# Rose Street and Revolution: A Tribute to Neil Smith (1954-2012)


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**Figure 1. Neil Smith, Kvillebäcken, Sweden, 2010 (Photo: T. Slater)**

I took the picture of Neil in Sweden in October 2010 (Fig. 1). We were there for a conference, preceded by a fascinating walking tour of the gentrifying Gothenburg

district of Kvillebäcken led by Catharina Thörn, a wonderful sociologist/activist who has been researching the class struggles there since they began. Behind Neil is a Kvillebäcken rent gap. Neil's delightful engagement with all the people we met during our stay in Gothenburg, and his masterful plenary lecture, are memories I will treasure.

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Neil Smith was – and always will be — a magnificent intellectual giant of geography, urban studies and social science. He was a tremendously warm, unassuming, funny and mischievous person, who gave generously of his time and brilliance to nurture and encourage emerging scholars, most of whom were simply in awe of his intellect (and many remained so long after they became established scholars themselves). So many people I know have devoted their lives to geographical/urban scholarship and activism because Neil's writings - passionate, honest, pure and truly beautiful – opened their eyes to new ways of interpreting the world, and more importantly, helped them think about how to change it. He was that good. His speaking performances were always completely inspirational - electrifying, exhilarating, energising. His death, far too young, is a terrible loss for all those committed to a more peaceful, humane, socially just world – to the possibility of *another* world. This wonderful role model for politically committed scholars is gone, but comfort and continued inspiration can always be found in his writings, and in the memories of all who knew him. I hope that this tribute in the form of some analytical and personal reflections (particularly with respect to his foundational work on gentrification) might make people smile and feel joy and hope amidst the awful and sudden pain of speaking about this great man in the past tense.

Neil was born in Leith, Scotland, but spent most of his childhood in Dalkeith, a small working class town south-east of Edinburgh. When I moved to my current post at the University of Edinburgh in 2008, Neil sent me an encouraging note I will always treasure, signing off with "Have fun in my backyard!" On the few occasions we met in person following my move to Scotland, he would always ask about the landscapes of his childhood. One time we got talking about where I live in East Lothian, a county just to the east of Edinburgh, and when I reeled off a few placenames he hadn't heard for a while it brought tears to his eyes. Neil simply loved the physical geography of his backyard. In his teens he became fascinated in the sharp contrasts and divisions in this landscape - the classic 'crag and tail' of Edinburgh Castle and Royal Mile, the extinct volcano of Arthur's Seat, the changing moods of the Firth of Forth ("a magical stretch of water", Neil called it), the sand hills of Luffness and Gullane, the striking basalt plugs of North Berwick Law and the Bass Rock. In the early 1970s, he chose to study geography at the University of St. Andrews to nurture and develop this interest. This is not to say that his childhood was devoid of an exposure to human geographical concerns and

politics – far from it – but it was these contrasts and divisions in the physical landscape that he found so compelling. Armed with a natural flair for mathematics, Neil was on track to become a glacial geomorphologist, and made no secret of this in a delightful interview for the AAG's "Geographers on Film" series.

Neil found himself part of an exceptional cohort of human geography students at St. Andrews (among them Charlie Withers and Malcolm Forbes), and there encountered a dynamic young lecturer named Joe Doherty. Whilst Neil was always a radical, it was Joe who proved instrumental in opening Neil's eyes to the radical potential of human geographical inquiry, particularly with respect to the study of cities. As he documents so vividly in the Preface to his book *The New Urban Frontier* (Smith, 1996), it was Joe's "gentle and patient guidance" that gentrification was something he could "get his teeth into" which diverted Neil from a career as a "pastoral geographer" (at one point Neil was seriously considering studying the diffusion of silage technologies in the US Midwest!) (p.xx). At a wonderful conference in Berlin in 2008 honouring the life and work of Peter Marcuse, Neil told me that Joe (who recently retired after remaining at St Andrews for his entire career) was an extraordinary mentor and teacher, a very special person in his life to whom he always felt deeply indebted.

