

Andrew Feenberg, Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History

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The main title of Feenberg's new book should be read in reverse. The topic is Marcuse, the crucial influence of Heidegger on his thinking, and why this influence helps make Marcuse more relevant to contemporary thought than is usually assumed. The book is informative, and provocative, in two ways. First, it is a revisionist work of scholarship. Feenberg rejects the usual story about Marcuse according to which, after an early attraction to *Being and Time* (SZ), he became disillusioned with everything Heideggerian, embraced the works of Hegel, Lukács, and the early Marx, joined the first wave of critical social theorists in searching for a way past the injustice inherent in Western capitalist societies, and remained hostile to Heidegger for the rest of his life. Feenberg admits that this story finds some limited support in Marcuse's self-interpretations and in his understandable eagerness to distance himself from Heidegger's politics, but he argues that, in the end, the usual story can be sustained only by superficial scholarship and political bias. If we pay attention to what Marcuse actually wrote, what we find is a strong and lasting allegiance not only to certain features of SZ, but also to Heidegger's interpretation of *technē* – in his early work on Aristotle, as well as in his later critique of technology. Feenberg argues, approvingly, that Marcuse never abandoned his early view that Heidegger ontologically privileges praxis over theory/ideology, and that SZ's phenomenological defense of the priority of practical/productive life provides precisely the required model for updating the early Marx's critique of experience in a capitalist world.

Second, and just as provocative, Feenberg thinks Marcuse's phenomenological critique of experience can and should go hand-in-hand today with the consideration of how radically to transform, not primarily political economy,

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but technoscientific society. On this issue, he claims, Marcuse was prescient in a way that most critical theorists and neo-Marxists were not, for he saw that “The oppressive features of technological society are not due to *excessive* materialism and technicism...[but to] the *arrest* of materialism and technological rationality” in an especially undemocratic, dehumanizing form (100).

Here, then, is surely a book with an uncommon thesis, written by an author who is no mere commentator. In Feenberg’s view, we must reaffirm the need for a “phenomenological” Marxism, give Heidegger a positive role in this project, admit that Marcuse remained forever indebted to him, and conclude that it is the evaluation of technology, not political economy that stands at the center of a truly radical critical theory. All of this helps define Feenberg’s conception of history’s “catastrophe.” What he means by history’s “redemption” flows from his interpretation of Marcuse.

For Feenberg, it is important to remember that the Heidegger Marcuse knew as a student was not just the author of SZ, but the already (in)famous, mid-1920s (mis)appropriator of Aristotle.¹ Moreover, where others went on to stress the way Heidegger works out SZ’s notion of care in light of *phronēsis*, for Marcuse the ontological interpretation of *technē* as a kind of production (*poiēsis*) is just as important. Marcuse had a transcript of the famous “Aristotle-Introduction” of 1922, and he seems to have understood the potentially radical significance of the fact that when Heidegger asks about human being, he turns to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, not the *Physics* or *Metaphysics*. Already in Heidegger’s early lecture courses, says Feenberg, Marcuse would have witnessed Aristotle being “transformed into an existential ontologist *avant la lettre*” (4). From these lectures, Marcuse seems to have concluded that in a properly phenomenological account, directly experienced human being is not conceived as the mere presence of one kind of entity in a world full of knowable entities, but must be seen above all as a “productive existence” that involves making and using things. According to Feenberg, it was at this time that Marcuse developed the Heideggerian conviction he never lost: after SZ, one can take as established the ontological priority of practical/productive life.

Heidegger is somewhat more generously treated here than in Feenberg’s other works for he wants to argue – on Marcuse’s behalf as well as his own – that Heidegger’s critique of current technoscientific existence is basically justified, and that to understand the power of this critique, we must see how it is precisely our practical/productive mode of existence that the currently “arrested” form of technoscientific rationality most corrupts. Hence, Heidegger’s insistence that the analyses of the life experiences people actually undergo is a better source of existential ontology than natural and social scientific theory, SZ’s argument in Division One that existence has more than

¹ It is a bit unclear what Feenberg thinks the young Marcuse got from Heidegger. Maybe because he is ultimately more interested in telling us what he, not just Marcuse, finds valuable in the early Heidegger, Feenberg tends to speak of Heidegger in his own voice, not in terms of Marcuse’s texts. Moreover, there no chronology of Marcuse’s study of Heidegger, or of what works he actually saw. Here, I will assume that Feenberg’s Heidegger and Marcuse’s are the same.

one mode, that the mode of theoretical engagement with objects is not basic, and the clear connection between SZ's analysis of praxis and the later critique of technology – all of these features of Heidegger's outlook are presented positively.

