

The ironic misfortunes of ‘geographic theory’. Sceptic musings on a sexy oxymoron

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Abstract

In this short piece, I engage with Henry W. YEUNG’s (2024) diagnosis of a ‘philosophy envy’ affecting contemporary human geography to partially support his interpretation and equally argue against it. While I read geography’s infatuation with changing philosophical vogues as resulting in a deleterious *theoretical hubris*, the reasons for the academic and political pedigree that prevailing forms of geographic theory have purchased require a deeper epistemic scrutiny (and perhaps also a bit of spoof) than YEUNG’s book allows for. Consequently, after preliminary derision of globalised scholarly infatuation with theory-making, I turn attention to two features of the epistemic structures underpinning mainstream critical geography, namely, constructivist schemes and parochial modes of justification, briefly taking issue with both. I end with a final coda about what could be expected of Theory of Geography as a subfield, calling simultaneously for a more substantive and purposeful philosophical reflection in geography and a sceptical take on theory to curve down its pure vanity.

Keywords: geographic theory, critical geography, critical theory, philosophy, book *Theory and Explanation in Geography*

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The magnificent *feu follet* of theory

At the beginning of his compelling book *Le démon de la théorie* [The devil of the theory], French literary scholar Antoine COMPAGNON wittily states: ‘*La stagnation semble inscrite dans le destin scolaire de toute théorie*’ (COMPAGNON, A. 1998, p. 9) [‘Stagnation seems to be the scholarly destiny of all theories’]. And then he goes on to rub salt into the wound: ‘*L’appel à la théorie est par définition oppositionnel, voire subversif et insurrectionnel [...] la fatalité de la théorie est d’être transformée en méthode par l’institution académique, d’être récupérée, comme on disait*’ (COMPAGNON, A. 1998, p. 15). [‘The appeal to theory is by definition oppositional, even subversive and insurrectionary [but] the *misfortune of theory* is to be bound to be transformed into a method by the academic institution, to be co-opted, as we used to say’. Emphasis added].

Certainly, his assertion should be read against the backdrop of the peculiar and long-lasting link between university and secondary school teaching recruitment system in France, which rapidly turns highbrow epistemic exquisiteness (whether produced through the mercurial blossoming of sophisticated theories or through the churn of methodological innovation) into a well-established repertoire of formulas, recipes, phrasings and oven-ready statements fit for success in national examinations. And yet as French as COMPAGNON’s malicious assertion might sound, it sheds light on the different fortunes that French philosophy and literary theory have undergone at home and in the Anglo-American academic culture (CUSSET, F. 2003). But it does so in a very paradoxical way, for the predictable stagnation of said theoretical flares that so overtly revealed itself at home, has become true in the global

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academy through the twisted form of an ever-growing proliferation of exotic theoretical finery. More is less! So just as counter-cultural movements dazzlingly fuelled consumer culture back in the 1970s (Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's book, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*, made the point decades ago), the handful of theorists who have risen to global celebrity in the turn of the century have been every bit as co-opted and commodified as preceding critical masterminds. What a destiny, becoming an amusing face on a water bottle sticker!

For sure, geography has not been an exception when it comes to these matters – quite the opposite: stickers have even been analysed as part of 'urban geographies of resistance' (AWCOCK, H. 2021).

After some exciting and somehow hectic decades of critical-cum-theoretical endeavours in human geography (DIXON, D. and JONES III, J.P. 2004; CRESWELL, T. 2013), we may still be waiting for the dust to settle (much ado!). Nevertheless, we would be wise not to underestimate the demon of theory, for it can well be the case that some irony awaits us around the corner: stagnation, rather than being the future that lies ahead of us turning eventually theory into boredom, seems to lie instead at the very centre of mainstream theory-making and manifests itself in the form of a nagging acceleration of scholar productivity which keeps fanning the flame of never-ending novelty.

Put it otherwise: the unleashed theoretical frenzy that has swept across some quarters in human geography and elsewhere could be claimed to be but a particular expression of stagnation. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with contemporary characterisations of the nature of our times, as late, super- or hypermodernity have been variously predicated upon such a relentless acceleration of many modern phenomena (DARDOT, P. and LAVAL, C. 2010; ROSA, H. 2015; GUMBRECH, H.U. 2014), whose acute exacerbation dooms the epoch to be an ever more ludicrous sequel of itself, with stagnation and acceleration being the two sides of the same coin.

Accordingly, in the critically-minded but highly commodified academia theoretical hyperactivity evinces ill-concealed stagnation, which takes place under the various forms of marketisation, mainstreamisation and academicisation of critical approaches (CASTREE, N. 2000; OSWIN, N. 2020); increasing epistemic extractivism and expropriation of recently-released-from-the-Global-South's (or far-flung 'exotic places') concepts and terms (HALVORSEN, S. 2018); or citationary alibies and respectability politics (Rox, A. 2020) that entail a formal *habitus* which re-inscribes academic dependency and the colonality of knowledge (SCHÖPF, C.M. 2020) in emancipatory talk.

All of them are visible signs of a constant quantum leap within a theoretical loop continuously spiralling out of control and awkwardly trying to escape its own incongruities, as if the most visible (rewarded!) part of the global academic bubble were now populated by such hilarious 'sleepwalkers' at whom HANMETT, C.R. (1997, 2001) poked fun almost three decades ago following Neil SMITH's academic hoax (SMITH, N. 1996).

The 'global conversation' (isn't all this to and fro of travelling theories and formulas happening in worldwide premiere journals?) threatens to turn itself into a huge black hole that falls prey of its own rhetoric practices and the performative *hubris* of ground-breaking conceptual whims – even more so when it expresses itself in the form of either hyper-vigilance about the vices and sins inherent to one's own (privileged) positionality (SAVOLAINEN, J. *et al.* 2023) or a constant call for theorising back at Western conceptual, thematic and epistemic hegemonies – and yet aren't people elsewhere busy with more interesting things than feeding such 'global conversation' anyway?