It was as an undergraduate, on a year's exchange from St. Andrews to Philadelphia, that something very special happened to this young Scot with a wild mop of curly red hair (the redness faded, but he never lost his accent). Neil retained his fascination in sharp contrasts and divisions in landscapes, but after observing the contrasts and divisions within Philadelphia's Center City he realised that *social* forces carve up that city with the same awesome power and precision as the physical forces that carved the backyard of his youth. Just as in glacial environments one can identify the physical forces that have scratched and sculpted rocks and valleys, in urban environments one can detect the forces of politics, class struggle and flows of capital etched onto buildings and streets. His remarkable undergraduate dissertation, refined and distilled into a punchy paper published in Antipode in 1978 entitled "Gentrification and Capital: Practice and Ideology in Society Hill" (Smith, 1978), tracked those forces via an investigation of the process of gentrification in the Philadelphia neighbourhood of Society Hill. The divisions in this city provided Neil with a compelling and tempting portal into human geographical inquiry, with Marx and Engels as his theoretical guides.

Society Hill was not, however, the first place where Neil saw gentrification. That had occurred several years earlier, recounted in *The New Urban Frontier*:

"In retrospect I suppose I first saw gentrification in 1972 while working for the summer in an insurance office in Rose Street in Edinburgh. Every morning I took the 79 bus in from Dalkeith and walked half the length of Rose Street to the office. Rose Street is a back street off majestic Princes Street and long had a

reputation as nightspot with some long-established traditional pubs and a lot of more dingy howffs — watering holes — and even a couple of brothels, although these were rumored to have decamped to Danube Street by the early 1970s. It was *the* place in Edinburgh for a pub crawl. My office was above a new bar called "The Galloping Major" which had none of the cheesy decor or sawdust on the floor of the old-time bars. This one was new. It served quite appetizing lunches adorned with salad, still a novelty in most Scottish pubs at the time. And I began to notice after a few days that a number of other bars had been "modernized"; there were a couple of new restaurants, too expensive for me — not that I went to restaurants much in any case. And narrow Rose Street was always clogged with construction traffic as some of the upper floors were renovated. I didn't think much of this at the time, and only several years later in Philadelphia, by which time I had picked up a little urban theory as a geography undergraduate, did I begin to recognize what I was seeing as not only a pattern but a dramatic one. All the urban theory I knew — which wasn't much, to be sure — told me that this "gentrification" wasn't supposed to be happening. Yet here it was — in Philadelphia *and* Edinburgh. What was going on?" (p.xviii)

*The Galloping Major* is long gone, but every year now I take my undergraduates to 119 Rose Street, the birthplace of critical gentrification inquiry. Neil walked me to the spot a few years ago — a profound moment in my life - and told me Billy Connolly's joke about Rose St: "That's why they call it Rose Street. There's rows and rows o' pubs!" Just as Joe Doherty had saved Neil from pastoral geography, *The Galloping Major* saved him from a life of insurance statistics — I seem to remember he remarked that "gentrification beats accrual tables any day". Sadly I didn't have my camera with me when Neil took me there, but Figure 2 is a photo of what it looks like today (*The Galloping Major* was in the spot now occupied by *Murdo Macleans*, a hair salon).

The "little bit of urban theory" Neil picked up as an undergraduate was dominated by the legacy of the social and spatial theories of the 'Chicago School' of sociology, infused with the methods and assumptions of neoclassical economics. This body of work was *inter alia* an attempt to account for why certain population categories lived in certain districts of the city, and it laid the foundation for ideas of spatial equilibrium and economic competition that were used to develop neoclassical models of urban land use in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Neil was very suspicious of these massively influential models, not just because they showed "half of the ideal city…submerged under Lake Michigan" (Smith, 1992, p.110), but because they were linked to a portrayal of the suburbanization of middle-class and wealthy households as the driving force of urban growth and overall metropolitan housing market dynamics. The *consumer sovereignty* paradigm undergirding those models was that the 'rational choices' of individual consumers of land and housing dictated the morphology of cities. Middle-class consumer demand for space apparently 'explained' suburbanisation, and this was seen by many scholars to be

