Weber (eds), *Espace et rapports de domination*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, (2015), 35-43.

³ It was the theme of his talk at Occupy Wall Street, as well as several other venues in 2011-2012. See, e.g.

<https://archive.org/details/NeilSmith-TheFutureIsRadicallyOpen>;

<http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/event/1219>; <http://ibis.geog.ubc.ca/~ewly/urban/awards.html>;

http://socialtextjournal.org/may_day_event_guide/. See also Joe Doherty, “Neil Smith, 1954-2012: ‘The Future is Indeed Radically Open’,” *Urban Geography* 34 (2013), 1-4.

opened up the *possibility* of a future: there now *were* alternatives. But these alternatives had not only to be seized, they had to be made.

Central in the making of the future was the struggle for ideas. Geographical or spatial theory mattered, and with the “urban revolution” in full swing, and with America’s empire (if not its military might) crumbling, it mattered more than ever. And here Neil’s optimism was tempered. It was tempered both by a realistic assessment of geopolitical and political-economic processes and the sheer power of the global capitalist class, the global political elite, and the global institutions they control, and by a critical assessment of the shifting structures of knowledge production. The neoliberal assault on the university, which Neil understood as both epoch-making and highly uneven, was only one structuring force encouraging a resurgent intellectual conservatism in geography (a conservatism often masked as radicalism). As Neil outlines at the beginning of “The Future is Radically Open,” universities in the UK have been particularly hard-hit, while, perhaps remarkably, those in the US have retained space for radical scholarship.

Neil always understood historical geography (the production of nature and space) and the history of geography (the production of spatial knowledge) to exist in a “tight dialectic,”⁴ and so he was always concerned to work both sides of this dialectic. The current paper is no exception. In my view, the early parts of “The Future is Radically Open” – where Neil seeks to suggest the pressures that have evacuated radical scholarship from much UK geography while preserving a place for it in US geography – is a bit rough; it’s overly telegraphic and won’t be very convincing to those who think, for example, that getting excited about “vibrating materialities” while taking the train to work or about how air is “elemental” (which will come as no surprise to physical geographers... or anyone who breathes) *is* radical.⁵ But once he gets going, linking the production of knowledge to the production of nature and space, entering a brief (literally) for the continued salience of scale, and productively critiquing Lefebvre – all in an effort to name a common project for radical geographers – the paper makes a remarkably wide ranging yet equally concise call for a new radical politics of geography (on both sides of the dialectic). This is the paper’s value.

The audience Neil was writing for and speaking to was a new generation of radical French scholars, fighting their own institutional battles, seeking to shift their own field’s trajectory. His goal that day in September, 2012, was to get folks to see that the future is radically open to the degree we understand the forces that have made the present and from within that present struggle to *make* a future. Twenty-five years ago Neil liked to quote Gramsci to students like me to the effect that one can only predict the future to the degree that she or he is central in the

⁴ See Neil Smith, “Uneven Development Redux,” *New Political Economy* 16 (2011), 261-265.

⁵ David Bissell, “Vibrating Materialities: Mobility-Body-Technology Relations,” *Area* 42 (2010), 479-486; Peter Adey, “Air’s Affinities: Geopolitics, Chemical Affect and the Force of the Elemental,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5 (2015), 54-75.

making of it. This is sensibility Neil never abandoned. The message of “The Future is Radically Open” is that neither should we. There is work to be done, and now is the time to do it.

Introduction continued (By Anne Clerval, Antoine Fleury, Julien Rebotier and Serge Weber)

In 2012, a symposium entitled « Space, social relations, and domination: gathering research initiatives in the making » (*Espace et rapports sociaux de domination: chantiers de recherche*) took place in Paris (Marne-la-Vallée). Radical theories and approaches have for some time been poorly acknowledged in France as a branch of geography, and they remain barely institutionalized. That is why French-speaking researchers working in this field were specially invited to be part of the event. The aim of the symposium was to provide them with an opportunity to meet and debate. For two days, the relations between space and domination were debated, both theoretically and methodologically. Space was considered an instrument of domination, through capital accumulation, but simultaneously as a lever providing opportunities for class solidarity, resistance, and emancipation. The symposium not only dealt with class relations, but also with gender oppression, racial discrimination, and other social hierarchies, identified as domination processes. From there, the participants discussed the ways in which those processes combine together in space.