But just when it seems that we are about to eventually assume that all this business of endless repetition of gestures of self-suspicion or self-deconstruction is but a 'meaningless piety' (SPIVAK, G.C. 1988, p. 271) destined to become a frantic yet routinely performed exercise of innocuous scholasticism, theoretic inventiveness strikes again with a new cunning

tour de force (a sort of *Theoria ex machina*, one would dare to say) reinvigorating the old faith in the beneficent qualities of verbose theory.

Accordingly, hot-on-social-media globalised theory has now come across as the new object to denaturalise, unmask, re-world, provincialise, decentre, dislocate (the list could go on for a while), turning, thus, intellectual life into a special case of ‘*servitude volontaire*’ [voluntary servitude] – an obfuscating epistemic regime incapable of knowledge production outside of the remit of *theoria recepta*, dull self-referentiality and the formats, moulds and moods of global consumption and, therefore of translatability and various travelling requirements and compulsions.

Were it not for the unfathomable proliferation of academic silos (aka ‘epistemic communities’) and the ensuing need for esoteric initiation into their languages and *arcana*, one would be tempted to say that the only decent task left to the well-established globetrotter scholar (youngsters: don’t even try!) is to devote himself to writing arresting hoaxes and erudite satires which carefully dress up straw men – and of course to chase love, prestige, and fleeting glory across the world’s interconnected circuit of conferences – à la David Lodge. Nonetheless, it is no secret that neither the inane polarisation and intellectual barrenness that fighting cultural wars (seriously or playfully) leads to, nor carrying on with one’s business, as if everything were still the same, will be of much help in coping with ‘the degrading slavery of being a child of his age’, as Chesterton has had it. This present age cherishes theory – which is bad news for theory, for any type of theory indeed.

Yet theory is always hard to beat – it always works theoretically anyway.

Against this background, it would be worth discussing to what extent such standing of *theoria recepta* in human geography is to be attributed to what YEUNG, H. (2024, p. 12) calls ‘philosophy envy’ in his recent work *Theory and Explanation in Geography*. The book can be easily claimed to be the most comprehensive and thorough examination of contemporary post-positivist Anglo-American human geog-

raphy to the day, for it does spare no details when it comes to present, organise, analyse and critically explore those major works that are commonly assumed to be ‘geographic theories’ of one kind or another.

More significantly, it is one of the few works having drawn *specific attention* to the *central role* that theory and theorisation have played over the last decades across the very different trends that make up contemporary human geography (it should go without saying, following the preceding pages, that an a-theoretical human geography can no longer be considered ‘critical’, no matter how much it actually might be).

That theory has proved to be a core and integral element in the (f)actual functioning and practice of critical geography is something that has gone overlooked so far or has not been the object of thorough and systematic examination – at least until recently, when some geographers have started to discuss the consequences of the uses and abuses, the ‘seductions and distractions’ (LAKE, R.W. 2025a, p. 9) of theory-making in geography (DAVIDSON, M. 2025; TONKISS, F. 2025).

Certainly, the recent history of the Anglo-American crafting and global circulation of ‘French Theory’ (CUSSET, F. 2003) is very telling in this regard and later episodes of ‘Italian Thought’ (CHIESA, L. 2014), as echoed in human geography (MINCA, C. 2016), or subsequent pleas for ‘German Theory’ in critical geography (KORF, B. 2021) apparently come to confirm YEUNG’s diagnosis of a certain ‘envy’ of the theoretical gotcha.

Furthermore, such episodes (and their concomitant material circumstances and intellectual routines) make it possible to predict the upcoming success of, let’s say, ‘Brazilian spatial thought’ after the English translation and dissemination of works by Milton Santos (MELGAÇO, L. and PROUSE, C. 2017) or an ‘Asian Theory’ that aims at theorising back (YEUNG, H.W. 2025) at Anglo-American onto-epistemic cores. The model is far from losing momentum, and it seems to be destined to repeat itself – provided that the basic equation between *theory* and *criticism* can remain unquestioned. The model is

fairly well established, in any case. ‘Theoretical interventions’ have turned into critical moments *de rigueur*, and when those come peppered with a few drops of geographic fetishism to gain further traction and charm (i.e. for theory to become more ‘plural’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘multilingual’), success is guaranteed – well, here I am, isn’t my broken English just lovely?

In the same way that ‘Zulu nationalism’ was listed in the famous and far from comprehensive long inventory that I. HACKING made of the kinds of item that, in addition to facts, knowledge and reality, have been claimed to be socially constructed over the decades (HACKING, I. 1999, pp. 1–2), theoretical gloss is destined to shine brighter and brighter under the shimmer of enticing and evocative places that have not yet been fully absorbed by hegemonic cores and bubbles.

The proof is in the pudding: Spanish philosophers have been lately asking ‘Why there is no Spanish Theory?’ (VALDECANTOS, A. 2025), a question that can only be read as either a tormented baroque sigh or a sarcastic settling of scores with theoretical vogues and their underlying meagre understanding of intellectual labour.