However, the point of Heidegger's own project and his insistence that SZ is a "preparatory" work for this project, not a systematic ontological treatise in its own right, are never considered. For Feenberg/Marcuse, Heidegger is at best an important ("phenomenological") means to a still more important (critical-theoretic) end. I refuse to settle, says Feenberg, for a Heideggerian "reflect[ion] on the catastrophe of technology" (88). This reflection can help prepare the ground for the task of socio-political emancipation, but Heidegger himself remained so tradition-bound and politically reactionary that his own alternatives never rise above the level of, in turn, bad ideology and fuzzy romanticism. Here is the point of Feenberg's subtitle. About the "catastrophe" of contemporary technoscientific existence, Heidegger is dead right but hopelessly dystopian. For the next step, we must turn to those thinkers who foresee the possibility of moving beyond Heidegger's "earnest contemplation of the present" in order to "project a concrete utopia than can *redeem* the technological society...by formulating transcending demands and realizing the dream of freedom" (88, my emphasis). According to Feenberg, Marcuse is one of these thinkers of redemption.

Here again, Feenberg revisits familiar territory with a provocative eye. Marcuse, he says, ultimately grounds his redemptive vision in appeals to lived experience, and he was right to do so. Unfortunately, most commentators have been so intent on criticizing the specific appeals Marcuse actually made (e.g., involving class struggle, Freudian eros, and New Left "sensibility") that they fail properly to credit the sheer fact that he makes them. Furthermore, what is really wrong with these specific cases is not that they involve appeals to experience but that they ultimately depend more, and unphenomenologically, on someone's theory about experience. Feenberg's purpose in revisiting this territory is thus to revive interest in the phenomenology of human experience as a genuine source of guidance for a humanizing makeover of contemporary technoscientific life.

In Feenberg's view, it is precisely Marcuse's phenomenological commitment that allowed him to develop his greatest contribution to the contemporary debate. Through this commitment, he was able to work his way toward the idea of a revolutionary "aesthetic dimension," already growing in contemporary experience, that might be made to function transformatively in technoscientific life generally with the same spirit of radical experimentalism as did the earlier avant-garde movements in art. "In a liberated society," says Feenberg, the "sensuous power of the imagination would become 'productive' in reality, like the artistic creator, and would guide technical practice" (97). Here, he says, we find a good reason not to dismiss Marcuse's embrace of the New Left student movements of the 1960s as simply naïve. For to disparage their activities as merely ineffectual displays of radical opinion and unrealistic demands for reform is to miss in them "the emergence of 'new needs' and a

‘new sensibility’ operat[ing] at a more basic level than politics, [i.e.,] at the level of the form of experience itself in which the aesthetic qualities of objects are revealed immediately to sensation” (94).

With the emergence of this “aesthetic *Lebenswelt*” in the midst of democratic capitalist life, Feenberg sees a means for moving beyond the impasse bequeathed to us by dystopian thinkers like Heidegger. We need not regard ourselves as facing the forced option of either continuing to endure the nightmare of technoscientific dehumanization or waiting with Heidegger for a new god. There is a third possibility – namely, to transform today’s arrested, scientific form of technological rationality into a more ontologically sensitive, holistic, and explicitly politicized rationality – one that would begin with the (phenomenological) question of what technology is making of us and end with the (critical-theoretic) determination of what we can make of it (99). As Feenberg argues in other places, no technology is ever neutral, and neither is the “knowledge” that guides it. Every technology has an internal “code” – a normativity that determines what it is, what it does, under what conditions, to what things, with what people, for what purposes. There is no reason why our currently exploitive, dehumanizing, instrumentalistically coded technologies should not be subjected to “democratic interventions” that would make them more life affirming (106–108).

