
The year 1979 saw the publication of Douglas Hofstadter’s Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid, in which he theorized, among other things, the structure of the human mind in terms of what he called “strange loops” and “tangled hierarchies,” mutually reinforcing relations between mental structures that “become explicable in terms of the relationship between [them]” (Hofstadter, 1989, p. 709). A short time later, Andrew Feenberg noted a structural similarity between Hofstadter’s “tangled hierarchies” and certain Marxian approaches to social theory, approaches that “show the inseparable connection between the most abstract concepts of philosophy and a concrete social context, which is changeable” (Feenberg, 1981, p. 24).

Nearly 30 years later, in his most recent book, a collection of papers entitled Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity, Feenberg continues to draw on and refine his early insights about the mutually defining relationships between reason and experience, relationships that in Feenberg’s capable hands give rise to a powerful critique of the dystopian cast of mind that characterized much twentieth-century thinking about reason and praxis in modernity. At the same time, he manages to avoid naïve faith in what can only be described as technocratic ideologies: ideologies that see contemporary institutional rationality and its attendant socio-technical advances as unambiguous signs of social progress. As such, he successfully navigates a theoretical course that allows him to recognize and revitalize elements of modern utopian thought latent in contemporary philosophical and sociological thinking about technology. Thus, Between Reason and Experience is an elaboration of Feenberg’s critical theory of technology, a theory that draws on the optimism inherent in the best aspirations of the critical modernist tradition—aspirations that have, all too often, lain fallow through much of the latter part of the past century in the debate over the nature of technology and modernity, over the relation between praxis and theory.

In an effort to draw our attention to underlying historical transformations in approaches to thinking about technology, Feenberg juxtaposes differing literary representations of modern society over time, focusing on a dialectical movement in the aesthetics around socio-historical dynamics of technology. Representing the (arguably immoderate) optimism of nineteenth-century narratives of technological progress is Edward Bellamy’s 1888 science fiction novel Looking Backward: 2000-1887, a novel that imagines the results of the human drive to master technology culminating in a kind of socialism “in which standardization and control [are] confined to the human struggle with nature” (Feenberg, 2010, p. 49). Feenberg’s representative of the dystopic critique of technocratic rationality is Aldous Huxley’s 1932 classic Brave New World, a kind of “refutation of Looking Backward” (p. 47) that draws attention to the apparent inability of accounts like Bellamy’s to “conceive of what Norbert Wiener called ‘the human use of human beings’” (p. 49). However, Feenberg is clear in pointing out that both the utopian and dystopian extremes of the socio-technological spectrum are
largely untenable as ground from which to articulate a social theory of technology. On the one hand, Bellamy's utopia was merely speculative in its hope that society would “control modern technology just as individuals control traditional tools, [for] we have long since reached the point at which technology overtakes the controllers” (p. 61). At the same time, Feenberg points out that the dystopian critiques of nineteenth-century thinking about technology “did not anticipate that once inside the machine, human beings would gain new powers they would use to change the system that dominates them” (p. 61).

As a convincing case in point illustrating the ways that human beings gain new powers from within emergent socio-technical systems—from within the machine—Feenberg examines the French success with the popular proliferation of videotex, a telecommunication technology that ultimately failed to take on popular significance nearly everywhere but France. Here he argues that the French Teletel (the French incarnation of videotex) was, in the end, “largely shaped by users' preferences” (p. 104), which according to Feenberg partly accounts for Teletel's strong performance in the French market. In addition, Feenberg suggests that Teletel's success was possible because of the politics around the French implementation of videotex, politics that ultimately had a “highly decentralizing effect” (p. 89). As a result, “Teletel became a vast space of disorganized experimentation, a ‘free market’ in online services more nearly approximating the liberal ideal than most communication markets in contemporary capitalist societies” (p. 89). Nevertheless, Feenberg's analysis is nowhere near the kind of free-market boosterism so common to contemporary neo-liberal discourses. Rather, by “free market” he seems to imply something very much more than simple deregulation; indeed, he appears to mean something much more like market democratization. One of the implications of this view of free markets is that markets themselves come to behave as technologies of socio-technical mediation, “as ambivalent institutions with a potentially dynamic role to play in the development of new technology” (p. 89). Not surprisingly, then, Feenberg's critical theory of technology, while extending some of Marx's preliminary insights about “the class character of technology,” recoils upon and adds to the “critique of the formal bias of markets,” completing the critical loop between Feenberg's work and the germinal influence of Marx (among others) (p. 165).

The closing chapters of *Between Reason and Experience* emerge from the methodological applications of Feenberg's critical theory; having illustrated the changeable nature of concrete socio-technical configurations, Feenberg's theory loops back into a discussion of the philosophical thinkers and concepts from whence his philosophy of technology springs. Ultimately, Feenberg arrives at a contemporary critical theory of technology by following, to a degree, Herbert Marcuse's “attempt to unite art and technology in a value-oriented concept of technological rationality” (p. 212). However, Feenberg's modifications of Marcusean theory enable him to avoid certain commitments that stalled Marcuse's thinking so that it founded in speculative utopianism. Thus, Feenberg has arrived back at his first port of call, the co-ordinate at which aesthetics and what Feenberg calls the “technology/society nexus” (p. xxiii) coincide. It is from the perspective of this “return” that we come to see that technologies “are inherently political” (p. 212).
As such, Feenberg’s work is an important contribution to, and point of departure for, the politicization of the aesthetics of technology wherein “the arts would appear not as antagonistic to technology but rather as informing it through revealing the potentialities of its objects” (p. 212). Moreover, as an additional installment and elucidation of one of Feenberg’s long-running projects, Between Reason and Experience is an important work of philosophy; at the same time, given the interdisciplinary ramifications of one of Feenberg’s central aims, to elaborate the theoretical girders that will support “the gradual extension of democracy into the technical sphere” (p. xxiv), his latest work will be found relevant in science and technology studies (STS), communications studies, and sociology, among others. Finally, Feenberg’s lucid, straightforward prose coupled with the broad relevance of his themes for contemporary life will no doubt contribute to Between Reason and Experience garnering an enthusiastic reception with a general readership beyond the academy.

References

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