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# ON THE POLITICS OF EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT

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## ABSTRACT

**This commentary on Elvin Wyly's paper, 'The Evolution of Geographic Thought', aims at stimulating a reflection on the possibilities offered by the politics of evolutionary thought as envisaged in the paper and its use by critical scholars. Through the analysis of the paper's ambivalences towards the politics of evolution and its history, the commentary discusses the limits and the potential of Wyly's effort to destabilise the linearity and unity of evolution.**

**Key words: evolutionary thought; critical geography; history of geographical thought**

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## INTRODUCTION: FASCINATION AND DISCOMFORT

In 'The Evolution of Geographic Thought', Elvin Wyly develops a compelling and provocative analysis of the relationship between geography and evolutionary thought. From the moment I read the paper for the first time I felt surprise, provoked and fascinated by the complex and systematic theorisation that goes well beyond the boundaries of disciplinary thinking. How to grip such a rich and dense analysis keeping together Deloria, a 'neo-Lamarckian' perspective and the noosphere? How to engage with the work of someone who is able to keep together so many different perspectives and examples? In the first section only, the discussion keeps together, among others, the Honourable Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, congressman Steve King, Professor Kimberley TallBear of the Faculty of Native Studies from the University of Alberta and Dr. He Jiankui, a biophysicist specialising in genomics at Shenzhen's South University of Science and Technology.

The main argument of the paper reads as follows: '[E]volution is accelerating. Evolutionary geographies are evolving, too – in

a complex interrelation between biophysical materialities and the way humans think, talk, and fight about the meanings of evolution'. Wyly defines his argument as 'simple, perhaps even naïve and self-evident', demonstrating a praiseworthy humbleness. His analysis is indeed extremely rich, original and complex, displaying an impressive ability to connect facts, concepts and problems that very few people could analyse together. The fascination of reading such an original and challenging text was soon followed by a sense of discomfort for Wyly's (perhaps implicit) suggestion about the centrality of evolutionary thought in our discipline, including those radical stances I see myself aligned with. Drawing from this variegated range of feelings, in this commentary I aim at stimulating a reflection on the possibilities offered by Wyly's politics of evolutionary thought and its use by critical scholars.

## PLAYING WITH AMBIVALENCE

From the start, Wyly plays provocatively with his choice to produce a critical theory centred around the idea of evolution: in the first paragraph, he anticipates that some readers might be

offended by such a choice ('Even now, many people will be offended by my words, my ideas, me. This is as it should be') while also introducing evolution in its everyday, mundane meaning and use ('You are evolving. So am I. So is every one, every thing, around us. [...] There are geographies of these socionatures, these cultures, and they have evolved. They are evolving now'). In my view, this first paragraph already sets the tone for the overall ambivalence permeating the paper's analytical effort. Is it possible to 'recuperate' evolutionary thought in a critical (geographic) perspective acknowledging its problematic history? Wyly seems to suggest so, even though that involves rethinking our approach and consideration for evolutionary thought, challenging the most simplistic and linear readings of evolution, and privileging complexity over sterile opposition between elements.

When reading through the original, albeit sometimes difficult to digest, theorisation of the Delorian, neo-Lamarckian noösphere – defined as 'a coalescence of distinct processes of biomaterial evolution enmeshed in globalizing encounters of diverse cognitive-cultural ways of *thinking* about evolution' – I could not stop asking myself 'Is it legitimate (rather than possible) to attempt to "recuperate" evolutionary thought in a critical (geographic) perspective?'. However, Wyly's paper – probably willingly – does not openly address this question, this choice being at the core of its provocative spirit. In the paper, Wyly demonstrates a great knowledge of feminist, indigenous and queer politics and scholarship, cautioning against the 'co-optation, abuse and weaponization' of radical perspectives under the Delorian, neo-Lamarckian noösphere. For someone who clearly masters these critical and emancipatory analyses, the choice not to clearly position his political project and not to question the use of a language with such controversial history is quite surprising.

How does the recuperation of evolutionary thinking might support the production of radical and emancipatory knowledge? Wyly's emphasis on the struggle to distinguish allies from enemies at a time when 'the accelerated, combinatorial cognitive production of ideas and representations of human identity and difference are central strategies of accumulation and legitimization – as are the contradictions and conflicts that

ensue in the discursive circuits of media and monetization' and 'humanity struggles to learn from diverse ancestors and potential future descendants to find better ways of evolving on a precarious planet' is timely and relevant (as brilliantly demonstrated by the discussion about Wyly and Bannon). However, there is a rich tradition of intellectuals and scholars who have showed how emancipatory and progressive claims can be easily appropriated and weaponised by oppressive hegemonic structures (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello 1999; Puar 2007; Bumiller 2008; Farris 2017), so I am left unsure about the novel contributions of evolutionary thinking towards the construction of practices and knowledges that reject, among others, ableism, ageism, cisgenderism, classism, colonialism, heteronormativity, racism and sexism. Can a critical geographical theory, even in its most abstract form, avoid to (self-)question its political potential today? Interrogating the political, emancipatory potential of thinking evolution as envisaged by Wyly (i.e. 'fluid, non-linear and multidimensional') is a tricky process open to conflict and contradictions. Wyly's paper clearly demonstrates awareness of this, but it does not go all the way to theorising the radical (and emancipatory?) character of evolutionary thought.

