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Almost a Critical Theorist . . .

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Abstract: This article starts with an autobiographical reflection in which I first trace how close I came to doing my Ph.D. studies with Herbert Marcuse when he was at Brandeis University; then follows my early post-Ph.D. work which continued to use critical theorists in teaching, later following a growing disillusionment with the implicit elitism of many critical theory authors. Then I turn to deeper philosophical reasons for my divergence from critical theory by introducing the notion of "shelf-life," and argue that much Marxist and neo-Marxist work is today outdated, or has reached limits of its shelf-life.

Key words: Herbert Marcuse, shelf-life, elitism, Andrew Feenberg, postphenomenology, post–Critical Theory

1. Introduction

Looking back from late life, I realize how close I came to being a "Critical Theorist," the older name for the school of thought associated with the "Frankfurt School." Let me do some autobiography and turn back to the time I was a graduate student, first at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton, Massachusetts, for my Master of Divinity (M.Div.), 1956–1959; then for my Ph.D. at Boston University, 1959–1964. I had originally planned to become a "philosophical theologian" with fantasies of doing a doctorate perhaps in a well-known German university. That plan faded from 1958 on for reasons about to be cited.

That year, 1958, was intellectually crucial. It was my last year as an M.Div. graduate student. This meant writing a thesis—mine was on Nicolas Berdyaev, a Russian existentialist thinker—and, as it turned out, a very important change of job. I had been youth minister at the First Baptist Church in Boston. Now, from my denomination's Foundation, I was invited to become a Chaplain at MIT in

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Cambridge, a very challenging and prestigious position, which I obviously accepted. This brought a major benefit in a move to a parsonage on Harvard Street in Cambridge in a large old house built in 1810 for the Mayor of Cambridge, shared with the then Harvard Chaplain, also the minister of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church on Harvard Square (ironically, the minister and chaplain from my Kansas University undergraduate days, Ernst Klein). We lived there until I finished my Ph.D. in 1964 when we moved to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, my first full time academic job post-Ph.D.

Looking back now from late life, it is hard to imagine the radical and exciting intellectual life of those late days in the 1950s: graduate days are obviously heavy duty reading days, with one of my theological day heroes deeply read, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by Hitler for his role in an assassination plot during WWII. I read all the Bonhoeffer books I could collect and one big idea he was pushing was "religionless Christianity," part of a widespread radical reaction to dying modernism, a subtheme in both critical theory and postphenomenology. This notion was also touted and magnified by my main theological teacher of the times, Paul Tillich, also an early expatriate fleeing Germany, who turns out to have been an influence upon several early critical theorists. Andover Newton was part of a Boston-wide theological consortium which meant we could also take classes at Boston University School of Theology, Episcopal Theological School, Harvard Divinity School—I took classes at Boston and Harvard with a full handful of courses from Tillich (I don't think I then realized, as I do today, that in many ways he was the first postmodern "atheist" theologian! His notion of God certainly didn't fit the parameters of any extant religion of the time. And, like Bonhoeffer, his was a sort of religionless theology). The final figure of the time, was an old friend, Harvey Cox, who, in *The Secular City* (1965), also embraced a kind of religionless Christianity and urban cosmopolitanism, and was the best preparation for my retirement location, Manhattan, NY, much later. I mention in passing, that this was also the era of the famous assassinations, first of John F. Kennedy, later Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, as well as of the Civil Rights Movement, and liberal, reformist Democrats, Anti–Vietnam War protests, all movements in which I was passionately active. So the Boston area was clearly a hotbed of all this—so, no wonder, my earlier plan, complicated by a growing family with three children by 1962—began to fade. I still wanted to do a Ph.D. in philosophy, and my first interest was Brandeis University whose foremost philosopher was Herbert Marcuse. This was before *One Dimensional Man* (1964) was published which he was writing while at Brandeis.

