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Andrew Feenberg

Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity

The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2010. 257pp., \$22 pb

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Reviewed by **Christian Lotz**

Andrew Feenberg has established himself within the area of US-American philosophy of technology during the last three decades as the proponent of one major approach to technology and society, namely, what is in general referred to as “Critical Theory of Technology.” As such, Feenberg tries to position himself in critical distance not only from “substantive” approaches to technology, such as Heidegger’s and Ellul’s, but also from phenomenological approaches, such as Ihde’s. Feenberg also stands in critical distance to “post-humanist” approaches, such as Haraway’s cyborg theory of humans and her inter-species theory of sociality, culture, and history. Feenberg’s position is mainly based on the assumption that technology is not, as instrumentalists claim (which has often been repeated in public debates), a socially neutral phenomenon; rather, in his major book publications Feenberg has tirelessly demonstrated that technology is from the ground up, a social phenomenon and not simply a tool *for* social processes. In this connection, every “technical action” (xix) is not independent from the social agent, given that it determines the agent’s identity as well as her further actions and choices. Consequently, technology can never be thought of as being independent from the constitution of the social agent. Accordingly, Feenberg intends to present a theory of technology that can be connected to social progress and to the further democratization of our societies in order to rationalize and socialize the feedback loop between agent, society, and technology. Because of this it is clear that Feenberg needs to be in critical distance from metaphysical approaches to the constitution of reality through technology, which, for him, remain merely “abstract” (7) positions.

The book is compiled of revised versions of formerly published essays (ranging from 1992 to 2008). Though these essays lack an *ultimate* unity, as they do not coherently unfold a theory and contain a few repetitions, the chapters fit very well with each other since they develop various aspects of the main theme of the book in different ways. The book is divided into 9 chapters and is organized into three sections, the last one of which comes closest to Feenberg’s former publications. In his early books, especially in *Transforming Technology. A Critical Theory Revisted* (2000), Feenberg – in accord with some aspects of Marx’s view of technology – argues that, because technology is not socially neutral, technology itself must change through democratization, if it is to be successful in bringing about what Feenberg calls “socialism.” As former critics here pointed out, Feenberg’s vision of socialism remains vague. In *Between Reason and Experience* the emphasis on the Marxist background recedes even further into the background, though Feenberg still argues that technology is not socially neutral, i.e. that it comes about through social relations

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and embodies social choices, affects agents, generates social structures and can be influenced by social movements. As such, as Feenberg claims, technology is not independent from “experience” (xix), and, consequently, cannot be thought of as the outcome of instrumental rationality alone (3). In *Between Reason and Experience* former references to “socialism” have turned into what he calls “democratic rationalization,” which – given the main assumption of his approach – can only be realized if we are able to change the “technical mediation of a variety of social activities, whether it be production of medicine, education or the military” (6).

This thesis leads to Feenberg’s rejection of determinist theories of technology, i.e., theories that operate on the assumption that social institutions need to adapt to technological imperatives (9). Instead, he argues, we need to adopt a view that takes technology – taking Latour as a springboard – as socially contingent.

Arguments, such as the necessity of child labor at the end of the 19th century, or the contemporary conservative and economic anti-environmental attitudes of industries and political groups, are based on the assumption that changes are not possible for economic and technological necessities. As we have seen again and again throughout history though, as Feenberg argues, “technology is a scene of social struggle” (13) and changes occur with varying effects for individuals, societies and industries (such as in the case of child labor). As such, we need to speak of a “co-construction of society and technology” (94). Moreover, as Feenberg shows, we should not look at technology as a pool of devices; rather, technology is the “environment within which a way of life is elaborated” (15), which in turn means that the design of technology is not simply identical with designing devices, machines, or other object forms. Alternatively, technologies emerge within social activities and embody social choices, attitudes, struggles, values, and social interests, which makes them unstable and changeable. These norms are materialized in what Feenberg calls “technical codes” (37, 68). The history of bicycles, cars, or boilers shows that the definitions of these objects incorporate standards that point back to social norms and social rationality. Economic significances are therefore, Feenberg claims, often secondary to the “wider human implications in framing a way of life” (23).

Not overlooking the thoughtfulness and importance of his analysis, especially if compared with phenomenological theories of technology, one often wonders, though, whether Feenberg’s focus on the social dimension overlooks what we can learn from Haraway and, for example, Stiegler, who are well aware that the expansion of our contemporary capitalism and its technological form has consequences for the biological and physiological make-up of humans. For, as Stiegler has argued, technology cannot be disconnected from the anatomical and biological constitution, and we should therefore expect that modern technologies not only change the *embodiment* of social struggles (which is rarely addressed by Feenberg); rather, they change the whole psychological and brain apparatus within which we find ourselves and upon which we depend. Accordingly, we find what could be called a “social idealism” in Feenberg’s theory of technology that remains hardly noticeable behind the surface of his explicit reflections. In addition, though Feenberg points out that technology is the form of our life, he almost never considers how the whole range of human relations, including emotions, beliefs, and knowledge as a whole are part of technology and of social reproduction. His notion of the social agent, in other words, remains at times as abstract as the notion of the social in some philosophies that he himself rejects on the grounds that they are too substantive.

