Beyond critique: utopia

My purpose in this book has been to show that Feenberg’s intervention constitutes an important and much needed development of Marxian and critical theory in relation to technology. I have also argued that his work is a vital counterweight to other, non-critical tendencies in contemporary philosophy and sociology of technology, especially constructivism, ANT and post-phenomenology. In concluding, I will summarise the sense in which his work constitutes an advance and then review some of the suggestions I have made, in an effort to contribute to the further development of the theory.

As far as critical theory is concerned, Feenberg has continued and updated the tradition, retaining its focus on individual human self-realisation and the centrality of that idea to any meaningful conception of historical progress. Pursuant to this, his work takes as its problematic one of the most important questions of contemporary Marx scholarship, concerning the paradoxical relationship between technology and progressive social change. He is almost alone among Marx scholars of the past three or four decades in taking this question seriously and making it central to his attempt to reconstruct Marxist theory. That forms of social organisation and power familiar to people in capitalist societies also pervaded life in the Soviet Union and restricted its progress towards anything like socialism has been widely observed, but much of the theoretical reflection on this has involved genuflections to the role of ‘technical reason’ in domination, rather than investigating the concrete mediation of rationality and power that constitutes the technical. This evasion is somewhat of a travesty, and Feenberg’s intervention must be seen as bringing some urgency to a question that has been deferred for far too long.

As part of this, Feenberg has also challenged the critical theory tradition’s suspicion of technology, including the well-worn trope that
technological rationality is integrally or essentially opposed to ‘human’ values of communication and meaning. Demonstrating that a humanist approach need not involve any such essentialism, Feenberg addresses this by incorporating social and historical factors into the definition of technology, and this is perhaps his most significant innovation. In this way, he has made it possible for critical theory to engage with technology as not merely a problem but also a locus of possibilities and potential. This move is also an important step towards clarification of the ways in which technology can become problematic for progressive politics, and has led to a corresponding sharpening of the analytical resources of critical theory. This is illustrated by the valuable concepts of technological ambivalence and progressive or democratic rationalisation, which are essential foundations for understanding technical politics.

None of the rival positions in contemporary critical theory have produced concepts with similar purchase on the technology–society relationship. Jürgen Habermas (2003) has written an interesting study of genetic medicine’s potential to undermine the neuro-physical basis of democratic culture, but his basic model remains the dichotomy in which aspects of the technological system present a threat to the value basis of the cultural lifeworld. There is little sense in this work of the positive possibilities presented by genetic medicine. There are good reasons to be cautious, of course, when it comes to identifying political potential in the genetic modification of the unborn, but a theory that includes this opposition at its foundation seems likely always to be caught on the back foot when new technical capacities open up. Other contemporary critical theorists simply have nothing to say about technology. This becomes increasingly odd when so much of the empirical substance of society is technologically mediated. Critical theory’s assumption that the fundamental processes are human-communicative, with technology only contemplated as some kind of historical accretion, feels increasingly out of touch in the age of social media.1

In contrast, Feenberg introjects social elements into the definition of technology. This undermines essentialism, while he retains many of its critical insights, and makes it possible to develop a richer, more nuanced conception of the entwinement of technological capabilities with human ones and their joint development through social and historical processes. The notion of technical politics as a site of struggle where these processes are mediated and subject to challenge is an important theoretical development. Understanding technical action in terms of political hegemony enables us to view the various interventions, hacktivisms and grass roots initiatives in terms of their wider significance.

Feenberg’s work is also markedly superior to the depoliticised efforts that dominate in science and technology studies (STS). As we have seen, his embrace of constructivism enables him to develop ideas from critical
theory in a new, productive conceptual space. Focusing on the processes through which social forces shape technological artefacts in development secures greatly enhanced relevance for critical social theory at a time when so much of life seems to involve these contests. Beyond this, though, drawing on ideas from contemporary political theory to develop the concept of technical politics, Feenberg has grasped the wider, political potential in such contests and articulated this to the reconstructed version of critical theory in his theory of progressive rationalisation. In place of catastrophism or implausible and unappealing doctrines of rupture, he offers a political theory of technical change that might be built upon in a practical sense, rather than leaving people hoping for divine intervention.