the future of all urban places. But the empirical reality of Society Hill – gentrification, a process that had also been observed in a few other large Western cities (including London, where the term was coined in 1964) – seemed to call this paradigm into question. Neil 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 (he once captured the absurdity of this view for me in person when he joked: "Can I please have the phone number of the middle-class household that ordered the London Docklands? I want their power!"). Crucially, in Society Hill he unearthed data showing that not all middle class people in Philadelphia were suburbanizing, as *space was being produced for them* via state-sponsored private sector development, producing handsome profits for developers and agents of capital at the expense of working-class people who were displaced from central city space. Neil argued in that *Antipode* paper of 1978 that the latter day followers of the Chicago School created an "empiricist and ecological quagmire in which substantive theory nearly drowned" (p.24). In the next sentence, typical of his delightful writing style, he went on to note that "With the help of breathing equipment from various Marxist sources, resuscitation is well under way." (ibid.)


**Figure 2. Present-day Rose Street, Edinburgh (Photo: T. Slater)**

This 'breathing equipment' resulted in what is surely the most important essay on gentrification ever written, entitled "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People" (Smith, 1979). When my collaborator Loretta Lees asked Neil to reflect on this essay for a book we edited

(with Elvin Wyly) entitled *The Gentrification Reader* (Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2010), Neil produced an enthralling commentary in which he said that the main challenge "was integrating a sense of historical spatiality into an already existing body of theory which, itself, seemed space-blind." (p.97) In "Toward a Theory..." he explained that in capitalist property markets, the decisive "consumer preference" (with characteristic mischief he adopted the neoclassical language!) is "the preference for profit, or, more accurately, a sound financial investment." (Smith, 1979, p.540) As disinvestment in a particular district intensifies, as had happened in Society Hill, it creates lucrative profit opportunities for developers, investors, homebuyers and local government. If we want to understand cities, Neil argued, it is much more important to track flows of capital rather than flows of people.

Crucial to this perspective is the ever-fluctuating phenomenon of *ground rent*: simply the charge that landowners are able to demand (via private property rights) from users of their land, usually received as a stream of payments from tenants (but also via any asset appreciation captured at resale). With each passing year, there is likely to be an increasing divergence between *capitalized ground rent* (the actual rent captured with the present land use) and *potential ground rent* (the maximum that could be appropriated based on the 'highest and best use'). This is what he called the *rent gap*:

> Once the rent gap is wide enough, gentrification may be initiated in a given neighbourhood by several different actors in the land and housing market. And here we come back to the relationship between production and consumption, for the empirical evidence suggests strongly that the process is initiated not by the exercise of those individual consumer preferences much beloved of neoclassical economists, but by some form of collective social action at the neighbourhood level. (p.545)

Every year I teach undergraduates about the rent gap, and show slides of Neil's basic diagrams and tables included in the famous article, along with a few photos of rent gaps, such as the one in Figure 3, snapped in Istanbul by one of my former students, Raphael Brookes.

But in teaching the rent gap I always try to emphasise what motivated Neil to come up with a convincing explanation for gentrification. The flight of capital away from certain areas of the city – depreciation and disinvestment – has devastating implications for people living at the bottom of the urban class structure. Landlords in poorer central city neighbourhoods are often holding investments in buildings that represented what economists and urban planners call the 'highest and best use' over a century ago; spending money to maintain these assets as low-cost rental units becomes ever more difficult to justify with each passing year, since the investments will be difficult to recover from low-income tenants. It becomes rational and logical for landlords to "milk" the property, extracting rent from the

tenants yet spending the absolute minimum to maintain the structure. With the passage of time, the deferred maintenance becomes apparent: people with the money to do so will leave a neighbourhood, and financial institutions "redline" the neighbourhood as too risky to make loans. Physical decline accelerates, and moderate-income residents and businesses moving away are replaced by successively poorer tenants who move in - they cannot access housing anywhere else. The lack of maintenance expenditure leads to tough housing conditions for those poorer tenants, amidst myriad other consequences of capital disinvestment such as high unemployment, poor schools, inadequate retail services, dismal health outcomes, and so on. I'm pretty sure that Neil never wanted the rent gap to be about abstract lines and curves on a graph, or reduced to theoretical squabbles in journals. The rent gap is fundamentally about class struggle, about the structural violence visited upon so many working class people in contexts these days that are usually described as 'regenerating' or 'revitalizing'. Furthermore, identifying rent gaps and identifying those institutions capturing profits from them opens up vital questions about strategies of resistance and revolt.


