



## Landscape and Power in Geographical Space as a Social-Aesthetic Construct; Landscape Theories: A Brief Introduction.

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*Landscape and Power in Geographical Space as a Social-Aesthetic Construct*, by Olaf Kühne, is both challenging and challenged. It is challenging because it can provide insight into a potentially valuable philosophically and theoretically informed German sociological approach to landscape that is largely unexplored by English language geographers. The book itself, however, is challenged by the problem of how to communicate the value of this approach to English language geographers whose language, theory, discourse, and sociocultural background differs considerably from that of the book's author. It is also challenging to a book reviewer who would like to mediate between the two geographical cultures.

Olaf Kühne, who did doctorates in both geography and sociology, is a professor of urban and regional development in the Geography Department of Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen, Germany. The value of *Landscape and Power* lies in the author's informed use of "social constructivist" sociological theory to explore the role of landscape in urban and regional development. Social constructivist theory is heavily embedded in German phenomenology and sociology, and unless one has a reasonable background in these fields (and the German language) it can be difficult to make intelligent use of this theory. The problem of language, I believe, lies already in the word *construction*, which is difficult to fully grasp unless one is able to disentangle the entangled historical relationship between German and English, and between German and U.S. scholarship.

The most influential work on social constructivism is Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Both authors were of Austrian background, and both moved to the United States after World War II, where both were heavily influenced by the multinational, multilingual intellectual climate of New York City, particularly its New School of Social Research and, in the case of Berger, a sociologist and theologian, by the academic environment of Wagner College on Staten Island, New York. Wagner developed out of a German Lutheran seminary, where the Sunday church service was preached in German long after Wagner became a liberal arts college. Of particular importance to the two authors was the philosopher and sociological phenomenologist Alfred Schütz, a Jewish refugee from Austria. We thus have two native German-speaking scholars, living in New York City, who produced a highly influential book that was first written in English and only later translated into German under the title *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie* (Berger and Luckmann 1969). These sociological philosophers, who were greatly interested in language, naturally would have

had a comprehensive understanding of the word *construction* as used in a variety of languages going back to the Latin and would have assumed that their English language readers understood the complexity of the term as well.

In contemporary English, the word *construction*, to judge from the dictionary, primarily suggests, either literally or metaphorically, something to do with the building of a building; for example, a concrete structure constructed according to the plans of an architect. In German there are other words of Germanic origin, notably *Bau*, that carry this meaning of intentionally designed construction, and are related to the English word *building*. The original meaning of *construction* in English and German derives, however, from roots in the Latin *constructus*, past participle of *construere*. The etymologically primary (i.e., oldest) meaning of *construction* listed in the dictionary, which derives from the study of language (also legal language) is therefore "the act or result of construing, interpreting, or explaining" (Merriam-Webster 2021). There is, of course, a considerable difference between the construction of reality, and thereby the reality of landscape understood in materialistic terms as being analogous to a building, and construction understood in terms of language as having to do with how reality is understood and perceived. Social constructivism, understood in the broad sense of construction used by Berger and Luckmann, is concerned with the way phenomenal reality is understood and practiced in the context of people's social being. This is also how I understand what Kühne basically means by *construction*. As he puts it, "A fundamental tenant of social constructivism is that knowledge of the world in which we live comes only through interaction with those with whom we live. It is impossible, then, to know the world 'as it is'; we can access it only in pre-interpreted form" (Kühne 2018, pp. 2–3).

Kühne's book is best, in my reading, when he demonstrates how he uses a theoretically and philosophically informed social constructivism in practice, as he does in the six case studies with which he closes the book. The first case study, "Landscape Between Modernization and Mystification: The American Grid and the Frontier," thus shows considerable insight into this iconic U.S. landscape as understood from a constructivist stance. The same kind of insight can also be found, for example, in his analysis of the German and Polish landscape in the body of the book. The author, however, is challenged when he tries to comprehend English language geographical theorizing in terms of his German constructionist framework.

The book's problem lies in its attempt to serve both a German and an English language readership on the basis of

what are primarily German geographical and philosophical discourses. As the author explains in his foreword, “This book aims ... not just to make my own research up to the present point in time available to an international readership, but also to document the ongoing discussion about landscape in the German-speaking countries of Central Europe—a discussion undoubtedly rooted in language and culture. Hence, my coverage of this debate will focus especially on the literature in German” (Kühne 2018, p. v). My feeling is that instead of hitting “two birds with one stone,” he tends to miss both the German and English-speaking birds. Kühne’s own approach to landscape is, in practice, heavily rooted in German language and culture, and even though the book is written in English, and ostensibly for an English language readership, it is oriented in important ways toward a readership that can read German. When Kühne discusses the work of English language landscape scholars he tends to portray many of them, notably the “New Cultural Geographer” Denis Cosgrove, as taking a social constructivist approach. In this way he provides a way by which his German readers can relate their framework of thought to developments in “Anglo-Saxon” geography. The problem, however, is that social constructivism, with its roots in phenomenology and philology, was not used to any significant degree by Cosgrove or, in fact, in most of the English language scholarly discourse on landscape to which Kühne refers.

