Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory. A. Feenberg. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London (1995). xi + 251 pp., $, ISBN 0-520-08986-3

Ending the Philosophy of Technology

The past half century has seen a large body of literature growing around a core of themes that now make up a familiar twentieth-century intellectual genre called "the philosophy of technology." Its seeds go back to 19th century American Transcendentalists whose ambivalence toward technology can be seen reflected today in popular culture from television's *Star Trek* to Apple Computer's commercials about "Big Brother." The genre routinely revolves around Baconian utopias, Marxist criticisms of industry, or dark dystopian Jeremiads from Aldous Huxley, Jacques Ellul, or Martin Heidegger. Andrew Feenberg's new book reviews and revises the genre, even to the point of suggesting that the phrase "philosophy of technology" might be redundant today. Our society is so immersed in technology that any thinking worthy of the name now belongs to what was formerly a rather narrow genre.

Alternative Modernity wants to preserve the momentum of the earlier philosophy of technology, but without the familiar themes and without with the implied distance suggested by the phrase "*philosophy of* technology." In its heyday, philosophy was not philosophy *of* ethics nor *of* logic nor *of* knowledge. Philosophy was instead *constituted by* ethics, logic, and epistemology. Philosophy was not *about* these things; thinking about these themes *was* philosophy. Similarly, Feinberg wants to show intellectually what our general culture recognized instinctively some time ago: philosophy and technology are not logically remote items like eyeglasses and peanut butter, but philosophy and technology indeed belong together like telescopes and stars. To do philosophy today is to think about technology, and to reflect on daily life immersed in technology is to philosophize.

Stopping the Pendulum of Utopia / Dystopia

Feenberg's book seeks to break the pendulum swing of the philosophy of technology. Instead of vacillating between utopia and dystopia, he focuses on specific phenomena belonging to technological practice. The book's subtitle "The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory" might just as well read "The Technological Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory," for Feenberg writes not about the technical, analytic mask worn by mainstream twentieth-century academia, but he writes about the techno-logic that runs through mainstream

twentieth-century culture and by doing so, he joins philosophy to the mainstream debate in contemporary society.

A slew of books fuel that debate. The role of the Internet computer network, for example, stands at the center of contemporary debate. One need only browse some of the book titles published between 1993 to 1995 to glimpse the critical thinking applied by mainstream culture to computer technology: *Resisting the Virtual Life* by James Brook and Iain Boal, *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution* by Kirkpatrick Sale, *Media Virus* by Douglas Rushkoff, *Data Trash* by Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* by Clifford Stoll, *The Age of Missing Information* by Bill McKibben, *The Gutenberg Elegies* by Sven Birkerts*, War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* by Mark Slouka, *and The Future Does Not Compute* by Steve Talbot.

This high profile critical debate reinforces Feenberg's point:

> Philosophy of technology is adjusting gradually to the emergence of technical politics. Until recently it polarized around two contrary positions: we were obliged to choose between uncritical acceptance of the claims made for technology or uncompromising rejection of its dystopian powers. This dichotomy depended in turn on the sharp distinction between technology and society that used to be shared by both advocates and adversaries of technical progress. Today this distinction has broken down. (p. 2)

The breakdown of this distinction means, for Feenberg, that theory must now serve the democracy of debate. The debate about technology infiltrates every area of life, just as the influence of the computer permeates everything from astronomy to sports. The very fact that groups from feminists to environmental activists have recently influenced the social application of science means, for Feenberg, that technology belongs to the underdetermined dimension (Duhem-Quine). Technology is determined neither to be our nemesis nor our messiah. Technology is underdetermined and so belongs to democratically open public debate.

Toward Pragmatic Phenomenology

The influence of Herbert Marcuse runs through *Alternative Modernity*. When Feenberg addresses the nature of debate about technology, he appeals to democratic movements, to liberation. Throughout, Feenberg makes a consistent effort to bring along and then modify twentieth-century philosophy of technology as advanced by Europeans. The Frankfurt School, Habermas, and J.F. Lyotard appear frequently in Feenberg as both support and foil in his effort to transcend the philosophy of

technology. Yet European culture always seems to swing between the blind love / blind hate relation to technology. The argument Feenberg has with these European theorists — all deeply indebted to G.F.W. Hegel — tends to pull Feenberg back from his fundamental insight, which is that global, Hegelian generalizations about technology carry little weight in a culture that is completely immersed in technology. Even Lyotard's rejection of the Big Picture seems misinformed precisely because his observations lack the practical insights of direct observation. A culture immersed in technology needs specific, focused, highly practical critiques rather than broad-brush love / hate approaches to technology.

Pragmatic American Phenomenology?

Where Feinberg remains faithful to his fundamental insight, he digs into pragmatic specifics. Half his book presents concrete case studies that move from actual practices to reflections on how malleable technology has proved in the past and how up-for-grabs the significance of technology will remain in the future. His case studies discuss the early image of nuclear disaster in post-World War II science fiction, the dystopian themes in the popular spy films of the 1960s, the impact of AIDS on medical experimentation on human subjects, the surprising success of the Minitel network in France, and the Japanese response to modernization as illustrated by Yasunari Kawabata's novel *The Master of Go*. These concrete analyses — along with discussions of science fictions writers like Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem, William Gibson, and many others — never manifest analysis for its own sake but serve to build a case for Feenberg's point about the flexible, changing relationship societies have to technology and the way technology gets shaped by public debate. These concrete studies come closer to the pragmatic phenomenology implied by the book, and these were my favorite sections of the book, especially the ninth chapter's fascinating treatment of the Japanese game of *Go* in the context of the Japanese high-tech economy.

Providing the reader with case studies and then also with arguments about European theorists, Feenberg moves decisively toward American pragmatics, — not the Pragmatism that blindly championed the scientific method à la John Dewey, but the new pragmatism that reflects on existential issues arising from our technologically enhanced environment. Feenberg shows that Western culture has already moved away from scientism and has embarked on a voyage to find itself where it actually exists today. That voyage begins where the philosophy of technology fades before the realization that high-tech tools directly influence our psyches and bodies. We can hope that Feenberg continues refining his two-pronged approach to theory and practice so that from his hand we may one day

receive something like a unified phenomenology of our electronically designed environments.

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