**Figure 3. Rent Gap in Istanbul (Photo: R. Brookes)**

"Toward a Theory…" is as provocative and convincing today as it was when it first appeared. Reading it is an exhilarating and transformative experience. It is astonishing to think it was largely based on undergraduate dissertation research, and written up by a graduate student in his early twenties! My friend Eric Clark, who went on to write the definitive work on the history, theoretical roots,

and empirical expression of rent gaps (Clark, 1987), recalls reading it in a university library not long after it was published and saying out loud "YES! This completely makes sense!" The paper completely changed his professional life (and countless others too). Without it, we would not understand gentrification like we do, or have such a clear set of critical analytic optics through which to interpret and challenge cycles of investment and disinvestment in cities. It's equally fascinating to note where the paper appeared – the very mainstream Journal of the American Planning Association, in a special issue on neighbourhood "revitalization" (a term that understandably made Neil wince – he always argued that working class neighbourhoods are culturally *devitalized* by gentrification). In an excellent discussion of the rent gap in the book Gentrification (Lees, Slater & Wyly, 2008), Elvin Wyly noted the etymology of the word 'gap' – from the Old Norse for 'chasm', denoting a breach or wall or fence, a breach in defences, a break in continuity, or wide difference in ideas or views. He continued:

> The rent gap is part of an assault to breach the defensive wall of mainstream urban studies, by challenging the assumption that urban landscapes can be explained in large part as the result of consumer preferences, and the notion that neighbourhood change can be understood in terms of who moves in and who moves out. Scholars, therefore, take its implications very seriously. (p.55)

It's hardly surprising that the rent gap thesis has been the subject of intense debate for over thirty years, but it was typical of Neil's unassuming nature that he did not think at the time that anyone would pay his paper any attention:

> I thought I was doing the usual journeyman graduate student work of taking on my betters. I was confirmed in this judgement when my advisor [David Harvey] let the paper languish for months and months on his desk, water leaking on it from the unfixed ceiling, and especially when he finally delivered the assessment that no-one would ever publish it because my efforts at theory were much too simple and definitely obvious. I had already corrected the journal's proofs." (quoted in Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2010, p.97)

But along with its critical edge, it is precisely that very simplicity of the rent gap thesis that makes it so utterly compelling. For instance, David Ley, one of the most astute critics of the thesis, has referred to its "ingenious simplicity." (Ley, 1996, p.42) As I see it, the rent gap thesis is acutely relevant today, at a time when neoclassical assumptions have been revitalized and appropriated by the political triumphs of neoliberalism. It is a critically important challenge for contemporary urban scholarship to identify precisely where developers, owners of capital and policy elites are stalking potential ground rent; to expose the ways in which profitable returns are justified among themselves and to the wider public; to raise

legitimate and serious concerns about the fate of those not seen to be putting urban land to its 'highest and best use'; to point to the darkly troubling downsides of reinvestment in the name of 'economic growth' and 'job creation'; to examine the possibilities for concerted resistance; and to reinstate the use values (actual or potential) of the land, streets, buildings, homes, parks and centres that constitute an urban community. These concerns were at the core of Neil's inseparably intellectual and political project.

After graduating from St. Andrews, Neil moved to Baltimore in the late 1970s to pursue doctoral studies under David Harvey at Johns Hopkins University. He was fortunate to arrive there at a time of great excitement for human geography and urban studies. Harvey's Social Justice and the City (1973) and its deep engagement with Marx and Marxist thought had galvanised a generation, opening up completely new ways of interpreting the structure and function of urban places, reorienting the entire discipline of human geography away from positivist spatial science towards more normative concerns about what cities might look like if profit-seeking as a direct and socially accepted goal were to be replaced by a "genuinely humanizing urbanism". It's impossible to understand Neil Smith's writings without being aware of these revolutionary changes in geographic thought, of which he was both student and invaluable teacher. Neil's PhD thesis became his masterbook, Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space (Smith, 1984), one of the very great geographical monographs of the 20th century. I cannot do justice to it here – that it is now in its 3rd edition and still enjoys healthy rates of citation across several disciplines speaks volumes of its colossal influence.

