

Feenberg on Modernity and Technology

by Philip Brey (Philosophy Dept., Universiteit Twente)

1. Technology, Modernity, and Rationalization

Technology is, according to Feenberg, the sum of rational means employed in a society. Technologies fall under a dominant standard of *scientific-technical rationality*. *Rationality* implies the application of formal rules to some domain of experience. Such rules impose clearly defined all-or-none categories on experience, and tie these to principles of equivalence, implication, or optimization that relate to thought and action, and they do so with an unusual degree of precision. *Rationalization* is the process of making some domain of experience conform to some standard of rationality. The design of technological means conforms to rationality in that it involves the employment of such rules, and the application of technological means or other forms of rationalization to different sectors of society is justified by the belief that rationalization applies to any social domain.

Feenberg employs two definitions of modernity, a broad one and a narrow one. Modernity in a narrow sense is *current modernity*. Current modernity has some distinctive features that are often pointed out: it is capitalist, it has a consumer culture, it employs an atomistic conception of individuals. According to Feenberg, however, modernity is not characterized by any of its current social institutions, nor by a particular conception of human nature. Instead, it is characterized by an *ideology of rationalization*. As Feenberg says at one point, *modernity is the project of building a rational society*.

In modernity, Feenberg argues, rationalization constitutes a *cultural horizon*: a set of culturally accepted assumption that form the unquestioned background to every aspect of life. Some of these assumptions will inevitably support the prevailing hegemony. Thus, a cultural horizon is the basis for a social hegemony. E.g., the 'chain of being' in feudal societies constituted a cultural horizon that helped to establish hierarchy in society, and protect caste relations. Rationalization is our modern horizon. It defines the basic cultural parameters on which modernity rests.

Rationality, as defined earlier, also exists in *premodern societies*. These also had practices of accounting, legal systems, and game play, which were domains that required some degree of rationalization. However, in premodern societies, these rationalizations remained limited to a select few social domains, and were reconciled with rituals and the social hierarchy by recontextualizing strategies. In modern societies, in contrast, formally rational activities are liberated from such recontextualizing strategies and their validation is supposed to rest on universal logical or scientific principles rather than on contingent needs or traditions. They can thus be applied to different social domains

without further need for justification. In this way, *rational systems* such as technology, science, markets, and law, play a privileged role in modern societies.

Feenberg believes that *there are no universal principles of rationalization*. He holds that particular rationalizations are always motivated by contingent interests rather than by universal principles. It follows from that that different rationalities and rationalizations are always possible. That is, the form that rationalization takes in current modern society is not the only form.

Feenberg also sets out to identify the values and interests that underly current strategies of rationalization. These are, simply put, *profit and power*. Current strategies of rationalization support the hierarchical control of labor, which is characteristic of capitalism, as well as the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of any form of culture except for a rationalized form of culture.

2. Technology and Alternative Modernity

Feenberg is interested in the possibility of *alternative rationalizations*, particularly forms of rationalization necessary for socialism, which would embody responsibility for humanity. Recently, he has also added responsibility for nature and preservation of culture to these values. A society that made use of an alternative rationalization would still, however be modern. It would not be premodern, because it would still have rationalization as a cultural horizon, nor for the same reason would it be postmodern. It would be an *alternative modernity*.

Feenberg believes that *technological design* is the key to the effectiveness in establishing hegemonies under our current horizon of rationalization. The technological rationality embodied in the design of machines for production, for instance, is not universal but particular to capitalism (or any society with hierarchical management of the labor force). Technological rationality is not merely a belief, an ideology, but is effectively incorporated into the structure of machines. If one wants to change the prevailing conception of rationalization and undermine current hegemonies, one therefore has to change the embodiment of current rationalizations in technological design.

In singling out technology as the basis of modern hegemonies, Feenberg downplays *other rationalizations* that are at work in society in other rational systems that were mentioned before. Marcuse, for example, still believed in the possibility of an *alternative science* (holistic, organic), but Feenberg believes that an attempt at such a science is not necessary for changing the current order. Although Feenberg thus seems to emphasize material technologies as routes to reform, he sometimes also seems to include *social technologies* (the design and redesign of markets, economic systems, and other social institutions) as important to civilizational change. (Feenberg's emphasis on material technology, and particularly production technology, seems to be in line with Marxist historical materialism, in which the productive base (the forces and relations of production) were also seen as key to the structure of society.)

In Marxism, critical theory and sociology, supposedly rational systems such as markets, law, administration, had already been shown to have a social basis. In classical Marxism, however, technological rationality was thought to be exempt from society. The prevailing belief even in social science was in *technological determinism*: the belief that technology has its own autonomous logic of development and constitutes an invariant element in society that, once introduced, bends the recipient social system to its imperatives. Later on, neomarxists such as Marcuse have argued against a deterministic interpretation of technology and for the existence of multiple technological rationalities, but they have never been able to make their ideas concrete. Feenberg sees in constructivist studies of technology the promise of *updating* Critical Theory and show in detail how even technoscience has a strong social basis. In developing his own theory of technology, therefore, he draws on this work, particularly on that of Latour and of the SCOT-approach.