The will to play with the ambivalence of evolution rather than theorise its emancipatory potential emerges already in the literature review section 'Histories of Evolution in Geographic Thought'. Here Wyly decides to reproduce the 'usual' narrative of the history of Anglo-American geographic thought from its separation from geology through the lenses of evolutionary logics, highlighting three key turning points (the 'human ecology of the Chicago school and the conservative mainstreaming of structural-functionalism; Marxist historical materialism analyses opposing the naturalising justification of Neo-Malthusian political economy; and feminist theory waves and the milestone contribution of Donna Haraway on situated knowledges). Although acknowledging the oversimplification of his analytical effort, Wyly defines this reconstruction 'not an inaccurate portrayal of the cultural evolution of how successive generations of geographers have thought about, and positioned themselves in relation to, various theorists of evolution'. This statement

is followed by a provocation: 'Berry and Park are viewed as less evolved than Harvey; Haraway's feminist technoscience, Butler's gender performativity, and Sedgwick's queer theory are understood as more evolved than Harvey's Marxism'. Beyond the provocation itself, what strikes me here is to see how the reference to evolution downplays questions of conflict and power (even though Wily mentions them), as highlighted by the increasing opposition to specific epistemologies and methods within universities and society across several countries (e.g. Verloo 2018; Borghi 2020; Warmington 2020; Hancock 2021). The language of evolution seems to acknowledge the presence of a 'winner', that is, the 'more evolved', while anyone who occupies a minoritarian position within academia and works on specific topics knows very well how hard and tiring it is to justify the legitimacy of one's own work all the time (not to mention those cases where this leads to being fired or publicly exposed as occurred recently in France). The issues of power and conflict, exemplified by the resistance within the discipline of geography to acknowledge some epistemologies as legitimate, are at the core of Natalie Oswin's recent re-reading of the same 'usual' narrative labelled as 'all wrong' (Oswin 2020, p. 11). For Oswin, the cultural turn was not the *evolution* of positivist and Marxist readings but the response *against* the structures of empire, military and capital that marked the history of Anglo-American geography, a history narrated as follows.

'The drive by white supremacist heteropatriarchs to chart, map, exploit and extract from lands, peoples, flora and fauna previously unknown to them for their own early capitalist gain set geography into motion as a discipline and embedded a disregard and disdain for difference and social justice into the fabric of geographical thought and practice. By the 20th century, when the earth was all mapped and mostly claimed by some Europeans and their nation states, and tensions among the global powers culminated in World Wars I and II, many geographers then provided intelligence for military efforts. As such, the region and the nation were added to the globe as scales that

geographers could expertly advise upon and influence. Spatial science, that effort to prove geography's worth as an objective, scientific endeavour, came directly out of the military collaborations of the Second World War. In the dawning era of late capitalism, the 'space cadets' used new computational capabilities to search for spatial laws with an eye toward helping governments and businesses achieve economic efficiency. As global capitalism was clearly becoming increasingly reliant on and tied to cities, spatial science research focused on this domain, thus expanding existing geographical claims to expertise on the globe, the region and the nation to the urban'. (Oswin 2020, p. 11)

Like Wily's, Oswin's narration is over-simplified but is framed around conflict and opposition rather than continuation and evolution while being openly positioned as part of a theoretical political project built on solidarities across modes of difference that inhabit an epistemological elsewhere and reject the dualistic logics of hegemonic systems of power (us/them, margin/centre and major/minor). Oswin's theorisation echoes Muñoz theorisation of queer utopia: 'Queerness is an ideality. (...) Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel *then* and *there*. (...) Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing' (2009, p. 1, emphasis in original).

Wily's effort follows a similar trajectory, as shown by the paper's engaged politics of citation and the acknowledgement of the central role of intersectionality to understand the weaponisation of emancipatory politics under the Delorian, neo-Lamarckian noösphere. However, Wily's project does not turn towards a specific political project to be built around (the resignification of) evolution.

While I feel discomfort for the idea of such project because of the violence perpetrated in the name of evolution, I acknowledge the political potential brought by the destabilisation of evolution. My personal intellectual trajectory (e.g. Di Feliciano 2017) has been shaped

by Gibson-Graham's 'politics of possibilities' (2006), whose first step is represented by the politics of language. Inspired by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Gibson-Graham frames politics as involving 'the continual struggle to fix meaning, to close the totality and stem the infinite processes of signification within language' (2006, p. 55); it follows that 'a counterhegemonic political project could be pursued through destabilisation and dislocation of the seeming unity of the hegemonic discursive formation' (p. 56). In this respect, Wylly's destabilisation of the linearity and unity of evolution appears as a valid first step towards world-making efforts opening political possibilities. However, the destabilisation of evolution is not followed by another language in the paper. Both Oswin and Gibson-Graham's political projects point towards alterity and difference, without denying the existence of hegemonic structures. Which is the political direction envisaged by Wylly's reconceptualisation of evolution? Who is the subject at the core of this project? How can a project centred around evolution drive collective emancipatory action? If willing to address these questions, hopefully in his future writings, Wylly's theoretical effort might open the possibility to reconcile an emancipatory, world-making politics of difference with the idea of evolution.

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