The positive examples that Feenberg uses are centered on communication technologies, such as the French “Minitel” system (which Feenberg also used in previous publications). However, Feenberg’s embracement of these technologies, especially the internet, which he defines primarily as a communicative medium (152), is at times in conflict with the critical spirit that he tries to embody in his essays. For example, though he calls for skepticism about the claim that “the ‘written word’ of the Internet is indeed a place where humans and machines appear to be reconciled” (54), Feenberg pays too much attention to the role users play in the development of software and technology design. Though one might agree with the importance of the internet as the coming force and outcome of global capital and, hence, social exchange

and social relations, and though one must understand that the internet is not simply a “function” or an “instrument,” but indeed a “new form of social life,” one wonders whether a more radical critique is needed. Furthermore, although we need to understand that even recent political movements (including the revolutionary movements in the Middle East and the emergence of Wikileaks) at least in part evolve within a media and technology oriented logic through communication and imaging devices, we should also see that the internet is the central driving force in the extension of control and surveillance, the rationalizations of the labor process, as well as the monopolization of the electronics and computer industries. As far as I can see, Feenberg does not really appear to be concerned with these aspects. In response, Feenberg would probably point out that the fact that this review is published in an online journal and that soon the difference between “paper” and online will disappear, leaves us with only one reaction, namely, we need to make sure that the internet and its design will be further developed and shaped by social democratization (instead by the industries alone). To be sure, calling for a more critical attitude *is* what he wants, insofar as he hopes for (a) the task of critical theory to become a critique of technology, and (b) for “secondary instrumentalization” through the discovery and development social norms that are suppressed by current technical codes (71, 151).

At times Feenberg’s central notions remain “theoretically bloodless,” including “democracy,” “socialism,” and “political theory.” For example, on p. 28 he claims that the call for a different design in technologies and the further democratization of the design process is a “socialist” position. However, he nowhere explains how democratization theoretically hangs together with socialism and how we are supposed to think about it as the determining form of a whole society. Rather, it seems as if socialism, for Feenberg, simply means “more democratic and participatory procedures” (213), which, given the problem of the state and the civil society, remains, as such, fairly empty. In addition, he claims on p. 79 that his theory is a “political theory of modernity,” but it remains vague which philosophical position Feenberg holds regarding the questions of how to think about political foundations, community, the common, political forces, and concepts such as power and authority. To put it plainly, the fact that struggles over technology turn out to be political struggles (80) does not make his theory a political *theory*. This is a vagueness that seems to go back to the lack of a founding social principle in Feenberg’s essays. As we know, the difference between early Critical Theory, such as Adorno’s, and recent Critical Theory, such as Habermas’s, is that the latter philosopher gave up on a *unifying* principle of all social relations. For example, the commodity form and the exchange principle (Adorno) are no longer taken to determine the whole of societies. Instead, Habermas accepts that we need to look at societies from the viewpoint of social systems in which different spheres are ruled by different principles or social codes. Though Feenberg discusses some of these aspects in chapter 8, ultimately his position on this question remains vague, as he neither seems to embrace the position of earlier Critical Theory nor the position that Habermas presents. Habermas no longer seems to bother with technology in his writings during the last 30 years of his writings and, rightly so, he gets heavily criticized by Feenberg for the “caricature” (137) his theory embodies in regard to technology and science. Instead, Feenberg claims, technology embodies “value” and is part of the lifeworld. He even goes so far to speak of the “lifeworld of technology” (153). Feenberg’s implicit position between a loose Marxist tradition and newer liberal theory certainly shows Feenberg’s long standing affinity with one of his teachers, Marcuse (see 212).

In sum, Feenberg’s book is a fine book for readers who are interested in a philosophy of technology that does not depend solely either on empirical studies or on the phenomenological tradition. In addition, his inclusion of non-Western viewpoints, such as Japanese positions (113), is refreshing and points towards future intercultural studies in this field. However, the book will disappoint readers who look for radical positions, since – at least in this book – there is not much left of what was formerly called “Critical” in Critical Theory; for his approach remains fairly pragmatic. Instead of working on the basis of Critical Theory as a *theory of society*, he reduces it to a critical analysis of technology. His pragmatic position is most visible in his response to Verbeek: “This excessively negative approach overlooks the secondary instrumentalization that complements the initial functionalization to which objects are submitted as they enter the technical field. The world is still meaningful even in the age of technology, although the meanings

have certainly changed and become more fluid” (75; for a similar charge against the Frankfurt School see 166).

28 April 2011

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