3. Technical Codes and Subversive Rationalization

I will not review Feenberg's arguments against technological determinism here and arrive right at the bottom line of his analysis of technology. Feenberg argues that technologies, production technologies in particular, have a *technical code* in the service of the capitalist goals of power and profit. The technical code of a technical artifact is constituted by those features of its design that reflect the cultural horizon of the society, which in modern society is that of capitalist rationalization, i.e. it embodies hegemonic values of power and profit at the expense of workers and the environment. The technical code defines technical parameters, such as the choice of materials and the way in which these are to be put together. These parameters are defined as arising out of technical necessity, as well as the demand for economic efficiency, but in fact this code is socially specified and embodies implicit norms, relating to safety, environmental compatibility, the autonomy of end-users, etc. The technical code determines the technical or *functional rationality* of a technology. This functional rationality is *decontextualized* from the social considerations that underlie it and justified on apparently rational scientific-technical grounds, if justified at all, and therefore appears as neutral.

Superficially, it may seem that the notion of technical code leads Feenberg to a new form of technological determinism: a determinism conditioned not by universal standards or technical rationality but by technical codes constructed by the prevailing power structures. However, this is where Feenberg's notion of *subversive rationalization* comes in. Because technical codes are socially constructed, they may be changed, even after the moment when a material design is completed. Technical codes can be changed even after material design is completed because social groups can devise new social meanings for artifacts, which lead to different uses, and may even lead to material redesigns. An example of this is given by the French teletel system, which had as its technical function to give telephone subscribers access to databases. However, it became to be a means for anonymous on-line chatting. Feenberg agrees with social constructivists that differences in interpretation by social group make a difference in the very nature of the object itself: The object becomes an environment in which a way of life is elaborated.

Better still would be when workers and others were involved with the design of technologies from the very start. This is the key to the transformation to a socialist society, according to Feenberg: It would involve a profound democratic transformation of industrial civilization, which would involve effective participation of citizens in a widening range of public activities, while enlarging personal freedom. Democracy would thus be introduced into the domain of work, rather than being restricted to the choice of government. This would lead to the emergence of a new form of rationalization, that would embody socialist values, rather than capitalist ones. In *Alternative Modernity*, this notion of subversive rationalization is extended to also include the environment and non-modern cultures.

4. Feenberg and Latour

Feenberg and Latour differ on some issues, but there are also impressive agreements. To begin with the latter: For both Latour and Feenberg, the essential character of Modernity is not found in its particular social institutions, its dynamism, its social and economic structure (its industrialism or capitalism), but in a particular *ideology* that is not found in any other society and constitutes what Feenberg calls a cultural horizon - a set of culturally shared assumptions that form the unquestioned background to every aspect of life. Both set out to *deconstruct* the modernist ideology that forms our cultural horizon, and both believe that we would be *better off* as a society when we would be able to see through this ideology. That is, both want to move us beyond modernity, but only to an extent. Neither embraces postmodernism, neither do they advocate traditionalism: A return to premodernity. So in a sense, both advocate an alternative modernity.

Another similarity is that both Latour and Feenberg, as I read them, reject social constructivism and embrace a constructivism according to which realities such as technical codes are hybrids - both in the mind and in the technology, so to speak. They moreover both look for an alternative to current modernity in which new, alternative hybrids are produced. (Feenberg wants these to be produced under the horizon of an alternative rationality.)

Feenberg and Latour differ in the way they describe the prevailing ideology of modernity. Latour describes it as the 'modern Constitution', Feenberg calls it rationalization. Latour emphasizes the failure of socialism, as the counterpart of the naturalism rejected by both him and Feenberg, whereas Feenberg still wants to hold on to some form of socialism (although less obviously so in *Alternative Modernity*). Feenberg hence remains closer to the Enlightenment than does Latour.

Feenberg also complains about the ease by which Latour and others are willing to obliterate the distinction between modern and premodern societies, and warns for the resulting dangers of *relativism*. How without that distinction could we explain or even signify the planetary triumph of Western civilization? Latour is right that, in a sense, we have never been modern (Feenberg says the same by claiming that the rationalizations of the West are as contingent as any of the structures erected by premodern cultures.) But it is because of the illusion that we are modern (the illusion that rationalizations can

grant autonomy) that we are able to evolve in the way we do. Modernity is characterized not by the actual autonomy of reason but by *a necessary illusion of autonomy*. This he wants to preserve (albeit in an alternative form), in contrast to Latour.