

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Yeung, H.W.: Theory and Explanation in Geography. Hoboken, NJ, Wiley, 2024. 320 p.

In his book referred to above, presenting a plethora of theoretical approaches and concrete examples, Henry Wai-chung YEUNG offers a clear and sound argument for a mid-range explanatory theory, which, in his opinion, geography needs badly. He argues for a theory development that explicitly incorporates *normative* concerns, is well grounded in *socio-spatial contexts* and, in part, through supporting researchers with their empirical studies, *useful* to the practice of positive social change. It is no coincidence that he places epistemology, which he urges that geographers should adopt for theory and explanation, within the framework of critical human geography.

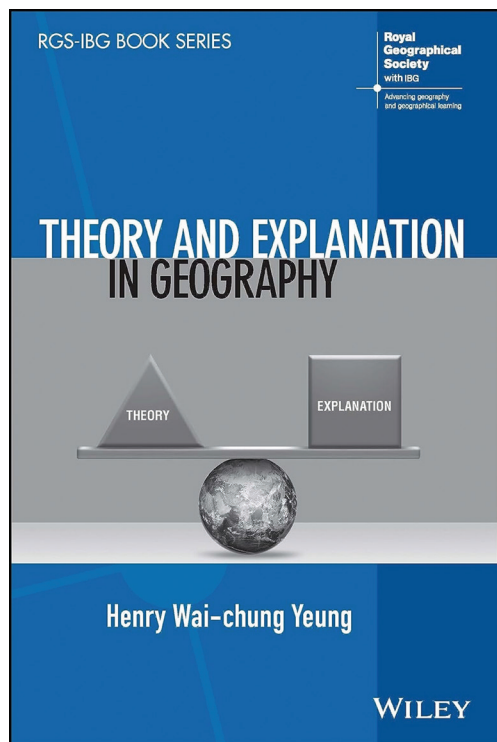
Agreeing with the author's revealing reflexivity and unambiguous positionality, I find it important to make the perspective from which I deem certain topics, questions, and arguments of the book worthy

of highlighting or thought-provoking clear already at the beginning of this review:

1. As I am also an advocate of critical geography (TIMÁR, J. 2003), I should stress that, in my opinion, critical human geography still has a long way to go before it can be referred to as mainstream in Central and Eastern Europe, where a significant number of the readers of the Hungarian Geographical Bulletin are from. It is far from being in the hegemonic position where, relying on Cox's assessment a decade before, YEUNG placed critical geography in general: "The hegemonic position in human geography is now occupied by something that is called 'critical human geography'" (Cox, K.R. 2014 in YEUNG, H.W. 2024, p. 80).

2. In the social context where I, along with many of my fellow researchers, strive to deal with critical social sciences notwithstanding, those in power perceive approaches like Marxism, feminism or postcolonialism as ideologies, and do not regard the disciplines applying them as science; in fact, they even hinder their cultivation (TIMÁR, J. 2019).

Nevertheless, I do not think that this book will be unable to attract considerable interest in Hungary or the neighbouring countries. For instance, an international discussion on this book was organised at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj in 2024, which was also seminal to the publication of a number of papers in this issue of the Hungarian Geographical Bulletin (BENEDEK, J. and TÖRÖK, A. 2025; GYURIS, F. 2025; GYURIS, F. *et al.* 2025; PUENTE-LOZANO, P. 2025; YEUNG, H.W. *et al.* 2025). Obviously, the author's name itself already attracts attention, since, as an outstanding scholar of economic geography and a leading figure in the field of Global Production Networks research, he was, for example, invited in 2023 by several institutions in Budapest to present his latest research findings. I admit, I also hope that this theoretical book written by an internationally renowned scholar of critical geography rejecting value-neutrality, advocating a normative and context-sensitive approach, striving for progressive changes against social injustice, exploitation, oppression, uneven development, and the like, may also serve as a source of confirmation for representatives of critical social sciences in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Henry YEUNG, who, after his graduation in Singapore, entered the University of Manchester in order to familiarise himself with the Western theories of economic geography, whose empirical knowledge is embedded primarily in



the realities of East Asia, and who is now a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is an author who also takes a stand against the Anglo-American hegemony of knowledge production, among other things, with this book. Thus, hopefully, he will agree that what I, too, keep in view primarily, while giving voice to some of my doubts (criticism) in the course of this brief review of the book, is the professional concerns that stem from the socio-spatial context presented above. I do so with the sincere hope that this book, together with the questions it provokes, will stimulate discussions in postgraduate programmes in the Central and Eastern European region, and that it will find its way into the curricula of an increasing number of geography courses.

