It has been a month since Neil’s passing. I was set to return from Toronto to New York today to meet with his people and to tend to his plants. This is a familiar trip—one he and I took many times over the course of our years together. But as I write, my flight has already been canceled and rescheduled three times because of hurricane Sandy. The storm wreaked havoc on many people and places in its path. It also makes the loss of Neil’s voice painfully acute. Today, an article of his circulates widely online that helps many make sense of the social life of ‘natural’ disasters. Writing in the immediate aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Neil (Smith, 2006) insisted on the politics of catastrophic events. He asked us to resist the ways in which the insertion of ‘natural’ before ‘disaster’ served to naturalize the organized violence of uneven development, uneven preparedness, and uneven emergency response.
Conclusion

Neil concludes his article from 1992 on a hopeful note: “a politics of scale can also become a weapon of expansion and inclusion, a means of enlarging identities.” At each scale he asked: what makes things cohere and what makes them fall apart? What allows each scale to criss-cross with others, and what is possible to do or to think when we “jump scales”? It is clear to his students—and no doubt to many others for whom he was a source of intellectual, political, and everyday vitality—that Neil lived life on multiple scales, with coherence as well as its dialectical other.

We’ve collected these moments from a reservoir of many happy and inspirational memories from our time with Neil—in the seminars he taught, the spry conversations we had, the scenes of community and care we shared—in which he generously gave himself and found himself. It is clear that Neil’s influence and his resolve will endure in many new scales and spaces of possibility. He expanded, included, and enlarged so many of the minds and hearts he touched. Therewithin, and indeed at every scale, Neil Smith lives on.

Nick Bacon, Matthew Bissen, Marnie Brady, Zoltán Glück, Malav Kanuga, Steve McFarland, Jessica Miller, Elizabeth Sibilia, Erin Siodmak, Laurel Mei Turbin(1)

Globalization and empire

Neil’s profound contribution to political geography is encapsulated in two books differing in style but unified in argument. American Empire (Smith, 2003) is, among very many other things, a brilliant and scholarly intellectual biography of Isaiah Bowman, a geographer and public intellectual deeply implicated in the elaboration of US foreign policy for three decades, beginning in 1917 with his recruitment to the committee charged with devising the US negotiating position for the international settlement following World War I. The Endgame of Globalization (Smith, 2005) is an altogether more urgent and polemical work, responding to the so-called Global War on Terror and the associated US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Both books by turn scold and explain the liberal ideologies of globalization.

Both books explicate a related set of contrasts that are presented both as structural contradictions and as historical transitions. When Lenin (1952 [1917]) wrote of the New Imperialism of the early 20th century, he understood it as the consequences of a change in the character of capitalism. In this new monopoly phase, he suggested, giant corporations organized by powerful banks goaded imperialist countries to fight for privileged access to markets and resources. For Neil this distinction between an earlier territorial colonialism and a later economic imperialism was also a transition from a global order of absolute space to one organized as relative space. Yet it was also a structural contradiction; for even as, for example, the US planned for the relative space of global economic ambition, it found, as Neil explained in American Empire in a riveting account of the House Committee and the Versailles Peace Conference, that this required it to engage in the design of absolute space hoping to form stable countries out of localized ethnicities, and forging alliances and dependencies to serve the territorial aim of strategically containing its great rivals, Germany and the Soviet Union. In Endgame this same contrast is presented again both as a transition—in this case from the relative space of economic neoliberalism to the absolute space of chauvinistic neoconservatism—and as a structural contradiction between the market spaces that concern Wall Street (with its servants in the Democratic Party) and the territorial imperative of the search for oil that animates the energy companies (and its servants in the Republican Party). In Endgame Neil insisted upon the fundamental continuity rather than apparent novelty represented by the neoconservative adventure in Iraq and argued that economic globalization and militaristic empire share liberal roots.

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The contradictions, nay the hypocrisies, of liberalism are a recurring theme in Neil’s
gopolitical studies: universals in rhetoric serve national and racial exception in practice.

Bowman was an exemplar. At one time the president of Johns Hopkins University, where
Neil later studied for his doctorate, Bowman fondly appealed to the authority of objective
science while besmirching social science as dubious because communist, bemoaning the
presence at his own university of too many Jewish academics, and resolutely refusing to
consider the admission of black students or faculty. Countering the democratic ambitions of
Albert Einstein, Bowman was instrumental in limiting public accountability and promoting
corporate influence within the National Science Council. Responding to his own homophobia,
Bowman was relaxed about the demise of Geography at Harvard where the sexuality of its
primary professor, Derwent Whittlesey, was disgracefully made a matter of public con
clusion; and when Owen Lattimore was vilified by the anticommunist bigots associated with the
House Un-American Activities Committee, Bowman promptly ended their long friendship.
The contradiction is more than personal. In a splendid dissection of Bowman’s (1921) most
significant academic work, The New World, Neil contrasts the universalism of its claim to
be a purely objective account of global economic and political geography to the insistent
chauvinism of its master narrative: that everywhere undemocratic European colonialism was
ceding position to a US influence equally designed to manage the affairs of backward peoples
unable to be trusted with the direction of their own affairs. Bowman later proposed an openly
racist constitution for the United Nations.