Neil and his PhD advisor added a geographical, spatial dimension to something that had fascinated Marx – the powerful contradictions of capital investment and accumulation. Investments are required to create the places that must exist in order for profits to be made - offices, factories, shops, homes, and all the rest of the infrastructure that constitutes a city. Yet once these investments are committed to a certain place, capital cannot be quickly or easily shifted to newer, more profitable opportunities elsewhere. This is because capitalists are always forced to choose between investing to maintain the viability of previous capital commitments (or exploiting new opportunities), and neglecting or abandoning the old. Therefore 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 a dynamic "see-saw" of investment and disinvestment over time and across space, in an ongoing process of *uneven geographical development*:

> The logic behind uneven development is that the development of one area creates barriers to further development, thus leading to

> underdevelopment, and that the underdevelopment of that area creates opportunities for a new phase of development. Geographically this leads to the possibility of what we might call a "locational seesaw": the successive development, under-development, and redevelopment of given areas as capital jumps from one place to another, then back again, both creating and destroying its own opportunities for development." (Smith, 1982, p.151)

These words are taken from another masterful Neil Smith paper entitled "Gentrification and Uneven Development". That essay is also notable for the theoretical insights it draws from Friedrich Engels' prescient 1872 pamphlet *The Housing Question*, which noted that under the capitalist mode of production "scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else and often in the immediate neighborhood." Anders Lund Hansen, Henrik Larsen, Gordon MacLeod and myself all encountered Engels' fascinating pamphlet via Neil's 1982 essay, and we organised sessions revisiting the pamphlet at the 2012 AAG meeting in New York City. We were delighted when Neil agreed to be on the panel which concluded the sessions (his typically dynamic performance can be viewed here: http://vimeo.com/38981359)

Neil retained an interest in gentrification throughout his career, producing over 45 original articles and two books on the topic. Most of his foundational ideas appear in his 1996 book *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, in which he identified a striking similarity between the political climates of late 19th century Paris and late 20th century New York City. Revanchists (from the French word *revanche*, meaning revenge) were a group of bourgeois nationalist reactionaries opposed to the liberalism of the Second Republic, the decadence of the monarchy, and especially the socialist uprising of the Paris Commune, where the working-classes took over from the defeated government of Napolean III and controlled the city for months. 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 (the Communards) 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, Neil 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 the disturbing urban condition created by 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, gays and lesbians,

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 gays and homeless people, aggressive policing techniques, feminist-bashing and public campaigns against political correctness and multiculturalism. 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. Having witnessed the Tompkins Square Park class struggles of 1988-9, Neil argued that gentrification was the leading edge of a state strategy of revenge — an attempt to retake the city from the working class.

*The New Urban Frontier,* just like pretty much all Neil's work, was hugely influential, inspiring inquiries into revanchism all over the world. It is tremendously gripping and urgent scholarship — I remember reading it as an undergraduate not long after it was published and rising from my seat in excitement! I loved the elegance of the prose, admired the fierce quarrying of raw and secondary material, and felt deeply the author's seething anger at what was happening to the poorest residents of the city where he lived. The arguments in the book always inspire debate and critical engagement among my students, which is usually a marker of stellar scholarship and original, potent ideas. Neil's later work on gentrification was always concerned (and in tune) with how the process was changing from its 1960s and 70s "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 La Révolution Urbaine (e.g. Smith, 2002). Reflecting upon his encounters during his frequent travels and speaking engagements, he wrote a few years ago about how we are witnessing the dawn of a "revanchist planet", a new class struggle fuelled by a 'dead but dominant' neoliberal ideology. Given the 2008 financial crisis, the grotesque waves of foreclosures and evictions, the recent emergence of dismal austerity measures and their cumulative effects on cities, the 2011 'Arab Spring' and Occupy uprisings, it's understandable that Neil was thinking even more deeply about revolution in the years and months before his death. He was a very courageous thinker and activist, who in contrast to many (ex)socialists of his generation never, ever gave up hope that another, post-capitalist world is possible, that change can happen if the political will is there to be mobilized.