Feenberg does not claim that all of this is stated in Marcuse’s writings, but he does think he is correctly characterizing their deepest implication. Citing Marcuse’s lifelong habit of grounding his views in an appeal to the kind of “existential truth that is revealed in experience rather than...proved by” it, Feenberg asks, “In what modern philosophical framework other than phenomenology does this make sense?” (129). The problem is that Marcuse’s later, full-gallop efforts to distance himself from Heidegger pushed him into relying on objectivistic notions drawn from Marx and Freud to signify a dimension of human life he always actually understood in existential terms (121). This can at times make him seem addicted to inflated rhetoric, or the lure of offering yet another “naïve metaphysical challenge to the modern scientific understanding of nature.” But this was never really true of him; it is just that “he failed to find a convincing way of expressing his intuition” (119).

Reaction to both Feenberg’s Heidegger-interpretation and his positive Marcusean thesis will undoubtedly be mixed. Many readers (including myself) will question much of what Feenberg says – in his own name or Marcuse’s – about the “phenomenology” in terms of which he wants to treat these issues.

According to Feenberg/Marcuse, the early Heidegger appeals to Aristotle’s *technē* in order to juxtapose today’s alienating modern metaphysics of instrumental rationality with an ancient but now long-lost “productivist” ontology, in which the “belongingness of human beings and being in the making of worlds” is still sustained (40). But this seems wrong. When the young Heidegger retrieves to Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, he sees himself rethinking what the Greeks themselves were busy “onto-theologically” suppressing – by developing an essentialist metaphysics that depicts the productivity of human beings against the background of a superior cosmological

version of the same process. True enough, the Greeks were not moderns; they did not reduce technical action to the imposition of subjective intention on raw material. But this does not mean they adhered to – or even left open – the reversed priority of practical over theoretical normativity Feenberg wants. In his view, the ancients' teleological understanding, though obviously objectivistic, remains a way of

signifying the necessary bond between human being and being, the intrinsic relation between action and world. That they could recognize this bond and this relation while also innovating a scientific reason directed at the objective properties of things was the founding miracle of the West. For us such a paradoxical combination is impossible since we immediately dismiss the bond and the relation in affirming science and objectivity (135–36).

Feenberg depicts the ancients as somehow managing to “hold these contraries together” in such a way that they continued to treat things “as partners in technical making” while simultaneously “creating the sciences.” This situation, he says, constitutes a “lost Eden of reason to which we cannot return” (136).

For Heidegger, however, the modern philosophical activity Feenberg characterizes as one that involves “dismissing” an existential bond in order to “affirm” science is not at all the intolerance of ancient paradox Feenberg makes of it. It is, on the contrary, a more developed articulation of precisely the West's “founding miracle.” When dismissing/affirming is observed and conceptualized from the outside, it may indeed seem like a way of theorizing the world's essentials by rejecting any bond of experiential “partnership.” Hermeneutically understood, however, this practice is no less intimate a “relatedness between being and human being” than any other expression of onto-theological metaphysics. What has changed, of course, is that in following out the objectivistic responsiveness to phenomena begun by the Greeks, this dominant philosophical tendency itself has grown simultaneously more successful and less visible. “Creating science” may still have been initially regarded as cosmically “respectful”; but it is also “representative” – that is, temporally and linguistically selective, privileging “timeless” meaning and “adequate” articulation in any quest for knowledge. The rise of instrumentalistic technoscience is thus not the story of a lost Eden. It is the successful “culmination” – the “ending” – of all previous efforts to spell out the original “miracle”.

Heidegger famously characterizes SZ's analysis of Dasein as a “preparatory” project. We know now that this idea expresses considerations developed over a whole decade – above all in relation to what Heidegger came to perceive as the central weakness in the “phenomenological” thinkers around him. Dilthey, Husserl, and to a lesser extent Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and others – clearly all of them were describing aspects of human life ill-served by the reigning models of knowledge. Yet for all the promise in their projects, none of these thinkers gave a satisfactory account of how and why phenomenology

