

symplokē

editor

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

VIOLENCE

Volume 20 Numbers 1-2

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HACKING FEENBERG¹

MARK COECKELBERGH

Andrew Feenberg is one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of technology. Although his work is generally regarded as belonging to the tradition known as “Critical Theory of Technology” (Feenberg has been a student of Marcuse), it engages with a much wider range of thinkers and approaches, ranging from science and technology studies (STS) and Heideggerian phenomenology to Japanese philosophy.

Between Reason and Experience, a collection of formerly published essays, does not only provide a good summary of Feenberg’s work during the past 20 years, but also reflects the richness of a thinking that could only emerge from such a broad ecology of theoretical concepts and case studies. More importantly, it foregrounds some extremely challenging societal and philosophical problems that deserve attention from philosophers in and outside of the critical theory community.

The book starts with introducing its central thesis: technology involves “interaction between reason and experience” (xvii). To understand what Feenberg means, we have to know his so-called “instrumentalization” thesis: technological devices have their (instrumental) rationality, but devices then enter the lifeworld, and what technology is also depends on its use – which may be different than originally intended and which may influence design.

As Feenberg explains in the first part of the book, the instrumentalization concept must be seen as a response to technological determinism, which has argued that in scientific-rational dystopia there is no room for freedom and individuality. Giving the examples of hacking information technology (chapter three and chapter five) and the environmental movement (chapter two), he is optimistic about the possibility that user initiatives can transform design and that technology can be democratized. The end to dystopia is near (xxiii-xxiv), since “those who today are subordinated to technology’s rhythms and demands may be able to control it and determine its evolution”

¹Review of Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity*. The MIT P, Cambridge MA, 2010. 257pp.

(3). In this sense, there is “indeterminism”: technology does not determine society but is itself shaped by “both technical and social factors” (13). What Feenberg calls “technical code” is then “the rule under which technologies are realized in a social context with biases reflecting the unequal distribution of social power” (65).

In the second part of the book, Feenberg says more about his instrumentalization theory (72-76) and argues that the existentialist tradition (and I would add: traditional critical theory) has focussed too much on primary instrumentalization, neglecting meaning and concrete social forces. He also asks if Japan qualifies as an alternative modernity and, interestingly, compares their synthesis of Eastern values and Western technology to “the layering of technology with environmental, democratic, and other objectives excluded from the original design process” (Chapter six).

The third part of the book further reflects on rationalization and modernity. Feenberg also responds to Latour, whose work he criticises for eliminating the categories of modernity theory (135). In the final chapter, he concludes that nature and experience are complementary, and summarizes the ways in which lifeworld and science interact (211) by using Marcuse. However, in the concluding section, his thinking moves closer to Heidegger: he argues that we can only “recover the normative of technique” by letting norms emerge from “the shared experience of a community with its world,” that is, from the horizon “within which actions and objects take on meaning” (217).

However, despite Feenberg’s emphasis on interactions between the two kinds of instrumentalization, and despite his flirts with Heideggerian thinking, he still seems to presuppose a sharp distinction between the rational-technological “system” and the lifeworld. This can be criticized from a phenomenological point of view (see also below). Feenberg criticizes Heidegger for not being able to discriminate “between electricity and atom bombs, agricultural techniques and the Holocaust” (25). But contemporary phenomenology could criticize Feenberg for discriminating too much between primary and secondary instrumentalization, that is, for suggesting that technology is something entirely separate from the lifeworld. Feenberg criticizes Habermas for leaving no room for the social dimension of science and technology (138), and for not paying attention to the complex “real interactions between system and lifeworld” (59), but his conceptualization of the relation in terms of “interactions” suggests that he adopts Habermas’ presupposition that we can treat both as separate spheres in the first place. This presupposition is problematic from both a phenomenological and a Latourian perspective.

In sum, Feenberg attempts to steer a course between critical theory and technology studies, but also between critical theory and phenomenology. At times this gives him a rather rough ride – it renders his thinking vulnerable to objections from all these sides – albeit one that is worth studying not only for critical theorists of society and technology, but for all those who are concerned with the complex societal and theoretical issues this book responds to.

For example, Feenberg has criticised STS for abandoning modernity theory, but STS theorists could demand more clarity about the practical implications of Feenberg's theory for technology and society. For example, as Brian Wynne suggests in his foreword, could democratisation of technology also imply *less* technology? And: what kind of *society* and democracy does he want? By including forewords from two known STS scholars, the book stimulates further work on this. However, these questions also bring us back to the problem concerning Feenberg's precise position within philosophy of technology, and in addition raise the issue about the relation between (Feenberg's) philosophy of technology and normative political theory.

On the one hand, Feenberg has received criticism from phenomenology of technology, which comes down to the objection that Feenberg does not go far enough in learning from Heideggerian (post)phenomenology. How Heideggerian is Feenberg and how Heideggerian does he want to become? And what is the precise relation between humans and technology? For example, in a recent comment to Feenberg, Peter-Paul Verbeek has argued that Feenberg reinforces the modernist split between humanity and technology. What we need, according to Verbeek, is not the alternative modernity Feenberg seeks but an a-modern way of thinking, which attends to how the self is mediated and shaped by technology (Verbeek 2011). However, according to Feenberg, such an approach neglects objective power struggles and should be complemented by an analysis of these power struggles. Can both approaches complement each other? When does alternative modernity end and a-modernity begin?

On the other hand, Feenberg's book invites criticism from neo-Marxist philosophers who regard his work as straying too far from critical theory's concern with (neo-Marxist) critique of society. For example, Christian Lotz argues that Feenberg embraces technologies such as the Internet too much and asks for a moral radical critique. Can socialism be equated with more democratic and participatory procedures, or does it require more? How "socialist" (28) is Feenberg really? Moreover, what seems to be missing is a political theory (Lotz 2011), by which he means recent critical theory.

Perhaps we must generalize this objection and point to a problem with contemporary philosophy of technology in general: what is missing in Feenberg and other philosophies of technology, including (post)phenomenological approaches, is more systematic and sustained engagement with political theory, political philosophy, and ethics. Apart from helping to further develop Feenberg's theory of technology, this could strengthen the whole field of philosophy of technology, which otherwise risks to become insular. On the other hand, mainstream political philosophy and ethics have no good reason to refuse the fruits of the best traditions in contemporary philosophy of technology we have. And, as Feenberg's book shows, hybrid fruits taste good.

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