Presently, French-speaking researchers are increasingly influenced by Anglo-American radical geography. Therefore, another goal of this symposium was to acknowledge this enriching influence and to encourage an emerging dialogue between Anglo radical geography and French research in geography. At the very beginning of the project, an informal meeting with Neil Smith in New York brought to the table the opportunity to gather both French-speaking and English-speaking radical geographers. He was enthusiastic and really supportive of the project as he worked on cities (and more specifically on gentrification) but also on uneven development in a capitalist context and on the role devoted to nature within this system. Besides, he was part of a small minority of researchers combining research and activist engagement. Today, his work appears to be a key reference for several of us. Neil Smith was very interested in renewing links between English-speaking and French-speaking academics. He also wanted to meet Yves Lacoste, a French researcher of geography and geopolitics who established the French geopolitical journal *Hérodote*⁶ – and he did it outside the symposium.

⁶ Leslie W. Hepple, “Yves Lacoste, *Hérodote* and French Radical Geopolitics,” in K. Dodds and D. Atkinson (eds.), *Geopolitical Traditions, A Century of Geopolitical Thought*, London: Routledge, (2000), 268-301.

The proceedings of the symposium have just been published⁷. They include Neil Smith's last article (translated to French) whose English version is now published by *ACME*. The aim of the book is to introduce a French-speaking point of view on space and domination processes. It is all the more important as English-speaking researchers dominate the academic world⁸. French-speaking researchers are obviously influenced by Anglo-American research but they also count on their own references and tradition, such as radical geopolitics, French Marxist sociology and geography and "social geography" (*géographie sociale*). The first part of the book aims to create a dialog between radical approaches from several countries (United-States, France, United Kingdom, and Italy). It includes Neil Smith's article. The other parts of the book shed light one after another on research topics and approaches related to the urban issue, gender, sex, sexuality and intersectionality studies, migration, migrants and marginality, and the environment. It presents a vivid account of the revival of French-speaking and radical research, while also advocating for giving more room to space in social and radical theory.

The Future is Radically Open (By Neil Smith)

Radical geography in the United States since the early 1970s has survived through a massive political downturn. Paradoxically, the US has become a place where radicals of various stripes can not only survive but actually thrive. Leftists from Spain to Sweden have told me that if they want their geography students to get a radical education – Marxist, feminist, socialist, anti-racist – they direct them to the US. How could that be? The United States?

In a strange way, the answer lies in American liberalism and the fundamental inspiration it provides for 20th century American Empire. A certain US exceptionalism indeed. But let us begin not in the US but in Europe. Take, for example, the British university system. Whereas in the 1970s, it was far less corporatist and bureaucratic than the US system, by the 1990s, the situation had entirely reversed. UK universities are now far more corporatist and bureaucratic than the vast number of US universities. How has this come about? There are many factors from finances to bureaucracy but the assault was largely coordinated from the 1990s by the infamous "Research Assessment Exercise" (RAE) and its new incarnation (the REF), currently being implemented.

The transformative power of the RAE lies in the fact that the university system is an almost exclusively state-centered system wherein universities are very heavily dependent on state grants. The RAE had the entirely intended effect of

⁷ Anne Clerval, Antoine Fleury, Julien Rebotier and Serge Weber (eds.), *Espace et rapports de domination*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes (2015). More information here: <http://www.pur-editions.fr/detail.php?idOuv=3765> (in French).