Having said all this in support of the idea of technical politics, though, a number of limitations must be acknowledged to the theory as currently formulated. First, technical politics is located in language, specifically in the processes through which technology is interpreted and its capabilities named, and we have seen in this book that the boundary between description and substantive reality is a repeated source of difficulty for the theory. Technology does not only exist as described but must be understood as involving objects that also act at the scene of design and elsewhere. A properly materialist philosophy of technology should be focused on opening up space in which objects may be heard. Retrieving the category of substantive bias, which Feenberg clarifies but then rejects, turns out to be a way to identify missing potential as well as identifying real evil in technologies of the past.

Secondly, the linkage from technical politics to civilisation change is fragile and requires some further support. Feenberg’s conviction that more popular involvement in design will necessarily make for ethically superior technology – a conviction seemingly shared by Verbeek – is not obviously supported by the historical record. Similarly, the notion that more aesthetic technology designs, which play more easily on the senses and connect people and nature, will necessarily be less exploitative or susceptible to entanglements in strategies of domination must be approached with caution. The linkages between local interventions that alter specific devices and civilisation-defining shifts in the global meaning of ‘technology’ require further thought.

Finally, the rush to politicise, while justified with reference to the conservative apoliticism of much STS, runs the risk of obscuring a range of sociological questions. Feenberg follows STS into the analysis of situations and processes already defined as ‘technical,’ and this is hazardous because many people, perhaps even the majority, do not get to play a shaping role or are restricted to marginal levels of participation. There is a sociology of access and exclusion that is largely left out of focus in the theory as it stands, and this is a particularly acute failing when technical politics is
the only kind available. Critical theory of technology would benefit from engagement with a wider range of sociological theories to address this.

Having said this much, it is also surely the case that a dialogue with wider sociological theories would benefit them as much as it would Feenberg. In particular, recent sociological work on changes to the nature of labour and workplace organisations would benefit from engagement with constructivist ideas in a critical framework. In this book I have referred to Boltanski and Chiapello’s important study of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’, which focuses on how the system has recuperated itself essentially by feigning to address the concerns of a generation of workers who refused to take up their roles in boring management and technical professions. The changes they describe were largely facilitated by technology that was shaped to the purpose, yet they completely overlook the issue. Similarly, Lazzaroto (2014) and Dardot and Laval (2014) have made arguments about the changing dynamics of subordination and domination in the workplace, which increasingly turn on subjects’ internalisation of behavioural and other norms, accompanied by an ideology in which people are made to feel responsible for everything that happens to them. These important works neglect to discuss how digital technology has been moulded to facilitate and enforce these processes. The changes these authors describe have implications for the critical theory of technology, since capitalist technology extends its hold over people into deeper recesses of their inner lives and social relationships. At the same time, though, it must be noted that none of them have discussed the shaping of technology, especially digital technologies, to meet these new system requirements.

Peter-Paul Verbeek has criticised Feenberg’s theory for lacking a properly ethical dimension specific to technology. It is true that Feenberg tends to view ethical criteria for technology as deriving from extratechnical discursive contexts. The problem with this approach comes into view when he seems to conflate better technology with more democratic involvement in design. Unfortunately, in contests over technology designs the fact that large numbers of people favour one option over another, or attribute some meanings to the exclusion of others, is not in itself sufficient to ensure that those designs are ‘best’. It is entirely conceivable that large numbers of people, perhaps even a majority, operating within a democratic regulatory framework might choose unethical, even immoral technologies. Feenberg supposes that in a more democratic context, space will be created in which people can deliberate on the best course and that this will tend to result in more progressive designs. He suggests that superior designs will be those that are more attentive to the communicative aspect of technology, especially its symbolic integration into the wider life of the community. This preference, however, is not justified in any explicit account of design ethics.
Verbeek rightly suggests that what is needed is an ethics immanent to the technology design process, although this is something that he then fails to articulate in any detail. In contrast, Feenberg’s theory of bias creates the theoretical conditions through which this idea might be advanced and, drawing on the rich heritage of critical theory, he did so well in advance of post-phenomenology’s fashionable ‘post-humanism.’ Moreover, it is worth noting that for all his attempts to distance himself from Feenberg’s approach, Verbeek only ends up joining him in calling for greater democracy in technology design.