So, during that crucial year, 1958–1959, I began to investigate philosophy programs, with my first serious interest being Brandeis and Marcuse. I do remember scheduling an interview, but I do not have distinct memories of why, in the end, I did not apply to Brandeis, my reason probably had to do with Brandeis's high tuition and a lack of financial support—but it was not for lack of interest in Marcuse. I ultimately chose Boston University which also offered a Lectureship, but were I have gone to Brandeis, I might well have had a Critical Theory formation and taken a different direction than today's postphenomenology. But, as noted above, both in Europe and through its large exile community also in America, critical theory and phenomenology remained closely related. I note that many early critical theorists were also well versed in phenomenology, including Marcuse and Adorno. Marcuse's influence followed me for quite some time. After finishing my Ph.D.—at Boston University, the most pluralist and history saturated program in the Boston area, but where I also got heavy doses of Quine, Goodman, and the main analytic philosophers of the day, I ended up with writing a dissertation on Paul Ricoeur, a French phenomenologist often heavily engaged with analytic philosophy of the time. My first book, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (1971) was a re-write of my dissertation, composed in Paris during the 1967–1968 "events of May" a year so crucial for mid-twentieth-century history. And my second book, *Sense and Significance* (1973) addressed perceptual and linguistic problems—these were more common at Boston University, a juxtaposing of phenomenological and analytic interests, very much my earliest publishing interest. The early years at Southern Illinois University saw a return to heavy doses of Marcuse, Arendt and others in my classes.

2. Critical Theory Elitism

So, early post Ph.D. times saw me still reading heavily, not only Marcuse and Arendt, but also Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas—along with mostly existentialist authors popular at the time, and continuing graduate school readings through which I obtained a deep interest in Heidegger and Husserl. And this was when I began to feel my first sense of disillusionment with critical theory. Of this group, Marcuse came, fleeing Nazism, to the US and stayed; Benjamin, we know, committed suicide rather than be captured; Arendt, Adorno and others also came, but many returned to Germany, either permanently or occasionally, after the war. And it was Adorno who first irritated me. He was also a musician, a long time student of Alban Berg, later deeply attracted to Arnold Schoenberg and the school of twelve-tone music of the early twentieth century. This school of music,

deliberately breaking with tradition, was also highly elitist and modernist. Re-reading the biographical history of the time, a full generation before me, is almost like re-reading the list of multiple books assigned to me by Tillich—and it turns out Tillich and Horkheimer were both Adorno's professors in Germany. Finally, Adorno did his dissertation on Edmund Husserl, all in keeping with the original closeness between phenomenology and critical theory.

But I, a full generation later, and also deeply interested in music, when reading Adorno (and, early Marcuse and other critical theorists), began to dislike what I took as an elitist attitude toward what they, as a group, called "mass culture" and what we would later take as "popular culture." Not that I was a proponent of popular culture, but the elitist culture of the German professoriate seemed extreme to me. For me Adorno's treatment of Schoenberg over Stravinski outlined the issue. Indeed, even early Marcuse was strongly anti-mass culture, although very unlike Adorno, ended up liking jazz and other forms of American indigenous music. I, along with James Marsh of Fordham, disliked Adorno's biased treatment of Stravinski compared to Schoenberg. Marsh actually published a significant article on this topic (Marsh 1983). Indeed, in my reading, I detected a sort of group-think of German elitism, particularly in the arts and music, of critical theory philosophers. They group-thought that high German culture was under attack.[1]

Of course, this distrust of mass culture, in critical theory, was tied to its 'neo-marxism' and its dislike and distrust of corporate influence, even in art and music. I did not understand then that Marcuse had—at the time he wrote *One Dimensional Man* time—abandoned the stricter 'class struggle' notion of classical Marxism. I simply had more listening time for Stravinski than Schoenberg back then. But I was also very much a musical pluralist such as Trevor Pinch noted later.[2]

3. Early Philosophy of Technology

I have had only two major career-shaping changes in my life. The first was noted above, the graduate school move to MIT, 1958–1964; and the second my move from Southern Illiois University to Stony Brook, where I worked from 1969 until my retirement 2012. As Eduardo Mendeita has pointed out, the Stony Brook appointment was into the midst of the major Cold War atmosphere of Stony Brook, the Brookhaven National Laboratory with its affiliations with physics, astrophysics and engineering and Cold Spring Harbor with its affiliations with early genetic biology, a vantage point from which to view and experience the biggest techno-science developments of the mid-twentieth century.[3] I was already publishing on technological themes by the early 1970s. My move to Stony Brook was also mid-

career, a highly productive time for me. *Listening and Voice* (1976), *Experimental Phenomenology* (1977) and *Technics and Praxis* (1979) established my own voice in phenomenology; empirical, experimental, and against the mere study of dead phenomenologists, a style I called "generic continentalism"—and for this issue—which might also explain my growing disillusion with critical theory.