Accordingly, if a large part of geographic scholarship’s turns, twists and breakthroughs now seem to be the result of a ubiquitous *Theoria ex machina*, YEUNG’s diagnosis of contemporary geography’s fundamental ‘philosophy envy’ could be given some credit. Many examples of such a need to catch up with broader patterns of academic capital production will spring to mind for geographers, not the least years-long efforts to turn Foucault, Lefebvre, Deleuze & Guattari (or whoever French thinker were called for in each case) into ‘spatial thinkers’ now looming large in human geography dictionaries and textbooks. Significantly, YEUNG’s book devotes an impressive number of pages to analysing problems and limits of the kind of theoretical production that has taken place in human geography under the well-known formula of Wittgenstein (or Kristeva, or Levinas, or ...), ‘whose challenging and thought-provoking writings remain largely

unknown within our discipline’. (As an example of this HARRISON, P. [2002, 2007], or FLEISCHMANN, L. and EVERTS, J. [2024] can be pointed out. Following the long list of French philosophers mobilised in human geography, still showing a high performance therein, as is the case of Blanchot [CARTER-WHITE, R. *et al.* 2024], or Derrida [*cultural geographies*, 2008], a recent plea for ‘German Theory’ in geography has brought to the fore philosophers such as Sloterdijk [ERNSTE, H. 2018], Adorno [MARQUARDT, N. 2021; PHILO, C. 2021, 2025], or even less-known-worldwide Plessner [KORF, B. 2021; ERNSTE, H. 2023]).

It is precisely this particular way of understanding theoretical production (and the critical purchase of such scholarship) that is the object of YEUNG’s major criticism. Even though in the book the distinction between post-whatever inspired geographic theory and more ‘classical’ forms of ideological-political theory-making (e.g. as in radical geography) is central to the definition of critical styles, both of them are rejected as not having been able to produce ‘explanations’ of the phenomena at hand (no matter how much theoretical elaboration has been bestowed upon such phenomena). And that is what ultimately drives YEUNG’s interest and criticism.

Geographen aller Länder, vereinigt Euch – Let’s shake off the shackles of philosophy!

With such goal in mind, YEUNG’s *Theory and Explanation in Geography* opens fire, raising a bold question: ‘Are these critical theories really theory as their names so pompously suggest?’ (YEUNG, H. 2024, p. xi). The title’s echoing of the famous HARVEY’s *Explanation in Geography* (1969) makes the reader suspect that the aforementioned question is a rather rhetorical one, for the book’s underlying assumption is that whatever may be expected of or requested from any *proper geographical theorisation* cannot be set out in terms of what philosophy (or any other discipline, for that matter) takes theory to be, e.g. speculative thought, philosophical the-

matiation of this or that, etc. Accordingly, YEUNG's book stands as a 'liberating' cry from the philosophical enslavement to which geography has subjected itself.

Curiously enough, the book does not contain a key guess that could be ultimately conveyed to make the case for the 'philosophy envy' argument. Perhaps such a guess is too much of a taboo among geographers to appear in a geography book. I would argue, though, that the ever-tighter Gordian knot of contemporary geography's dependency on *theoria recepta* lies in the fundamental equivalence that the terms 'theory', 'criticism' and 'space' have come to acquire over the past decades (with 'space' being the most recent to have entered into the equation).

Critical philosophy's contemporary infatuation with spatial tropes, terms, figures and concepts (commonly celebrated as the 'spatial turn') has largely been enthusiastically embraced (albeit often misread) by many geographers and, thus, celebrated as the coming of age of space – at last! After all, isn't epistemic maturity reached when a subject becomes an object of theoretical attention? Hence, what else but a 'theory of space' is to be expected if geographers are to be up to the times or to authentic criticism – i.e. authentic theorisation? There goes again the 'philosophy envy'.

More to the point, the ill-concealed annoyance of some of the pioneers of geographic theory (SMITH, N. and KATZ, C. 1993) with the new-brand interest in space and spatial concepts by post-whatever philosophers only comes across as to confirm YEUNG's diagnosis, yet in a twisted way: rather than 'envy' one would talk of a 'validation effect' in the light of the fact that the apparent convergence between philosophy's and geography's critical endeavours (the spatialisation of theory as paring up the politisation of space) has been assumed as endorsing previous theoretical impulses in critical geography and, more importantly, the very centrality of theory-making – independently of whether such spatialised philosophical musings were seen as productive or as fundamentally misguided (as in HARVEY, D. 1989). Theory is here to stay.

A curious consequence of this 'validation effect', which has perhaps been little noticed so far, is the surprising transformation of the image and identity of 'geographic theory' itself. Until not so long ago, the very term was regarded as a rough oxymoron, for there seemed to be little doubt about the purely philosophical nature of the task of theory-making, which was assumed to be fundamentally at odds with the bare empirical orientation of geography. At best, theory showed up in those rare occasions when manuals on the 'progress' of the field were to be written, historical shifts had to be explained, or it was necessary to craft some highbrow affiliation to justify the legitimacy of a new emerging trend.

Compared to old-fashioned 'uncontaminated' empirical forms of geography (a distorted image that is, in all likelihood, the result of the recent infatuation with theory), geographic theory has become a remarkably fertile endeavour, even an awfully sexy oxymoron from which all sorts of benefits are to be expected. As HÄKLI, J. (2020, p. 370) has rightly pointed out: 'Who would have thought that one day the arid "philosophical study of being" would become a hot topic in human geography? Not many, I bet, but these days it is difficult to find a [geography] paper that does not mention ontology in some way, shape or form!'

The overwhelming transformation of geography into a sexy theoretical business (as usual) has prevented geographers from challenging the dogma about the fundamental need of theory and theorisation in critical geography – or at least has prevented such criticism from becoming vocal (some exceptions to this can be pointed out: BARNETT, C. [1998a, b] and most recent interventions by BODDEN, S. [2023]. Besides, rarely attention has been drawn to the fact that *critical* geography has become over the years rather *uncritical* in regard to its own assumptions and epistemic practices [BLOMLEY, N. 2006, 2007, 2008], yet the place that theory might have played in this increasing dogmatization has not been scrutinized).