⁸ See for example: Manuel B. Aalbers, "Creative destruction through the Anglo-American hegemony: A non-Anglo-American view on publications, referees and language," *Area*, 36, (2004), 319-322; and Claudio Minca, "(Im)mobile Geographies," *Geographica Helvetica*, 68, (2013), 7-16, www.geogr-helv.net/68/7/2013/.

eliciting cut-throat competition between universities and created a corporatist frenzy; the RAE provided the metric — much like stock prices or profit indicators in the capitalist market. Obviously this dates back to Thatcher but the Blair Labour government operationalized Thatcherist ideas that she would never have been able to execute. The result is a highly centralized state-down system that has robbed the university of much of its previous power and has bureaucratically reorganized UK university education. From Spain to the Netherlands, parallel if quite different systems are being implemented, however unevenly. In terms of content, human geography in the UK has become culturalist as most previous radicals came to accept that "there is no alternative" or just got tired of the struggle. Frankly academics have backed away from politics, conveniently confusing politics with morality and/or ethics. I say this advisedly: I am from Scotland originally, got my first degree there, and have a part time position in the UK today. The neoliberal corporatization of academia is variously true in different other European systems.

The ironies in all of this are quite exceptional. Whereas the more replete European states (at least in Western Europe) organized superior national education systems in the postwar world, at least in the social sciences, that source of strength became a source of weakness. The neoliberal turn was able to capitalize on that strength and render it an opportunity for state power. By contrast, the US educational system is comprised of 50 quite independent state systems, multiple hundreds of independent private universities, and even more colleges. In my own university, there are 22 separate colleges (260,000 students) — just within New York City — and even inside that system the different colleges have considerable independence. One, for example, is a business school; another is a haven for radicals; and there is everything in between. Most are factories for a very diverse base of working class students, many immigrants. I recognize a certain paradox in the fact that as a Marxist I am somehow defending US liberalism, but it would simply be impossible to create the state-down political corporatization of academia that has taken place in much of Europe under the aegis of neoliberalism.

That provides context, but it means that in various US universities there are niches for radicals that have often been eradicated in European universities, especially the UK. From California to New York and many places in between, and north to south, there are groups and individuals teaching broadly radical ideas, effectively protected by the opaqueness of neoliberal state power. It should also be stressed that there is a certain uneven academic development. One geographer in 1970 declared political geography "moribund" and he was not wrong. This raises a second irony, namely that this particular geographer migrated from Britain, as did a highly disproportionate number of those who helped build radical geography in its various forms.

There is a larger history to this, of course. It has everything to do with the connection between geography and empire. European empires from at least the 18th century — earlier in many cases — into the 20th century, was about control over territory, putting geography at the center not just of imperial growth but of

national state consolidation: the dialectic of state and empire. By contrast, the rise of the US empire, which certainly started with some territorial conquests, took a very different path. The European conquest of what would become the US focused far more on geology, on the one hand, and anthropology on the other. The latter had everything to do with the extermination of Native Americans and a certain "rescue anthropology" in the face of that genocide; the native population was to be swept aside in large part, not managed. Geography was marginalized. To be sure, there were some relatively small scale territorial acquisitions around 1898-1904 (minor on a global scale, but devastating if you lived there – from the Philippines to Puerto Rico, Hawaii to Cuba), but the trajectory of US imperialism quickly took a different path. From the pre-war liberal Woodrow Wilson's administration forward, US imperialism was organized not so much through territorial control – the setting up of regional colonial administrations, etc. – but rather through the global market. Without question, military intervention remained not just intact but was building. Yet a European form of colonialism was shuffled aside in favour of an empire – not broadly colonial – organized through a growing US-led global economic power.

So what does this have to do with Geography? On the one hand, the knowledge of place became largely irrelevant, if power was organized through financial transactions. On the other, the discipline became largely irrelevant especially after World War II when on the global scale, geography split vey simplistically along binary Cold War fissures centred on geopolitics: the public geography of the period was extremely simplistic. The result was that the discipline really was backward, and had no basis in social theory.