In the first chapter, YEUNG makes it clear that in his book he strives to develop a “causal mechanism-based approach to theory and explanation in/for Geography” and promises to examine “why an explanatory theory might be useful in certain kind of geographical enquiry” (p. 4). To this end, he presents his points of view enabling a transparent logical framework helping the reader to follow this rather major undertaking to take shape. In this endeavour he relies on the three criteria referred to earlier (i.e. normativity, context-specificity, and practical adequacy), which he sets as requirements for the theory-building he recommends. However, he views this theory development as a “synthetic project”, which he also implements in three interconnected steps, especially in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

In the first step (Chapter 3), he primarily explains that a causal explanatory theory must necessarily be epistemologically realistic and practically adequate, and what constitutes the nature and usefulness of mid-range theorising (which is neither about over-deterministic generalisations nor about individual cases). In the second step (Chapter 4), relying on the epistemology of causal theory, he reconceptualises relationality, providing a critique of relational thoughts, which have become quite widespread in human geography by now. Then, in step 3 (Chapter 5), he shows that a tendency to conflate the concepts of mechanism and process can be identified in geographical literature; therefore, he develops a theory of mechanism. By so doing, he demonstrates what a mechanism-based explanatory theory might look like.

YEUNG aims to create a basis for the rationale of his own theory development in Chapter 2 of his book. Perhaps it is permissible to discuss this chapter in more detail now, reversing the order presented in the book. This is justified partly by the richness of ideas of this chapter that cannot be reproduced in a book review, since the author highlights opinions, criticism, and discourses relevant to his argument from the vast literature of geography, political sciences, analytical sociology, and the philosophy of social sciences. Similar to what he does at the end of every

other chapter, though now setting out 58 items on a total of 13 pages, he offers further details and sources to his readers who want to delve deeper into a given issue. Yet, he does not let them lose their bearings. In addition to a number of other useful charts and tables in the book, he rushes to their aid with a systematic overview in Table 2.1. My other reason for putting relatively greater emphasis on this part of the book is that this is the very chapter that, for me, raises the most issues likely to generate further discussions.

YEUNG identifies the presence of eight strands of the geographical thought in the new era that began in the 1970s, which followed both the publication of “Explanation in Geography” (1969), the work of the young David HARVEY that provided inspiration also recognizable in the title of this volume, Comtean positivism characteristic of the 1960s in general, and the quantitative revolution. Taking his pick from among them, he analyses the theories that include the word “theory” in their names. He, thus, touches on Marx’s theory of capital, then goes on to examine in more detail the actor-network theory (ANT), non-representational theory (NRT), and assemblage theory within poststructuralism, post-phenomenology, and posthumanism. He then turns to the feminist theory and finally to the postcolonial theory. The presentation of the nature of these theories is at the heart of his epistemologically focused interest. And for such presentation, the analytical framework is a systematic examination of the three characteristics of the type of theory that the author considers to be followed, i.e., explanatory theory. While clearly stating that the basic purpose of this 2nd chapter is “grounding this book’s synthetic approach to theory and explanation” (p. 36), he finally seems to have discarded all the theories listed there. At this point, I must admit that I find it difficult to identify any solid “grounding” in this chapter; rather, to me it suggests that if we follow YEUNG’s recommendation and try to “improve” geography with explanatory mid-range theories, then we can achieve this exclusively through the critical realism he has chosen.

Sometimes it is the wording that may lead me to that conclusion. For example, I interpret YEUNG’s frequent use of quotation marks around the word “theory” in his analyses as meaning that he questions the self-classification used in the given system of thought *in general* (not only because of the definition of the explanatory theory used by him). For instance, regarding the actor-network theory, he finally arrives at the following conclusion: “it is indeed not a theory, nor an explanation grounded in such a (causal) theory. The word ‘theory’ in ANT is a misnomer.” (p. 50) He concludes his assessment of the non-representational theory with similar words. He thinks of NRT as an “ethos and a style of thinking about event, practice and affect”, in which, agreeing with McCORMACK (2003 in YEUNG, H.W. 2024,

p. 54), he treats theory as a “modest yet enlivening and pragmatic supplement”. The conclusion here is also dismissive. “Like the actor-network theory, NRT is not a theory per se and, thus, the term ‘theory’ in its name is also quite a misnomer.” (p. 53) Taking the geographical knowledge production practice that I have experienced in my own region into account, and being familiar with the institutional system that is still strongly influenced by positivism, I fear that, despite a seemingly shared critical geographical approach, these evaluations would only make the career chances of those young people (e.g. BERKI, M. and TOLNAI, G.N. 2018; SÁGI, M. 2022) who, for example, in Hungary have only recently started to introduce or are the first to apply ANT or emotional geographies more difficult than easier.