Theory and Explanation in Geography provides such an occasion, for YEUNG offers an insightful, quite comprehensive and most sympathetic analysis of mainstream geographic theories. As previously pointed out, the book, on the one hand, shows how theorisation has been deemed fundamental on normative-ideological grounds, i.e. different bodies of theories have been claimed to have political and emancipatory potential, and, thus, assumed as key to utterly mould the epistemic structure of geographical inquiry so that political change and social betterment can happen.

On the other hand, the book proves how theorisation has been established on ontological grounds, most typically by resorting to anti-foundationalist stances as variously developed in Anglo-American versions of mostly German and French philosophy, something that has ultimately predisposed to what YEUNG calls ‘open-ended’ approaches to theory-making.

It is worth noting that even if theorisation is central to these two forms of geographic scholarship (what LAKE, R.W. [2025b] has recently called a shared ‘prioritisation of theory’ in geography), the underlying understanding and practice of theory itself widely diverge, and criticism is envisioned also differently. While in the ideological forms of human geography thick theorisation of the various forms of the link between spatial forms and social orders is presented primarily as a guide to action and change; in the latter (open-ended epistemologies) theory is expressed in the form of ontological assertions (BODDEN, S. 2023) that reveal the fundamental structure of the world (or lack of it indeed) so as to produce radical re-wordlings with emancipatory potential.

In both cases, YEUNG empathetically (and with infinite patience!) explores internal limitations of said takes on geographic theory in the hope of redressing the fundamental fact that theory-making (under such critical forms) has taken on *carte blanche* in mainstream globally spread human geography, with the result of increasing levels of either esotericism or dogmatism. In either case, rather parochial

standards of justification are at play, often deployed to prevent position in human geography from being criticised by other critical approaches (YEUNG, H. 2024, p. 11).

With this diagnosis in view, YEUNG’s interpretation of contemporary geography’s ‘philosophy envy’ begs the question as to how standards of theory-making are to be established in the field, i.e. through which criteria. Funnily, this is a stubbornly philosophical question (!), especially for someone who aims at ousting philosophy from its high position in geography.

However, as soon as the diagnosis is set, YEUNG’s book departs from theory. Instead of piling up philosophical arguments in favour of his explanatory theorising, he puts forward an example of what he proposes and, thus, tries carefully to stress-test his single piece of causal meso-level appropriate-to-(economic)geographers theory of global production networks.

Accordingly, the book’s bottom line reads more or less as follows: it is the task of geographers to produce forms of theory that utterly fit geography’s goals and fundamental spirit – whatever this latter means, YEUNG is not willing to turn it into a philosophical or normative question. Yet despite all his fundamental decrying of geography’s over-philosophising, YEUNG’s plea for explanatory theory-making needs rather badly some core ‘realist’ tenets, so as to partially rebuild overtly constructivist geography’s epistemic frameworks and make explanatory frameworks function. Put it otherwise, ongoing philosophical discussions on new critical and speculative realism seem integral to the very possibility of retrieving and justifying explanatory theorising in geography according to the very standards (of practical adequacy, causality, etc.) that YEUNG wants to set out. Curiously, one quickly realises that many of the criticisms that YEUNG addresses to geographic writing grounded in fashionable philosophy would perfectly apply to the increasing esotericism, fashionability and speculative turns that various realisms have taken – as soon as one moves past page

number 25 in books by Quentin Meillassoux or Markus Gabriel, and, thus, the philosophical experiments and ontological counterfactuals begin, YEUNG's philosophically-inclined readers can't help but mischievously wonder what would geographical theory look like should geographers embrace much of speculative realism's terms such as '*ancestralité*', '*matière fossile*', '*le grand dehors*', or else if geographers were to seriously explore '*les énoncés ancestraux et diachroniques qui portent sur les événements antérieurs ou ultérieurs à tout rapport-terrestre-au-mond*' and the likes.

At that point one is left pondering whether YEUNG's book proves that geography cannot afford itself 'too much' philosophy (of any type) before it becomes useless for the empirical purposes it used to assume (a take that fully justifies the path YEUNG follows in his book in regards with his limited commitment to realism); or whether he seems rather to suggest that it is just a matter of 'bad philosophy', or, at least of choosing a philosophy fit for geography's goals – yet does anyone in the room know of a special kind like that?

'Beware of overthinking!' comes across in either case as the rallying cry in the book. Eventually, YEUNG lays his cards on the table, for the right dose of philosophy to be administered to geography turns out to be a handful of 'analytical services'. The detour through speculative realism appears then as just a hook to bring empirical things back to geography and debunk any theoretical infatuation. Accordingly, YEUNG, H.W. (2024, p. 20) goes on to claim that his explanatory theory 'occupies an epistemological position relatively free from the shackles of specific philosophical stances and ontological fixes (i.e. neither critical realism nor poststructuralism and postcolonialism)'. Yet is that really the case? 'All Cretans are liars!', one is tempted to shout, playing Epimenides the Cretan as pages go by, for to claim that 'I have no philosophy' is not the best way to avoid philosophical commitments.

Even when it is easy to realise that the bulk of YEUNG's 'epistemic efforts' is put elsewhere, as the book strives to carefully rework

relational approaches to ground an analytically robust explanatory mid-range form of theorisation, getting rid of old paradoxes proves hard. Particularly, I find it wanting the way YEUNG operationalises critical and speculative realism without further engaging with otherwise key epistemic issues whose fuller development would deeply compromise key structures of post-positivist critical geography. So, is that the ultimate reason why he claims not to be trapped in any philosophical imbroglio?