But then things changed. In the 1960s, the urban uprisings especially sparked a whole new sense of spatial imagination. Change was inspired by the civil rights, feminist, socialist, anti-war, environmental, anti-racist, gay (LGBT) and other movements. Given the backwardness of geography from the past, and a certain refusal to examine its own history with any sophistication, the discipline literally had no immune system against radicalism. Yes there was Kropotkin and Reclus, anarchists both, but unlike sociology, for example, or anthropology, in the context of the US there was simply an absence of social theory. So when the movements of the 1960s swept in, the conservative mainstream had absolutely no defence. They simply did not understand.

So what does this mean about the present? This is where academic uneven development again kicks in. Sociology in the US, which had a significant radical history – much more than geography – has since become a far more conservative discipline, with many following the lead of rational choice theory borrowed from political science. Anthropology has also become more conservative, but much less so. While geography surely has its own conservatism, which has certainly been emboldened by the neoliberal turn, the radical wing has largely survived the neoliberal shift intact. There has even been a spread of radicals into positions of power, whether as department heads, board members of the main funding body, the

National Science Foundation, and even the council of Association of American Geographers. And radicalism within the discipline continues to reproduce new generations of radical students. The discipline is simultaneously powerful yet also in some ways under the radar. And so by the late 1990s, Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton could describe Geography as having become the "sexiest" discipline in academia.

None of this should be taken to suggest that radical geography in the US is immune from the broad right wing social and intellectual shifts associated with more than three decades of neoliberalism. The story of *Antipode* suggest this trajectory. As most of you will know, the radical journal *Antipode*, founded in 1969 at Clark University, began life as a very political project. It represents a US parallel to *Hérodote*, established few years later. In the case of *Antipode*, the work was entirely voluntary, drafting politically committed graduate students who typed up texts, copied them on an old time mimeo machine and compiled the eventual journal copies.

By 1985, however the journal become sufficiently successful and had expanded accordingly that a decision was made to hand over journal production to Blackwell Publishers, now part of the global publishing empire of Wiley-Blackwell Inc. In the intervening years, *Antipode* has become a respectable, almost establishment, journal, having lost much (but not all, by any means) of its rough radicalism. I say this not as blanket critique; it would be remarkable if such a venture remained isolated from broader social and political events. As a result a number of radicals in geography have established a wholly new radical journal entitled *Human Geography*. Ironically its founder and editor was one of the original editors of *Antipode* and by far its most enduring and influential one.

The question of isolation has another dimension. Unlike almost every other country, longstanding US anti-intellectualism ensures that with a few exceptions, press outlets prefer to bypass academics, preferring to have them stuck away in the universities.

Although so far I have narrated a history, perhaps a historical geography, I do so to provide a context but also a more analytical point. Social upheavals, revolts, economic and political crises, even intense social change lead to altered geographies. These are inevitably bound up with transformed material geographies which are themselves integral to our conceptual shifts concerning how we understand geography and the result is altered ways of thinking about geography. The preceding historical sketch sought to make exactly this point, but let me quickly provide several examples that help cement the point. My purpose is neither to condemn nor justify these shifts but to understand the triad linking social change with geographical change and further, with changes in geographical theory and concepts:

1. In the US in the 1960s, various urban uprisings led to intensified suburbanization, along class and race lines, changing the

geography of the suburbs, yet at the same time and intensifying the conditions that led to gentrification, thus changing the geography of the city landscape.

2. The rise of neoliberalism globally has altered the world's social geography insofar as global migration streams have fundamentally altered the racial and ethnic geography of places on all continents while at the same time provoking a resurgence of migration research.
3. The collapse of the USSR and allied Eastern European states has left a landscape of shrinking cities.
4. The environmental movement emerging from the 1960s and 1970, with a broad social uptake, has altered landscapes across the world, whether by reforestation or conservation via such mechanisms as debt-for-nature swaps, as in Costa Rica. Yet the cooption of that movement and the rise of corporate "greenwashing" after the 1970s has also created corporate opportunities and an expanded mining of nature, and to new ideologies of environmental change. The rise of the organic food industry has created a wholly new, multi-billion dollar, corporate sector in the economy. At the same time, environmental regulation in the Global North had the effect of sending toxic waste to the South, and this was actually the original source of Somali pirates who took over ships that were dumping toxic waste offshore and thereby poisoning and destroying fishing waters.
5. The liberalization of China after 1978 has not only transformed dramatically the urban landscape but rural landscapes too which are being rapidly urbanized while hemorrhaging people. It has also had a secondary effect on African geographies, not just because of intense mining and resource extraction but because of the mass migration of Chinese workers — more than a million mostly men — to specific regions in Central Africa.