I want to close with a few personal reflections. I first met Neil almost exactly 10 years ago (late September 2002), at a conference on gentrification in Glasgow, around the time I was finishing my PhD. My friend Winifred Curran kindly introduced me to him, and such was the influence of this formidable intellectual on my work that I was shaking like a leaf (I had no idea what to expect and I didn't want to embarrass myself!). I probably had a thousand questions for

him, but at the time I wanted to know more about the links between revanchism and gentrification. In a pub just a few doors down from the conference venue, he spoke to me with poignant eloquence about what New York had become, about the activists and social movements in Harlem with which he had genuine connections, and the structural roots of revenge against the poor — and how they connected to rent gaps, uneven development, and Engels. It was utterly captivating — a few minutes into the conversation I had forgotten my nervousness at meeting him because of his warmth and charismatic brilliance. He had this incredible ability to draw people into his unique way of understanding the world, to the point where academic reputations and gravitas were totally irrelevant. It was politics and ideas that mattered.

After that first meeting we kept in touch over e-mail — he would always respond, which was impressive for a world-renowned scholar with so many competing demands on his time — and we crossed paths about once a year after that. My first post in academia was at the University of Bristol, where I spent over five unhappy years. Neil was a regular source of solace and encouragement, even when we were not directly communicating. In the department where I worked there was a particularly horrifying workload system where each member of staff had to account for every hour of their working year on an Excel spreadsheet. When I began to see how the spurious data were being used (people were allocated extra duties if those hours did not add up to 100%, which, of course, nobody's total did), I stuck Neil's 2000 *Antipode* article "Who Rules This Sausage Factory?" (Smith, 2000) on my office door, where it remained for a few weeks, becoming heavily thumbed and creased until it was paid the ultimate political compliment of being removed. Neil was deeply concerned and dismayed about the wholesale political restructuring of the institutional framework of academia in Britain, and lamented the defensive rationalization of this restructuring among British social scientists who once demonstrated political commitments to the left. He wrote a beautiful short piece for *Social Text Online* in 2010 entitled Academic Free Fall, (Smith, 2010) where he rightly attributed much of the "utter deflation and flattening of the British academic landscape" to the damaging effects of institutional audit (the RAE and its chip-off-the-old-block offspring, the REF). An earlier spat (in both *Antipode* and *Transactions of the IBG*) with Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin about the state of the left in British geography proved divisive for many, but my own view is that it was wonderful to have a voice as powerful and influential as Neil's say things about the RAE that simply could not be committed to print by UK-based scholars worried about any institutional and workplace consequences. Neil always kept in mind that critical geographical inquiry had revolutionary potential, and he hated to see 'ostrich politics' get in the way of serious thought and debate on strategies of urban revolt against the workings of contemporary capitalism.

The last time I saw Neil in person was at the abovementioned AAG meeting in New York. Late in the evening, after the Engels sessions, it seemed as if the entire delegation at the conference descended upon the ACE bar on the Lower East

Side. Neil was there, towards the back of the room, apparently mobbed by graduate students, and definitely loving whatever dialogue was taking place - a regular sight at AAG meetings. We communicated via e-mail a few times after that, and I always looked forward to hearing from him. It was an immense privilege to know this remarkable man. On the day I heard he was gravely ill, Neil's backyard was bathed in the most stunning autumn light. Neil would have loved seeing the pink-footed geese flying in formation over Aberlady Bay (on their journey from Iceland to West Africa), the crystal clear views over the Firth of Forth to Fife, the recently harvested golden fields. That volcanic and glacial landscape that inspired this great man to become a geographer will always be there, and it will always have that special connection to one of the most brilliant geographers we have seen. So many people I know have wonderful "Neil stories", and my personal favourite is a short e-mail he sent to me in February 2006 after I sent him a draft of a paper I wrote called "The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research". His e-mail contains many lessons for life, scholarship and activism: "Comrade: send it off NOW. Always follow your own instinct, guts, politics. Say what you feel and what you can defend. Go get 'em!!".

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