This issue is not without importance for at least one reason. As I already mentioned, YEUNG tends to overlook the particular role and nature of the fundamental link between *criticism* and *theory* (and space) in contemporary human geography. While he makes plain the integral character of theorisation to all transformations of/in critical geography, he does not go at lengths as to interrogate why this is so and how theory, geography and criticism have come to be linked together.

To my mind, the fact that the equation between theory, geography and criticism is left unexamined in the book is to do (besides the aforementioned taboo about the spatial turn) with the lack of a further scrutiny of prevailing constructivist schemes in critical geography and how critical stances construe themselves in the first place. Whether a deeper engagement with critical or speculative realist philosophy in the book would have been a possible avenue for questioning hegemonic constructivist stances in the field is certainly arguable. Yet a bolder and more thorough epistemic analysis would have done the trick.

Again paradoxically, these are questions that call for more (and not less, as YEUNG would imply) philosophising, despite the fact that this necessarily will take geographers' time away from producing, testing and putting to work explanatory theories. YEUNG has claimed that he firmly believes in the division of academic labour. So do I! Just as philosophers are not going to do geographers' job, as YEUNG wittingly contends, division of labour *within* geography may still prove fertile, and, thus, a more defined and robust understand-

ing of what ‘Theory of Geography’ (as a sub-field) might mean can help out.

Therefore, in the remainder of the paper, I would like to take issue with YEUNG’s celebration of the fact that in geography there does not exist something akin to the firmly established subfields of ‘Political Theory’, ‘Social Theory’ and the likes. I will briefly sketch an alternative take on what can be expected of theory, thinking and philosophy in human geography, which I reckon can go beyond a handful of ‘analytical services’, as he suggests.

The short-lived political promise of constructivism, the *Schonstellungen* of critical theory and a *coda* about Theory of Geography

I will lay out my objections to YEUNG’s take on ‘Theory of Geography’ rather indirectly, by bringing his book into dialogue with another recent book that addresses similar issues, albeit in a different way: *Difficulties with Critical Geography. Studies for a Reflective Theory of Society* by German geographer Benedikt KORF (2023). Prima facie, both books call for forms of self-limited immanent critique through which human geography’s *theoretical hubris* (whether grounded in ideological-political premises or open-ended epistemologies) could be curved down. The reasons for undertaking such a task are different in each of the books: in the case of YEUNG, practical adequacy, sensitivity to the specificity of socio-spatial contexts, normative justification and empirical grounding are key criteria for geographic theorisation, alongside reducing reliance on ‘imported’ philosophical sources. In the case of KORF, he wants to see emerging forms of critical geography grounded in different philosophical moods, e.g. modest and hesitant expressions of criticism that would leave more room for self-awareness, reflexivity and thoughtfulness through digressions and ‘detours’ (*Unwege*) and ‘pensiveness’ (*Nachdenklichkeit*) à la BLUMENBERG.

An intuitive and frequent response to the criticisms that both KORF and YEUNG raise against (un)critical geographical theorising is that *if* such theories have proven a capricious

guide to intellectual life (LAKE, R.W. 2025a) it is just a matter of merely ‘bad critical scholarship’ (KLINKE, I. 2023) or ‘bad theory’ in critical geography (MITCHELL, D. 2025). That is to say, if critical geography is afflicted by the kind of shortcomings and difficulties that both authors point out, it is just because it is not critical at all.

Very much against the grain of aforementioned responses, I would like to briefly argue something rather different, namely, that what is fundamentally at stake here is that said shortcomings and difficulties in critical geography arise *precisely* from the very *internal structures* of the various theories which geography has embraced, just because they are *critical* indeed. My overall contention is that what is ultimately at issue in both YEUNG’s and KORF’s cautiously sceptical analysis of critical geographic theory is reckoning with the fact that said problems are *internal and integral* to critical theorising.

For one thing, said issues cannot simply be premised on poor or deviated forms of theorising – an argumentative strategy that ultimately secures core mechanisms of critical theory on moral, political or ideological grounds, encapsulating even further the fundamental believe in the performative nature of theory, as just depending on the re-orientation of discursive formations in which geographers’ objects and concepts are to be displayed.

Likewise, nor can the issue be reduced to a ‘mere’ conjunctural problem (i.e. external), be it the bedevilling dynamics of capitalistic production of knowledge under neoliberal academia or any other evil circumstances that domesticate, absorb, neutralise or strip critical theories of their emancipatory goals. It would be preposterous to argue so, given the constructivist assumptions of mainstream theory-makers and their high standards of accountability about the determining conditions under which such theorising takes place, at least for theory to be able to bring about something other than ideology, disingenuous statements or false consciousness.

Should any reader fully and seriously engage with the realist or sceptical questions underlying the analysis of critical geogra-

phy in YEUNG's and KORF's books, then the conclusions would be far more radical than either can afford to be in their present form in both books. This is why I think that YEUNG's opening question, 'are these critical theories really theory?' ends up being rather rhetorical and KORF's operationalising (i.e. taming) of MARQUARD's sceptical position is doomed to fail (PUENTE LOZANO, P. 2024).

If we take a cue from KORF's analysis of the same theoretical developments in critical geography that YEUNG's brings into question, it is made plain that the epistemic structures involved in such stances make thinking function by simultaneously displaying accusations and exculpations in order to fundamentally articulate its own position and encapsulate it. It is perhaps worth noting that KORF's interpretation is very much indebted to German philosopher Odo MARQUARD, who used the concept of 'tribunalisation' [*Tribunalisierung der Lebenswirklichkeit*] in his 1973 *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, exposing Philosophy of History and historical consciousness (key to the very endeavour of modern criticism) as a secularised form of the old theodicy.