I hope it will be useful if I move to an account of several current issues and debates taking place among radical geographers in the US. First, there is the question of a transforming urbanism. This question has many dimensions. If English-speaking geographers have, on many issues, been in the forefront of radical geography, when it comes to Henri Lefebvre they were followers rather than leaders. While Lefebvre's major work was largely digested in continental Europe and Latin America by 1980, it was more than a decade before US (and British) geographers paid serious attention to his work. It required translations into

English to initiate a fairly intense engagement by geographers (and others), an engagement that is still ongoing. Most significant for our present purposes, is the argument Lefebvre makes about the supersession of industrialism by urbanization. For many Marxists, this argument at first seemed to threaten the labour theory of value, but that would only be plausible if industrialization and urbanization are seen as dichotomous. One could read him that way but that would not show much recognition of his inherently dialectical approach, nor indeed much theoretical generosity.

Two examples suggest that Lefebvre was prescient in making this argument. First, there is the question of Chinese expansion. Although the focus has been on manufacturing and exports as the Chinese growth strategy, there is considerable data to suggest that construction – the building of entirely new geographies – actually accounts for a greater percentage of the Gross Domestic Product. In recent years, China has consumed half of the world's production of concrete. A second sign of Lefebvre's prescience came with the global economic crash after 2007. This crisis emanated not from the margins of global capitalism but from its heart, namely the United States and the sub-prime lending crisis. In other words the crisis was born at the nexus of real estate construction and finance capital at the core of global capitalism.

Lefebvre was also the inspiration behind the "Right to the City" movement (RTTC). It is an international movement with varied composition in different contexts, but in the US it comprises a loose coalition of anti-gentrification, housing, and community organizations, and has involved a number of radical geographers. It is not huge – 43 member organizations in 13 cities in the US – yet it does represent a fuller engagement between movement activists and academics – a number of geographers fit both categories – than in any other movement in recent years. The debates have focused especially on the meaning of rights and a questioning of a certain liberal individualism that perhaps inevitably lurks within "rights" claims and claims for justice. Is it possible to retain the language of rights and justice while struggling for the overthrow of capitalism? If so how?

A second arena of debate is also focused at the urban scale, but it seeks to combine an urban politics with an environmental politics. Borrowing from a recently established political ecology tradition and combining it with a longer urban geography tradition, an emerging urban ecology oeuvre is much more academic than RTTC but is at the same time tied into community activism around issues ranging from urban food production to anti-development politics. Lefebvre figures here too, but in a less positive light. Whereas his insight about the production of space represented a brilliant breakdown of the dichotomy between society and space, for Lefebvre capitalism has effectively murdered nature. The dichotomy between society and nature remains intact. A necessary critique of Lefebvre, together with a reading of Marx, has led to a broader theoretical exploration of "the production of nature," and "urban ecology" represents, among

other things, an effort to bring such the abstraction “production of nature” down to earth.

The debates concerning urban ecology in some ways mirror those around RTTC. There is little question about radical the roots of urban ecology; like RTTC it was an effort to "take back the city." And the goal of providing ecological environments for poor and working class urban residents is surely admirable. But there is an easy slippage from that goal toward an advisory role in establishment urban planning projects, development policies, and corporate development projects. Thus there is increasingly a discussion both in activist circles and in the geography literature of what is variously called "environmental gentrification" or "green gentrification." Urban ecology projects – whether the greening of waterfronts or the making of new parks or restoration of old ones – inevitably raise ground rents in surrounding areas and therefore housing costs and become a magnet for new development and wealthier populations.