I am glad to agree that feminist approaches to human geography have been working successfully for the past three decades to achieve normativity and emancipatory goals. However, YEUNG seems to side with those who believe that “the actually existing presence and impact of these epistemologies in Geography can still be disappointing” (p. 68). Ultimately, he finds that the explanatory theory’s third characteristic defined by him, i.e. “the *practical adequacy* of analysing difference and advocating change through explanatory theories ... has not been completely accomplished.” (p. 68) I think criticising the effectiveness of “explaining” or the extent of “the impact on change”, and seeing the possibility of progress only in the application of one type of theory, namely the explanatory one, are two completely different things. I have my serious doubts about YEUNG’s advice according to which a critical review of “an overemphasis on contingency and situatedness can be unfavourable to theory development in feminist geography” (p. 76) could be useful.

Chapter 6 is a case study that excellently illustrates how the author’s proposed mid-level explanatory theory development presented previously can be operationalised. This chapter will certainly make those who are not familiar with YEUNG’s previous economic geography studies on globalisation and global production networks (GPNs) feel like reading them, and they can also familiarise themselves with their theoretical extension.

The author’s intention to include this chapter is also to present why this kind of explanatory theory, for which he argues throughout the volume, is useful. Perhaps he will not be offended if I highlight a specific aspect of this usefulness here. Namely, one that I would link to the Central and Eastern European socio-political context, which I described at the beginning of this review, and which concerns the possible effects of the politics of theorising. It occurred to me that if we could make political decision-makers aware of YEUNG’s results regarding the explanations of the important economic processes of our times published

in this chapter, they might be more likely to change their science policy ideas to our advantage.

YEUNG clearly argues in this chapter as well that “the geographical theories are not contextually neutral nor devoid of value-ladenness. Rather, they almost always reflect the positionality of theorists and the historical-geographical contexts in which these theories are situated.” (p. 24) Geographical specificity in his GPN theory development can be recognised in its embeddedness in East Asian reality. Moreover, in this case study too, he successfully supports the “reverse discourse”, which opposes hegemonic knowledge production by “theorising back”, “speaking back” to mainstream Anglo-American geography. At the same time, this chapter also confirms my view that we still need to fine-tune the extensive international discourse on combating the uneven spatial development of geographical knowledge production. We must draw attention to the fact that when, for example, criticism is voiced in East Asia, as is the case with YEUNG, while “speaking back” they treat Europe as a unity, concealing, for example, the still existing disadvantage of Central and Eastern Europe in the academic institutional network (TIMÁR, J. 2004).

Following the train of thought of “speaking back”, in Chapter 7, the author argues for the strategy of “theorising back” at social science, saying that geography should not be content with just providing data to other disciplines. He does this by asking “what type of geography for what kind of social science?” (p. 252), that is, examining the possibilities of a more fruitful relationship with social sciences. He claims that the mid-range geographical theory and mechanism-based explanation proposed by him can also make a useful contribution to social sciences. However, YEUNG also believes that this type of theory and explanation can make significant contributions to public engagement and policy agendas. It is another question that, in my opinion, we could open a new chapter here to discuss what kind of policy we should support. YEUNG states that we cannot achieve social justice through discursive criticism and narratives alone; he also argues for the importance of activism for the victims of injustice. Towards this end and the theory-building he suggests, he encourages building relationships with like-minded social scientists. This reminds me of a friend of mine, who happens to be an economist, who is an excellent practitioner of participatory action research (PAR) in the fight against socio-environmental injustice (MÁLOVICS, Gy. *et al.* 2019). And YEUNG too urges to follow this kind of PAR. The researcher mentioned, having recently discovered the commitment of the critical geographers to activism inside and outside the academic world, is rather willing to cooperate. However, judging by his work so far, I do not assume that he is also ready to develop mid-range explanatory theory. YEUNG has convinced me through his book that his theory may

have a positive impact on social sciences and progressive social changes, and I can only hope that he can also be convinced that other kinds of theories and approaches can also lead us to this goal.

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