Feenberg’s theory includes resources to develop an immanent ethics of design because he identifies, in humanistic and pragmatic terms, the basic motivation of technology. His preferred example here is medicine, which he sometimes presents as paradigmatic for the positive technological employment of scientific knowledge (e.g. 2010: 81). For all that essentialists and others view technical action as marked by a kind of primal violence, Feenberg shows that this is intimately paralleled by a concern to make the world a better place. His dialectic of primary and secondary instrumentalisation includes this paradox at its very core, and its historical unfolding is what produces technology’s ambivalence and the possibility of democratic rationalisation. His embrace of Marcuse’s organicism leads Feenberg to frame the possibilities opened up by this theorisation in terms of a logic of reconciliation, according to which democratisation will restore technology to its original, beneficent social purposes.

I have tried to show that an Adornian position on this issue can sharpen the focus on an immanent ethics by focusing on identity and non-identity as this applies to technology itself. Presently, as technologists move to improve the world, so they instrumentalise it, themselves and, ultimately, everyone else as well, but they do so with at least some sense that they are contributing to progress. The prospect that, as Sartre put it, ‘liberated society will be a harmonious enterprise of exploitation of the world’ (1969: 224) seems fantastic now, but it is nonetheless conceivable that the benign motivations bound up in technological creativity might find themselves, if not emancipated, at least differently thwarted in a new social arrangement. If this sounds unpromising, it opens onto a technical politics that is not framed by the binary opposition of communication to instrumental domination, but rather presents multiple possibilities, each to be assessed through a utopian, future-facing calculation of their likely world impact. The ethics of democratic technical politics, then, start with a dialogue between people and things, with a renewed emphasis on responsibility as the basis of autonomy, rather than faith in the possibility of ultimate reconciliation. Utopianism here serves as a methodology for thinking the future, rather than a blueprint for utopia.
In this context, there is something to Bruno Latour’s repudiation of critical theory from which Feenberg’s theory might benefit. Latour identifies critique as a kind of impediment to thinking and acting differently, suggesting that it actually inhibits a different world-relation by tying subjectivity to a narrow conception of reality. For him, critical theorists are the ‘ghouls’ of social theory (2013b: 348), who are always equipped with explanations, normally of why things turned out so badly, but bereft of useful recommendations. His own suggestion is that theory should recognise that reality exceeds the ‘truth’ associated with various kinds of correspondence theory and elevated into disciplines positively associated with ‘science’. That most people most of the time are not seeking scientific legitimacy for the beliefs with which they operate, and that these beliefs are nonetheless productive of determinate realities, ought to be experienced, he suggests, as liberating. The category-mistake checker that academic social scientists have been applying to their theories is itself a kind of category-mistake (Latour 2013b).

Latour presents this view as anti-critical because critical theory, which from its inception was concerned with setting limits to scientific reason, is one of the factors that prevents theory from simply strolling onto the ground he has identified – the social and cultural territory produced every day without reference to whether its operative statements are ‘true’. This is an interesting challenge to critical theory because it turns one of its own long-established arguments against it, namely the suggestion that reification is an illusion produced by those who are in thrall to it. Critical theory has often alleged that others are in the grip of a ‘fear of freedom’ or other kinds of false consciousness that lead them into conformist behaviours, which in turn reproduce a system that is not in their interests. Latour’s argument is that by maintaining the dominant illusion that science and technology embody the only valid knowledge, critical theory is in fact complicit with its own mournful condition.