A third set of debates are more academic and they concern the importance of geographical scale. For Lefebvre the socialist goal resulting from his analysis of the production of space comprises a construction of "differential space." But as with all Lefebvre's formulations, what this actually means is rather opaque. The importance of geographical scale is that the differentiation of social space, broadly conceived, is organized via scalar differentiation. Scale is not the equivalent to geographical difference, rather it is a metric that organizes social difference spatially. In the postwar world, we can see the urban scale as the scale of social reproduction, and indeed this is how it was treated in radical urban geographical theory; the borders of the city are largely determined by the limits to the journey to work. (Obviously this does not imply that no production happens in cities). The regional scale, by contrast could be considered in that era as the scale of production. Complexes of suppliers, ancillary functions and final production involve the building of networks, which in turn craft specific regions. The US Midwest was a coherent region precisely because it was organized around a regionalization of steel and car production; one could make a parallel argument for the Ruhr and many other regions. The global scale was much more the scale of finance capital.

Now this is a very simple and abstract argument but in historical context it has some value. The problem is that economic shifts and political challenges can fundamentally challenge any scalar organization en route to creating whole new patterns of spatial differentiation. And indeed, globalization in the last three decades renders the foregoing scheme largely an historical artifact. To take just one obvious example, production – at least large scale production – is no longer organized at the regional scale but at the global scale. Perhaps reflecting this shift, current debate around scale comes largely from critiques emanating from post-structuralist and autonomist theory. The view of scale just presented has been labeled in such critiques as "vertical," although that itself is debatable. The post-structuralist critique seems to abolish any concept of scale in favour of what

the critics want to call a horizontal space, abolishing any social and political difference, creating, effectively, a flat earth. Power differences are abolished in an act of wishful thinking.

Let me conclude with a broader discussion of the fate of neoliberalism. In the first place, I would argue that the US has suffered the most dramatic loss of legitimacy and political power (manifestly it retains unprecedented military power) around the world. There is also a lesser loss of economic power. In 2001 the "Washington Consensus" was at its peak, and Frances Fukuyama had long since declared "the end of history." Today, the Washington Consensus has vanished without trace, and a few months ago Fukuyama came out with a new declaration, "the beginning of history." Whereas after September 2001 when both French and German leaders declared "We are all Americans now," by the time of the uprisings in North Africa ten years later the US State Department not only had no inkling that such revolts were coming but they were entirely isolated from influence in the region once the leaders they supported were ousted.

This is related to the fate of neo-liberalism. At its peak neoliberal ideologies and practices had captured all but a handful of economies including nominally socialist regimes from Brazil to Britain to China. I want to argue, borrowing a phrase from Jürgen Habermas, that neoliberalism is dead but dominant. The signs of its death come in various forms: the so-called Asian economic crisis from 1997 onward which provoked erstwhile supporters to disavow neo-liberalism; the anti-globalization movement and World Social Forum which, contra Margaret Thatcher showed there *is* an alternative; ongoing challenges from various Latin American movements including the Zapatistas; the European anti-austerity revolts; the global economic crisis following 2007; then of course the revolts in North Africa and South-Western Asia; and even the Occupy movement which, while coming initially from the US, and obviously a much smaller if highly symbolic movement, went global. All of these events have gutted neoliberalism, which no longer has any new ideas or forward momentum. Yet it remains dominant insofar as there is not yet any serious global scale challenge.

By way of conclusion, I would only say that unlike a decade ago, we are in a moment when the future is radically open. It is unclear what could emerge in the ashes of neoliberalism, and when that might happen. The iron logic of neoliberalism is seriously compromised, which apart from anything else, opens the door for much more political determination of what any new regime, capitalist or otherwise, looks like. We can be sure however that whatever new regime eventuates, it will be bound up with the production of new geographies and that a struggle over the production of new geographies is integrally a political struggle.

September 2012