In a way, reading both KORF and MARQUARD simultaneously, one could claim that the Philosophy of Geography that underpins critical scholarship has assumed and kept alive many of the mechanisms and moral benefits inherent to the old Philosophy of History. Ironically, even though postmodern *various spatialisations of theory and politics* aimed precisely at superseding the major shortcomings of historicism, any close reader of MARQUARD (or Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise*, for that matter, or even Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* which looms prominently in other works by KORF, B. 2022) would be able to pinpoint the underlying key continuities between these two different forms of critical thought and outline them by what they share as both part of the same Kantian *Zeitalter der Kritik* (PUENTE LOZANO, P. 2023).

KORF's analysis makes it clear how this typical gesture of 'tribunalisation' (e.g. moralisation) described by MARQUARD is a recurring pattern in critical stances. Put it otherwise,

these positions are *essentially* construed in such a way as to leave small space (or no space at all) for reflexivity or critique of their own presuppositions. Again, following MARQUARD, KORF characterises these as '*Schonstellungen*', i.e. positions from which those who formulate them spare criticism to themselves, avoid it or, at best, make it superfluous.

With this premise as a starting point, KORF undertakes the task of exploring mechanisms inherent to certain forms of critical discourse in which the 'imported' theory to several social sciences withholds the fundamental function of constructing a position of 'immunity', of generating an encapsulation of one's own positions that exempts them from justification. It is important to notice that the deep *structuring* effect that moralisation brings about turns this problem into a very pervasive and distinctive issue, one that goes far beyond a superficial question of simple 'bad scholarship' as previously suggested. Once again, readers of MARQUARD and Koselleck are well aware of how deep these difficulties run, for the issues of 'mediation', 'regression' or 'derealisation' (as formulated by MARQUARD in his commentary of Hegel's concept of *Sollen*) are far from being solved in spatial (non-historicist, non-that-Hegelian) contemporary critical thought.

Political epistemologies that made it possible to rebuild human geography in its move away from positivism have remained confined to such modes of justification, with theory frequently playing a central role as a key to avoid any relapse into positivism (or idle idealism). This is so because theory (and the corresponding philosophical system to which it belongs) becomes itself a framework of validity in said trends, which is precisely what YEUNG wants to avoid.

In other words the way concepts are mobilised and made to function in critical-geographical discourses produce their own 'framework of plausibility' ('*Plausibilitätsrahmen*' – according to the expression of German geographer Dietrich Bartels), one within which it is easy to move around unreflexively. Accordingly, KORF contends that the moral impulse that has

underpinned the post-positivist reconstruction of geography (making hence possible critical geography in the first place) has brought about a constant moralisation of positions and debates, entailing a never-ending doubling down and, thus, more emphasis on normative, ideological or philosophical commitments.

This brings me back to the fundamental intermingling of *geography, theory and criticism*, and why suggestions as to bringing into question *the centrality of theory* in critical geography are met with bewilderment or anger, let alone automatically regarded with suspicion – anti-intellectualism is charged with the worst political sins, as reactions to recent call for ‘resisting the seductions of theory’ in geography (by LAKE, R.W. 2025a) proof. Even though I don’t concur with LAKE’s definitions of theory – or depiction of how theory manifests in geography as either Truth or Representation – I find quite telling the various misunderstandings that lie at the core of this discussion and how the terms of the debate are set out.

And yet the real enemies of theory are quite different, though!

Oddly enough, if both YEUNG and KORF are unable to untie the Gordian knot that ties *geography, theory and criticism* in its present prevailing form, it is because they do not fundamentally bring into question the hegemony of constructivism in critical geography, which is at the root of the ‘unquestionability’ of said link and ensuing infurcation at any questioning of it.

Let me very briefly unpack the question.

In his insightful book *The Social Construction of What?* Ian HACKING pointed out that if talk of social constructivism had become a common coin, it was mainly because it had proved ‘wonderfully liberating ... and valuable for political activists’ (HACKING, I. 1999, p. 1), particularly when it was first put forward. As HACKING, I. or BOGHOSIAN, P. (2006) have insisted alike, the ‘discovery’ of the contingent nature of the conditions upon which knowledge is premised and justified has been key to the very constructivist strategy against the ‘inevitability’ of facts under

the guise of the evitability of the concepts or discursive formations within which such facts are embedded.

Accordingly, HACKING, I. (1999, pp. 6–7) famously captured the argumentative structure of constructivist positions as relying upon the denial of the inevitability of social or historical facts as key to political change. Typically, social constructionist follows three basic argumentative steps: (1) ‘X’ need not have existed or not be at all as it is (i.e. is not determined by the ‘nature of things’, and, thus, is not inevitable, but rather the product of social, economic or historical forces under which it first came into being). Moreover, (2) ‘X’ is quite bad as it is/was. (3) Therefore, we would be much better off if ‘X’ were done away with, or at least radically transformed. The combination of (2) and (3) is key to understanding why theorisation takes on such a political potential, for (3) is typically assumed to be an *inherently* progressive task.

Consequently, epistemic contingency has been key for epistemology to become political epistemology and for theory (understood as endless redescrptions of the ‘nature’ of things, i.e. of the discursive formations that defined such things as such) to become central to any intellectual endeavour, even geography!