succeeds where other approaches fail. In other words, for the young Heidegger, the real problem with, say, Dilthey's standpoint of historical life, Husserl's rigorous phenomenology, or Jaspers' philosophy of Existenz does not lie in what they try to *do* from their orientations. It lies in their excessively traditional sense of *who* a philosopher, so oriented, "is." All of them, he says, can at times be "phenomenological enough" in what they describe, and in this way they show that their philosophical instincts are clearly superior to those of the various positivists, neo-Kantians, and traditional metaphysicians of the day. Yet none succeed in making their own interpretive viewpoint an ontological problem – with the result that their insights often continue to be presented in the old objectivist language of subject and object, method and substance, the knowable and the ineffable, and so on. From this situation, Heidegger concludes that it is not enough to resolve or to intend to cultivate a renewed, more pluralistic, phenomenological sense of what it is for something to *be* natural, or vital, or psychic, or beautiful, or numerical, or object-like. One must first consider what it means to "be" phenomenological, in order for these good intentions to carry the day.

Restated in later terms, SZ's "preliminary" question is how to become phenomenological in technoscientific times. How does anything but a world full of "objects" get properly characterized when and where objectivism is "the" philosophically respectable attitude? Here is the real point of SZ's apparent favoring of what Feenberg calls practical/productive life. When Heidegger announces in §13 that he regards knowledge as a "founded mode" of being-in-the-world, he is not just putting us on notice that there are other modes, or that he will prioritize another one. He is beginning his effort to undermine the philosophical hegemony of objectivistic understanding in ontology. Discovering that there is another mode of existence that is ontologically more basic than theorizing is not an end in itself. The point is to see that it is so different in its make-up from theorizing that we must ask, what then "is" it to exist, such that existence has – and so must be interpreted as having – various modes?

Overall, Feenberg's book deserves a wide audience. It sheds valuable new scholarly light on an unfairly neglected Marcuse. It forcefully reminds us that *technē* interested the young Heidegger as much as it did the later critic of technoscience. And it clarifies some of Feenberg's own earlier arguments for the real possibility of radically democratizing technoscientific culture. Even (what I perceive to be) the book's central flaw presses issues upon us for which it is by no means obvious we already have satisfactory solutions. As I have suggested, when Feenberg uses SZ's Division One to argue for a reversal of priorities between the currently dominant ontology of instrumental rationality and a more humanly oriented practical-productive one, he short-circuits the very process of renewed ontological self-understanding for which Heidegger intends this reversal. One consequence of this approach is that Feenberg's book is structured, as its subtitle suggests, in the fairly traditional terms of theoretical critique followed by alternative transcendental/utopian vision. Feenberg says he rejects any sort of objectivist position "outside" everyday

affairs, and he insists his critique of everyday technoscientific life is “phenomenological”? But is it? From where does his general sense of its “arrested” character come? And what of revolutionary aestheticism? From what perspective is it possible to work out “transcendent-utopian” visions? It is difficult not to hear in these features of Feenberg’s argument a regression to a new version of objectivism.

My concern, then, is not that Feenberg fails to get Heidegger right, but that his approach allows him to avoid questions SZ might otherwise have forced him to ask about his own position. He rejects Heidegger’s view of current technoscience as dystopian and writes off the late work as a “a sad default on the promise of the Western philosophical tradition” – a kind of quasi-religious “waiting around for art to regain its power in a new dispensation” (45). But how can he be so sure that a life in which technology is “democratically” liberalized could be a life that does justice to *all* of our concerns and activities? How would he respond to philosophers of science, technology, ecology, race, species, and gender who might object to his apparent willingness to treat their central issues *through* the critique of technoscience? Perhaps one or more of these phenomena, given their proper due, might threaten precisely Feenberg’s critical priorities? Finally, there is the reflective question of how Feenberg would respond to other neo-Marxists who might appeal to the very same experienced world of production and work as he does, but reject his technological displacement of political economy as the central issue? What, for example, of Adorno’s objections that no experience, not even in the arts (and thus by extension, for Feenberg’s revolutionary “aesthetic experience”), entirely escapes collaboration with the culture industry? In short, what does Feenberg “understand” about our times that makes him confident that an optimistic and democratized idea of technoscientific practice is a better bet for the 21st century than a more suspicious, or differently focused consideration of the same worldly “site”? Without a doubt, these are serious issues. It is a little surprising that Feenberg does not consider them. But then how many thinkers actually do and with how much success?