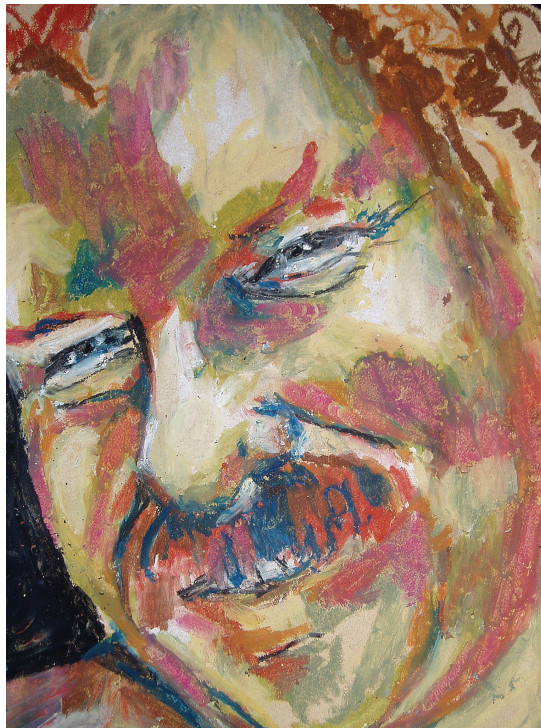

Neil Smith: a critical geographer

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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 geopolitical 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 confidence; 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