Arresting as these remarks sound, ‘[un] fortunately social construction analyses do not always libertate’ (HACKING, I. 1999, p. 2). Constructivism has ultimately turned out to be more of a cultural myth or an epochal fantasy than the solid dogma it once intended to be. The perception of the fundamental ‘emancipatory’ potential that theory assumes under such constructivist frameworks (i.e. things need to be ‘theorised’ otherwise because this is key to bringing about all sorts of performative miracles) is misleading most of the time, as the claim about contingency tends to be ambiguous about at which level it is predicated. Not only has such a take lost its political traction as soon as constructivist construals have become widespread in social sciences. It has resulted in rather banal claims, for this line of thought is overly simplistic, i.e. if something

is a natural fact, then we are simply stuck with it, and, thus, socially constructed things are easier to change than natural facts. This is, of course, a ludicrous assertion – diseases, vaccines, constant engineering of nature or extinction and modification of species are all examples of the opposite. And all the more so considering how persistent, pervasive or long-lasting certain social prejudices can be and how dilemmatic social action is when aiming at changing social structures.

So, going back to YEUNG's book, the overwhelming hegemony of this constructivist scheme makes it difficult for theorising to occur in forms other than those already criticised by YEUNG. His call for bringing into dialogue the critical trends he analyses with his explanatory theorising (and, thus, create a sort of Third Way upon which re-anchor an almost-free-from-philosophy Geography) comes ironically across as *Love's Labour's Lost*. Even if his contribution is much welcomed, unless this constructivist way of reasoning is brought into question, such critical theorising is doomed to become more (and no less) radical in its open-endedness or more (and no less) rigid in its moral encapsulation.

I am not saying that explanatory theory is not possible or convenient whatsoever. But I leave it to economic or human geographers to judge them. What I mean here is that it seems difficult under the prevailing constructivist scheme, which so firmly shapes (and orients in a *particular* direction) theory, critique and geography, that YEUNG's style of theorising does not get but a raised eyebrow and be met with an 'Uh-huh, again!' (2024 *Dialogues in Human Geography* and EPF Book forums on YEUNG's work).

The way (epistemic) things stand in mainstream human geography makes it hard that YEUNG's view of theory is not received as the 'tyranny of explanation' strikes back, meaning the tyranny of monism hovers over geography.

This leads me to my final short *coda* on Theory of Geography as subfield. If I have previously discussed YEUNG's diagnosis of 'philosophy envy', it is because I consider that critical geography's *theoretical hubris* can-

not be attributed *solely* to an anxiety to keep up with the pressing demands of a rapidly changing academic landscape in which theory has become a privileged form of epistemic capital and moral comfort. Additionally, it can be argued that the academic pedigree and critical prestige bestow upon theory in human geography can be traced back to very different sources and reasons (internal and external to human geography alike), which predate common references to HARVEY's rallying cry in *Explanation in Geography* ('By our theories you shall know us') indeed.

I cannot go at lengths with this point and make a comprehensive historical case to prove that this apparent dependency on 'external sources' is neither new nor specific to contemporary post-positivist geography – it can be traced back to the very origins of modern geography and much could be said along similar lines when it comes to the fundamental parallelism between how positivist and post-positivist forms of human geography got established by cherry-picking a range of authoritative forms of philosophy, science, social theory, etc. of the day.

Therefore, what is at issue here is a more fundamental problem about the epistemological constitution of human geography in the long run and about its place in the broader system of science as a whole – and, thus, as fundamentally linked to its structural conditions and the developments or transformations that regularly take hold in such a system. Reckoning with certain constitutive epistemic patterns in geography is something that calls for more reflection (not less) and for more (not less) philosophically (and historically) minded geographers able to address and soundly elaborate on such long-lasting epistemic questions. We simply cannot get away with them! And certainly not by trying to limit our philosophical commitments (or by believing that we have limited them).

More significantly, such a philosophical elaboration is not *solely* a matter of deploying robust analytical skills. While conceptual clarification and analytical robustness are very welcome indeed (and are often at the

beginning of any philosophical endeavour that is worth the name), it is a rather naïve assumption to expect that persistent epistemic or philosophical issues are simply to ‘dissolve’ when germane and brave analytical dexterity appears. This way of looking at things can be suited for car mechanics lovers, busy business travellers and very practically minded people, yet, it does a poor job when it comes to long-lasting dilemmas, geographic or otherwise.

Certain epistemic issues are here to remain in/with geography because they are to do either with fundamental features of geographical issues/objects or with the very nature of geography as a form of knowledge and its relation to other forms of knowledge.

So, this is not entirely a story about ‘philosophy envy’, it is something broader and deeper that we need to come to terms with. Accordingly, YEUNG’s celebration of the non-existing subfield of Theory of Geography is premised upon a mischaracterisation of sorts. Certainly, he is right when he says that nothing comparable to what we encounter in other social sciences (such as Social Theory, Economic Theory or Political Theory) does exist in geography or at least does not exist to the extent that it can be considered a fully-fledged and well-established institutional realm as the ones aforementioned. As a matter of fact, in the recently published *The promise of cultural geography*, CONWAY asserts: ‘... while the vocation of political theorist, social theorist, international theorist, or cultural theorist are all well established, it is unclear what “geographical theorist” would even mean’ (CONWAY, P. 2025, p. 52. Emphasis added). Nobody knows what on earth this business is about, and yet it hasn’t stopped growing and impressing hiring committees and editorial boards!

The relevance and political-cum-academic pedigree that theory has come to acquire over the last decades has resulted in an utter resignification of the very enigmatic syntagm ‘theory of geography’. In just a few years, the previous lack of clarity about what geographical theory might consist of (other than a sheer oxymoron as previously noted) has been replaced by a staggering proliferation

of meaning, mostly under the guise of prescriptive formulas. The limelight has been stolen by cultural geographers, though for such a fancy task has generally been left to them, theory-makers *par excellence* in human geography (see BARNETT, C. 1998a, b). Significantly, CONWAY, P. (2025, p. 51) has aptly explained why this is so: ‘To study culture (whatever this may be), one cannot bypass for long questions of interpretation – and, then, questions of theory. It is not, of course, the case that only cultural geographers engage in theoretical reflection, any more than it is only international relations scholars that study nuclear weapons, great power wars, or genocide. The point is simply that the subject matter of cultural geography imparts an uncommonly strong demand for, as Stuart Hall once articulated it, ‘the detour through theory’.