As Neil delights in showing in Endgame, the nationalist inflection of globalization continues
to the present. Although they speak ‘cosmopolitan’, US liberals are all too keen to insist upon
and practice US exceptionalism. Their American Empire announces itself as a crusade to
bring democracy to the downtrodden, but those most in need of liberation seem also to live
in places where the consolidation of Islamic states limits US influence or where economic autarky
secures local resources for local use. Neil makes the point very clearly in the case of Iraq, noting that, when the British ended colonial rule and came to craft the new state in 1920, they first divided up the oil reserves (reserving half for British companies); and then, when the US in turn occupied Iraq after the invasion of 2003, one of its first acts, through Paul Bremer, Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority of Iraq, was to rescind an Iraqi constitutional provision that prevented the privatization of vital economic assets. The allocation of oilfields to US companies quickly followed.

In the sixth of his theses “On the concept of history”, Walter Benjamin (2005 [1940])
writes that

“To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was’ [Ranke]. It means
to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. For historical materialism
it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust
itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject.”

Neil had been working on Bowman for many years when on 11 September 2001 his city
was traumatized by the two planes flown by members of al-Qaeda into the twin towers of
the World Trade Center. He completed American Empire and wrote Endgame under the
impress of that trauma, and his socialist internationalism did not fail him in that moment of
present danger, nor did his historical materialism. In American Empire he recognized the
exploitation of 9/11 for imperialist purposes as the third such moment of US global ambition:
the adventures in Cuba and the Philippines in 1898 and the masters-of-the-universe crafting
of international institutions to serve US purposes in 1945–47 flashed up as George W Bush
pursued global and full-spectrum dominance after 2001. In Endgame he recognized that for
many in the world the US was a space of aspiration and that, in consequence, 9/11 was felt
as a global trauma. In this journal (Smith, 2001), and less than a month after the slaughter, he
reflected on how it became possible for the Bush administration to claim this global
event as a purely national tragedy, and how it made precisely the chauvinistic rendition of globalism to nationalist purpose that he was to explore historically and theoretically in *American Empire* and in *Endgame*. This was public and relevant scholarship of rare quality. We are immeasurably impoverished by his death!

Gerry Kearns

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*Promoter, mentor, and internationalist: a legacy*

I first met Neil in Mexico during the winter of 1995. He had come to hold a conference at the Geography School, invited by Graciela Uribe. She had met him at a geography meeting in the US, and I knew the relevance of his work through his book *Uneven Development*. The book had a profound impact on me, as it is a critique of capitalism sustained by Marxist thinking with a logical and coherent theoretical structure. At that point, and since the breakdown of the paradigm in social sciences caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall, it seemed that Marxism could only be buried, and other directions should be taken in the thinking of the social and political world.

This meeting had great importance for my future professional practice as a geographer for two reasons. First, despite the fact I did not work in Mexico’s School of Geography, I welcomed the new direction in geography teaching in this country resulting from visits by professional critics like him to such a traditional space. Second, and probably more important, we agreed not only on the need for such spaces to be opened in countries or schools that had none but also on the importance of an international critical discussion that moved us away from the nihilism of the predominant paradigm in that moment: postmodernism.

And so it began, or possibly went on—because with colleagues from the University of British Columbia and the Simon Fraser University, he had already started planning a meeting in Vancouver in August 1997. It brought together 300 geographers from different countries and latitudes with different approaches to critical thinking. Our aim was to create a group that could give a geographical answer to global and local events generated by globalized neoliberalism. We attended in an optimistic spirit opposing the disillusionment and nihilism expanding every day in the academic and political fields. On a very sunny and warm day during the Canadian summer I arrived to register for the conference and met him there. I will not forget how he embraced me and said in a triumphant voice: “Blanca, we made it, we’re here.”

After a long and eclectic conference, a steering committee was formed of sixteen geographers from different latitudes in order to build up an agenda, summarized in the statement of purpose written by Neil and Caroline Desbiens (1999). “A world to win!” is the slogan reflecting the founding statement of this international association, as an alternative to the increasingly institutionalized and corporate culture of universities as well as a tool for a more equal world. The International Critical Geography group (ICG) was born.

Our objectives were clear but ambitious; five other conferences followed the Vancouver Conference, and Neil was a direct promoter of the first four: Taegu, Korea in 2000; Békéscsaba, Hungary in 2002; Mexico City in 2005; and Mumbai in 2007. For different reasons, he did not attend Mumbai or Frankfurt in 2011. Our alleged academicism and some strong criticism of our limited links with social movements certainly affected his promotion of the group and his participation in its activities in later years. In my opinion, this was a false dilemma right from the foundation of the group which has persisted during its fifteen-year existence. His position was clear, as he turned to link with the movements rather than to academicism or academic militancy.

The internationalist sense of the group was strongly promoted by him all the time he participated in its development. He involved groups that otherwise we would not have known, and he was also an important mentor for many of us, encouraging us to present our ideas