

Honneth, Feenberg, and the Redemption of Critical Theory of Technology

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Abstract : Critical Theory is in sore need of a workable account of technology. It had one in the writings of Herbert Marcuse, or so it seemed until Jürgen Habermas mounted a critique in 'Technology and Science as Ideology' (Habermas, 1970) that decisively put it away. Ever since Marcuse's work has been regarded outdated - a 'philosophy of consciousness' no longer seriously tenable. But with Marcuse's view has gone the important insight that technology is no norm-free system (as Habermas portrays it) but can be laden with social bias. Andrew Feenberg is among a few serious scholars who have perceived this problem in post-Habermasian critical theory and has sought to revive a basically Marcusean account of technology. On his view, while so-called 'technical elements' that physically make up technologies are neutral with regard to social interests, there is a sense in which we may speak of a normative grammar or 'technical code' built-in to technology that can be socially biased in favor of certain groups over others (Feenberg, 2002). According to Feenberg, those perspectives on technology are reified which consider technology only by their technical elements to the neglect of their technical codes. Nevertheless, Feenberg's account fails to explain what is normatively problematic with such reified views of technology. His plausible claim that they represent false perspectives on technology by itself does not explain how such views may be oppressive, even though Feenberg surely wants to be doing that stronger level of normative theorizing. Perceiving this deficit in his own account of reification, he tries to adopt Habermas's version of systems-theory to ground his own critical theory of technology (Feenberg, 1999). But this is a curious move in light of Feenberg's own legitimate critiques of Habermas's portrayals of technology as reified or 'norm-free.' This paper argues that a better foundation may be found in Axel Honneth's recent text, Freedom's Right (Honneth, 2014). Though Honneth there says little explicitly about technology, he offers an implicit account of reification formulated in opposition to Habermas's systems-theoretic approach. On this 'normative functionalist' account of reification, social spheres are reified when participants prioritize individualist ideals of freedom (moral and legal freedom) to the neglect of an intersubjective form of freedom-through-recognition that Honneth calls 'social freedom.' Such misprioritization is ultimately problematic because it is unsustainable: individual freedom is philosophically and institutionally dependent upon social freedom. The main difficulty in adopting Honneth's social theory for the purposes of a theory of technology, however, is that the notion of social freedom is predicable only of social institutions, whereas it appears difficult to conceive of technology as an institution. Nevertheless, in light of Feenberg's work, the idea that technology includes within itself a normative grammar (technical code) takes on much plausibility. To the extent that this normative grammar may be understood by the category of social freedom, Honneth's dialectical account of the relationship between individual and social forms of freedom provides a more solid basis from which to ground the normative claims of Feenberg's sociological account of technology than Habermas's systems theory.

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