Cosgrove, as a case in point, distanced himself from literary and hence, in effect, language-oriented phenomenological approaches to landscape theorization. He preferred rather to focus on the use of cartographic and perspectival technical methods of representation, notably as used by the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio to literally construct buildings and material landscape scenery at the behest of Venetian society (Cosgrove 1993). Furthermore, when he wrote of *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Cosgrove 1984), he was borrowing a term from the structural Marxists in which the “social” in social formation has an economic valence that differs from that of the notion of the *gesellschaftliche*, as *social* is translated in the title of the German version of Berger and Luckmann’s classic. Kühne, in fact, distances himself from the Marxism that informed much cultural geography at the time Cosgrove wrote his classic works. *Gesellschaft* has connotations of sociability, socialization, and social being in contrast to the more political-economic notion of social used by Cosgrove. It was, furthermore, Cosgrove’s emphasis on the conscious use of instrumental, geometric, cartographic, and perspectival methods of representation to generate the concept of landscape that prompted Nigel Thrift, and his school, to adopt a countervailing “nonrepresentational” approach to landscape that has led to an exploration of the phenomenological traditions

that are integral to German ideas of *gesellschaftliche Konstruktion* (Thrift 2007).

The importance of Kühne’s work lies in part in the fact that it is well grounded in social constructivist theory and philosophy but he does his work, and this theory a disservice when he lumps it together with English language scholarship that often has a very different theoretical basis and agenda. The end result is that he presents a somewhat confused picture of English language landscape scholarship to his German readership, at the same time as English language readers will have difficulty comprehending a book rooted in an unfamiliar discursive and language terrain in the German-speaking countries of Central Europe.

*Landscape Theories: A Brief Introduction* was published in a book series coedited by Kühne called “RaumFragen: Stadt–Region–Landschaft” (translated as “SpaceAffairs: City–Region–Landscape”). Kühne’s book presenting a brief introduction to landscape theory, made as part of this series, is even more challenged than *Landscape and Power*, but in this case mainly by being lost not in translation, but rather a lack of translation. The book is identified only on the cover in German as being a *Lehrbuch*, which means textbook. The book reads, in fact, as if it were originally a textbook conceptualized for advanced German students and then reworked or translated into English. There is, in any case, a certain resemblance between this English language book and another book, with a similar title, by Kühne published in German by the same publisher the previous year: *Landschaftstheorie und Landschaftspraxis. Ein Einführung aus sozialkonstruktivistischer Perspektive* (which translates as *Landscape Theory and Landscape Practice: An Introduction from a Social Constructivist Perspective*; Kühne 2018). In this book, the question of whether or not English language readers, especially students, are prepared to learn German to read the many German publications cited is quite acute. The book has more than forty pages of bibliography, including an impressive list of fifty-nine publications by the author himself, but these publications are largely in German, and the German titles are not translated into English. As a textbook, this book suffers also from not having an index to help the student navigate the book (this is also the case with *Landscape and Power*, which furthermore lacks a bibliography).

Reading this book, one cannot help but wonder what an English-speaking student would make of, for example, the section entitled, “Autopoietic Systems Theory,” which begins: “Although Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory has so far been used sporadically for the investigation of specific communication logics in relation to landscape, no

extensively elaborated autopoietic systems of theoretical landscape theory has yet been developed” (p. 22). This is a good example, I would venture, of just how rooted the author is in the discourses of a German language and mode of expression that would be unfamiliar to English language readers. Although this is intended to be a brief introduction to landscape theories ostensibly written for English language readers, it is considerably oriented toward a German public, particularly advanced students, and is thus not particularly useful to English language students of geography. A more pedagogical approach that takes account of the differing philosophical and language traditions dividing English and German approaches to landscape would have been more useful.

As in *Landscape and Power*, Kühne tends in this volume to link his German constructivist tradition with the work of social geographers in the British–Anglo-American tradition who are not particularly cognizant of the historical importance of German and continental geography to their discipline, particularly in the United States (on the German and continental roots of geography, see Sauer 1925; Hartshorne 1939; James 1972). Many of these Anglo-American social geographers are particularly critical of the anthropologically oriented cultural geography of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley tradition he fostered, which they often present as being hopelessly provincial and stuck in the 1920s, when Sauer wrote *The Morphology of Landscape* (Sauer 1925). Sauer, who was an American born of German descent and conversant in a number of European languages, actually promoted a cosmopolitan, continental-inspired, multidisciplinary approach to geography that encompassed Hispanic Middle and South America, not to forget the Caribbean, as well as Anglophone North America. The cosmopolitan tradition he fostered included internationally prominent scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Clarence Glacken, David Lowenthal, and J. B. Jackson, and they pioneered an understanding of geography as being concerned with how the reality of landscape is understood and perceived.

If English language geographers are to learn to appreciate the value of non-Anglo-American approaches such as social constructivism, or phenomenology, it is necessary to recover the cosmopolitan basis for the development of contemporary geography with its roots outside a narrowly defined Anglophone academic realm. The former British Empire, including the United States, has long since become settled by peoples from all over the world, who have brought their scholarly traditions with them, as was seen in the case of Berger and Luckmann, and even Britain

itself has long since become such a multicultural society. Books like Kühne’s are a valuable reminder of the existence of alternative scholarly traditions rooted in languages other than English, but if they are to be of use in expanding Anglo-American geographical horizons, then Anglo-America will need to become more appreciative of, and promote, its cosmopolitan and multilingual scholarly roots, difficult as this is in a time of increasing nationalistic parochialism.

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