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Review of *Permanent Weekend: Nature, Leisure, and Rural Gentrification* by John Michels

***Permanent Weekend: Nature, Leisure, and Rural Gentrification* by JOHN MICHELS**
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017 \$37.95

Reviewed by **CAMERON BUTLER**

John Michels, in *Permanent Weekend: Nature, Leisure, and Rural Gentrification*, aims to contextualize the changes in rural Ontario within the expansion of neoliberalism over the past several decades. Specifically, he focuses his research on the area of the Almaguin Highlands, conducting interviews with full-time residents, cottagers, vacationing visitors, and economic development specialists to understand how and why the encompassed municipalities and townships are gentrifying.

He sets out two goals for himself,

first, to critically examine the causes and consequences of rural gentrification and the new forms of economic development in rural Ontario in the neoliberal era, and second, to analyze the romanticization of nature among the newly arrived urban middle- and high-income residents. (5)

In general, he meets those goals. He does especially well to push back against the view of rural areas as becoming “post-productive” and instead shifting to new forms of production—away from timber or agriculture towards real estate or recreational activities.

Michels' research is based on fieldwork interviews with local residents and government officials, spanning several years. In presenting the interviewee's comments,

he makes an explicit effort to contextualize both their roles within the community, as well as his connection to them. This helps provide clarity and a greater sense of the community in which he worked. The book is divided into six chapters, with each focused either on a particular demographic group (e.g. cottagers, young professionals) or industry (e.g. agriculture, economic development consulting). Every chapter ends with a summary section that outlines the major arguments presented, making the book easy to navigate.

Chapter 1, “Historicizing and Theorizing the Almaguin Highlands,” provides most of the background context for the rest of the book, in terms of historical, geographic, and demographic information about the region. Michels lays out the ways that the Almaguin Highlands have changed from European colonization to the present, as well as the federal and provincial policy shifts through periods of Keynesian economic policies to current neoliberalism. He also well articulates the theoretical debates around gentrification, providing readers with a solid and clear primer on the current academic discourse.

In Chapter 2, “The Summer Cottage: a Home Away from Home,” he turns his attention to the first demographic group of his analysis: cottagers. The chapter focuses on the cottaging industry and the tensions that have arisen between full-time residents and summer cottagers, as well as the conflicting views of residents about whether cottagers improve or detract from the region as they upgrade their cottages' amenities. Michels discusses how the desires of middle- and upper-class urban residents to experience “pristine wilderness” and reconnect with nature serve as a major motivation for cottaging in the Highlands. Finally, he delves into how the tensions

between full-time residents and cottagers spill into municipal politics and the differing values of maintaining natural purity vs. promoting economic development.

“Tourism and Its Discontents,” the third chapter, shifts focus towards temporary visitors and tourists as drivers of economic change. The chapter highlights the rise of tourism and recreational activity companies in the Almaguin Highlands, as well as the disagreements about what constitute “appropriate” activities (snowmobiling is an issue of intense debate in the area). The strongest aspect of the chapter is his discussion of how nature is packaged and sold through tourism, situating the increasing commodification of nature experiences as a part of the expansion of capitalist production. However, he unfortunately does not take the next step in his analysis to connect that commodification process with neoliberalism, leaving the two lines of inquiry separate. Finally, the chapter takes a look at how women living in the Almaguin Highlands are particularly impacted by neoliberal policies and rural gentrification through the dismantling of social services and infrastructure.

Chapter 4, “Rural Gentrification,” highlights the major influx of retirees, the much smaller influx of young professionals, and the overall dynamic of youth outmigration. The discussion centres around people’s acknowledgements that gentrification is occurring and their efforts to direct gentrification in a way that benefits residents. Some call for the region to become a “bedroom community” for young professionals who work in surrounding larger cities, while others wish to maintain the rural feel of the area. The chapter describes how “beautification” and aesthetic standards are used to further gentrification by promoting a unified “feel” of the area. Michels explores

the differing views of residents and economic advisors, while looking at how the recent Highway 11 project has made the Almaguin Highlands more easily accessible, and thus created greater pressures to chart a clear future path for the region.

Michels then turns his attention to shifts in lumber production and farming in chapter 5, “The Changing Landscapes of Agriculture and Forestry.” The first half of the chapter explores the history of forestry in Ontario, and how mechanization and neoliberal policies have changed the industry, resulting in a shift away from “production forests” towards “recreation forests” (160). The second half looks at how neoliberal policies, including trade agreements like NAFTA, have led to small family farms being replaced by larger corporate-owned farms. However, a glaring omission in this chapter is the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), whereby temporary foreign workers work on Canadian farms in precarious positions for below minimum wage; SAWP and programs like it are well established as part of neoliberal promotion of profits over people in Canada and globally (Binford 513). One of Michels’ interviewees makes an allusion to the effect of the program in the Almaguin Highlands, but Michels fails to explicitly name or discuss the program in his analysis.

The provincial and federal government promotion of economic development, through grants and consultations is a running theme throughout the book, and in the last chapter, “The Economic Development Industry,” Michels focuses entirely on how those efforts have impacted the region. He looks at how neoliberal policies create a system where short-term grant funding is given to encourage municipalities to attract private investment and industry, through promised

amenities and “business-friendly” regulations. The chapter ties together the different motivations and influences that are shaping the region by highlighting dysfunctions within current policy and grant structures, and how it pressures municipalities to support private industrial development over the needs of their own residents.

Unfortunately the book’s analysis suffers from arguments that are not fully developed. Michels fails to engage with the current theoretical discourse around Western idealization and romanticization of nature, relying far too heavily upon Neil Smith’s 2008 book *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, to the exclusion of most other works on the topic published over the last decade. As a result, he does not manage to consider how his two objectives for the book are interrelated. He misses opportunities to explore the ways romanticization of nature informs, or is informed by, neoliberal policies and development grant programs.

Despite these shortcomings, the book succeeds at demonstrating the intricate ways that federal and provincial neoliberal policies impact local communities. Michels presents a clear picture on how competing values, goals, and efforts lead to tensions and challenges that are not easily overcome, and he does this all through an accessible and approachable format for academic and non-academic audiences.

Works Cited

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- Smith, Neil. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

CAMERON BUTLER is a Master of Environmental Studies student at York University, focusing on capitalist and colonial histories of Canadian wetland policies, management practices, and technologies. He has published works on queer ecology, anti-oppression, and stakeholder engagement practices.