Were historians of geography (and those rare and quirky younger brothers of theirs devoted to epistemic and philosophical reflection in geography, DOEL, M. 2024 dixit) to understand their work in a classical way they should confine themselves to consigning, compiling, ordering, and, when necessary, presenting in a scholarly and affordable-to-students format the rather unfathomable complexities of the flamboyant theoretical apparatuses which leading cultural geographers have been busy producing. However, those venturing well beyond this propaedeutic task, have additionally deployed a wide-ranging array of approaches (contextual, biographical, intellectual, place-based) to trace, explore and carefully account about the intellectual and material histories and geographies of recent theoretical and methodological developments in critical human geographies (BARNES, T. and SHEPPARD, E. 2019; BERG, L. *et al.* 2022; JAKOBSEN, P. *et al.* 2022; LARSEN, H.G. 2022).

These works share a recognisable common interest in mapping out the geographies and complex historical spatialities of circulation, translation, influence, and recognition through which critical human geography unfolded over the years. Importantly, these

works have provided source-rich and contextually-grounded accounts of the different (and sometimes diverging) historical paths and institutional sites through which critical and theory-inspired endeavours emerged, evolved, and deeply transformed previous academic traditions. More to the point of my argument, said spatial histories bear witness to the pervasive nature of the bifurcated fate of critical/radical geographies, that is to say: an increasing split between more empirically-oriented and engaged scholar endeavours and the drive towards ‘developing a corpus of abstract geographic theory to represent and explain the world’ (BARNES, T. and SHEPPARD, E. 2019, p. 21), with an eventual debunking of the former since the 1970s in favour of the growing traction and academic prestige of the project of building a theoretical basis for the discipline.

Certainly, said spatial histories have brought about a very compelling gain of situated reflexivity. They express a wider quest for normative reflection, self-awareness, and intellectual heterogeneity in the field (KEIGHREN, I. *et al.* 2013). Yet it seems that so far, history and philosophy of geography (HPG) practitioners have left fundamentally unquestioned the very styles of theory-making and philosophical moods that lie at the core of critical geographies, with very few exceptions, as pointed out. My contention is that engaging with some of the epistemic issues that I just mentioned through this commentary is a typical task that philosophically minded geographers can undertake – even at the cost of becoming the Jiminy Cricket that spoils the party to cultural geographers!

For many reasons, YEUNG’s call to ‘re-centring geographic theory’ should be understood as an integral part of what is to be done in the sub-field HPG and may eventually result in a more meaningful sub-field of Theory of Geography. All in all, a more substantive and purposeful philosophical reflection is required – a philosophy of geography that goes beyond the programmatic and prescriptive uses of theory and the hectic styles of mutually contested camps and entrenched

theoretical silos which the endless turns and twists (essentially ahistorical) in the field have brought about.

Even when I am rather sceptical (as much as YEUNG) about the way geographers have lately engaged with theory under the formula of commentary after commentary on such-and-such philosopher, I do not concur with explanatory forms of geography as having any privileged relationship with geography’s object, spirit and goals. As things stand right now in the field, more explanatory mid-range theorisation will certainly be useful and refreshing, yet I still consider that theory can meaningfully express itself in geography in the form of philosophic thematisation of geographic objects and concepts. Off the top of my mind, I would argue that MALPAS, J. (1999, 2012, 2022) has provided an outstanding example of this. And yet he is one of the few ones around deeply aware that fruitful geographic theorising cannot take place within the iron cage of constructivism, where the overemphasis on the contingency of particular instantiations of geographical objects (places, in this case) completely obliterates the very possibility of grasping why and how ‘place’ is a necessary structure to human experience.

Finally, going back to COMPAGNON and *Le démon de la théorie*, whatever relation geography may hold to theory, I would argue that when it comes to thinking, it is best to err on the side of caution. Sooner or later, theory’s *vis polemica* turns into theory’s *vis comica*, not to mention the tragic face it gives so repeatedly, in view of the frequently crooked, twisted, unexpected, corrosive, incomplete or downright deviant ways in which the best or worst ideas have come true and got realised in the world.

Taking seriously the fundamental irony that lies at the core of theory-making entails forms of self-reflectivity that lead to hesitant rather than militant forms of critique and thinking. The drive towards philosophical reflection leads more often to contradiction than to adhesion.

After all, the laughter of the Thracian maid always haunts theory’s very soul (BLUMENBERG,

H. 1987). And, thus, theory's *vanitas* becomes most apparent when least expected. As much as 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters', as in the world-famous Plate 43 from Goya's series *The Caprices*, contemporary academic infatuation with critical theory (in the forms already decried) seems to have produced mirages worth looking at head-on. Going back to initial spoofs, perhaps it is worth recalling that already in 1996, witnessing the tide of the theory rise, SMITH funnily asserted: "The appropriate political slogan for the remainder of the 1990s ought to be: "By our nightmares ye shall know us"" (SMITH, N. 1997, p. 135).

In this light, much of what is taken as theory-making might appear more like banal formulas fit for academic promotion and cursory commentary in cultural festivals than thought up to its own ironies and paradoxes.

Of course, self-irony comes across as a rather meagre consolation (if not outright heresy) in the face of the stubbornly enduring hopes that critical scholars have bestowed upon theory. Yet it does not matter anyway – it is not a secret that the laughability of thinking itself is a rather annoying, trifling and tricky vagary with which spoilsport sceptics entertain themselves, diverting energies from real-life urgent issues.

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