Socialist society will need its own technology and cannot rely upon passively inheriting what it needs from capitalism. Following through on this insight seems to require a type of thinking that is not compatible with ‘critique’. Attachment to that figure of thought limits technical politics to the introjected binary of technology’s ‘ambivalence’, while the objective situation contains more possibilities than can be addressed through a dialectical negation of capitalism’s negation of technology’s potential. A way of thinking the future that allows scope for what Adorno called ‘exact fantasy’ seems to be necessary. I have suggested that Adorno’s thought has something to offer theory that attempts to broach this question.

Latour’s repudiation of critical theory reflects empirical changes of the last 40 years that concern the way that technology is experienced. I have argued in this book that Feenberg’s notion that contemporary society is
ruled by a technological hegemony, in which coercion is experienced as the imposition of technical norms, is at certain points out of step with this experience, which involves friendly gadgets and a technical infrastructure whose primary orientation is communicative, even playful. Technical politics must grasp the paradox of a technology that is no longer austere or brutal but remains implicated in domination, and relate this to its study of ongoing struggles over the meaning of technology.

The difficulty critical theory faces here is that the constellation has shifted, with the consequence that the mix of values and standards of what might be considered ‘reasonable’ demands on technology varies more widely than Feenberg’s technical politics allows. Aesthetics, democracy and expertise are not easily assigned to ‘sides’ in an agonistic struggle against technical expertise over the shape or meaning of future technology. Moreover, while contests recognisable from the earlier period (over health, safety, etc.) have lost none of their importance, efficiency in design choices is rarely the central contested term in the way that it was before, because other values are now installed at the heart of technology design culture. Finally, the connection of technical politics to other struggles is not bridgeable via the notion of a ‘hegemonic technological rationality’ at work behind the scenes, forging a coherent web of domination that extends from the design of the latest phone to the opening hours of your local clinic.

It is curious that the main theoretical benefit from characterising technology as hegemonic should be an optimistic framing of popular technical activity that is unconstrained by hegemonic norms as ‘resistance’ or ‘democratic technical politics’, all adding up to a push towards a brighter future. From Latour’s perspective, whether it adds up to anything is a matter to be determined by the activity itself, but in the absence of a ruling power there is no obstacle to inaugurating many new counts of the world, none of them aspiring to include everything that is in it. In his vision, however, the question of power remains unaddressed. Feenberg points to the entanglement of expert discourses with institutions closely allied to the state and to corporations. For most people, who are not internationally acclaimed university professors, stepping outside these constraints to promote alternative forms of knowing only invites various kinds of stigmatisation.

The political success of openly irrational movements in the past decade suggests that some kind of breach may have occurred in the knowledge–power nexus associated with modernity. Feenberg’s theory of technical politics provides conceptual resources with which to understand the issues at stake in this new situation, as well as a strategic theorisation that clarifies its dangers and opportunities. He has succeeded in formulating a version of critical theory that speaks directly to twenty-first-century concerns.
Notes

1 This observation is not limited to critical theory but applies equally well to many areas of contemporary sociology, in which there has been a tendency towards ‘micro’ investigations (of ‘art’, ‘music’, even ‘personal life’) that purport to de-reify and explain their objects as emerging from strictly limited contexts. The absence of any reference to technologies in these studies is often indicative of their deceptive artificiality, or as Feenberg might put it, their abstract character.

2 Latour suggests ‘felicitous’ is a more useful term to describe the way statements perform their reality-producing functions.

3 “Exact fantasy” was ... a dialectical concept which acknowledged the mutual mediation of subject and object without allowing either to get the upper hand’ (Buck-Morss 1977: 86).