Since *Technics and Praxis* (1979) was frequently cited as the first English language philosophy of technology book—published the same year as Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* and Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—we can mark this moment as the late twentieth-century turn to praxis interpretations of technoscience. The late twentieth century was, in fact, the beginning of many authors starting to write on philosophy of technology, many of which are cited in Hans Achterhuis's *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn* (2001).[4]

I shall now conclude my autobiographically styled essay and turn to deeper philosophical reasons for divergence from critical theory. I note in closing this autobiographical story that the two most persistent criticisms I have faced in over forty years of doing philosophy of technology, are that I have under addressed the normative, ethical and political dimensions thought by my critics thought to be essential to philosophy of technology. These criticisms, however, come from two different traditions: neo-Marxism, often critical theory—not Marxist enough, and Pragmatism, particularly of the Deweyan strands—not Deweyan enough.

4. Has Marxism Reached Its Shelf Life?

In recent years, I have been developing the notion of "shelf-life." This idea, based upon long histories, argues that technologies, scientific objects, and *philosophies,* all have shelf lives. It derives from long-history observations and pragmatist philosophy (Dewey and Rorty particularly). Most anthropologists and archeologists agree that the Acheulean hand axe is the tool-technology with the longest known shelf-life of all technologies. Contrast this with cell phones, of which new ones appear virtually every year. The hand axe, likely invented and first used by *Homo Erectus,* 1.8 million years ago, lasted in the same shape until abandoned and replaced by more refined stone tools 400.000 years before present, thus this object had a 1.4 million years shelf-life. Typewriters and steam railway locomotives each had roughly 125 year shelf-lives. In science, the Democritean version of an atom was still a possible variant for the shape of an atom as late as the nineteenth century when the mini-solar shaped atom of Rutherford replaced it, thus wiping out the Democritean variant from scientific recognition after approximately 2500

years. Crystalline spheres, phlogiston, and aether, each once a scientific object, had shorter shelf-lives, but are now "dead" scientifically. Science has much clearer demarcations of when an object moves from a 'scientific object' to being 'historical.'

Philosophies, often thought timeless, also have shelf-lives, but these are more enigmatic. Rorty argued in his late twentieth-century books, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) that all "foundationalisms" including Plato's were now dead or shelf-lived. I agreed as is reflected in that both pragmatism and postphenomenology are anti-essenialist and anti-foundationalist.

So the question I raise here relates to a deepened notion of shelf-life for philosophies—should classical Marxism also be rated as having lived out much of its useful shelf life? My argument is this: Philosophers are mortal and when they die in some ways their thinking about events and things appears as limited. In my *Heidegger's Technologies: A Postphenomenological Perspective* (2010), I noted that since Heidegger's death was 1976, the explosion of new, largely digital, technologies invented post-1976 could not have been known to him. New AI, machine learning, social media, were for Heidegger posthumous inventions. Nor could he have foreseen the shift from the large machinic-gigantistic technologies which he so astutely critiqued to the nano-scaled processes which dominate twenty-first-century technologies (In now nearly four decades of reading *Science*, I note that articles nowadays predominantly refer to some nano-process). Thus, minimally, a death date has some import related to shelf lives.

Does the same apply to Karl Marx? My answer is a careful, qualified "yes." Marx was a totally nineteenth-century thinker, living between 1818 and 1883. This was, of course, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, particularly strong in the UK, his "stateless" home from 1845, when exiled from Germany due to his radical political stances. There is no doubt that his intellectual giantism makes him a pivotal figure for industrial times. His recognition of the means of production as materially related to technologies also makes him an early "philosopher of technology," prior to the twentieth century. He, along with Ernst Kapp, another neo-Hegelian, whose book, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology* (1877), is most cited as the first to use the term, "philosophy of technology." Kapp (1808–1896) was born before Marx, and died later than Marx, but authored his book later than Marx's well-known *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Capital* (1869). Marx, however, was the better known and still plays a role today, although I hope to show that in many respects he has reached some ends of shelf-life.

I am first going to take a rather unusual tactic by looking at two developments which, in effect, were too late for Marx to experience. Marx died in 1883, two years before Roentgen invented the X-ray. All philosophers of technology agree that new technologies lead to changes in disciplines, society, and even one's self. Few today are "technological determinists" such as the young Marx.[5] The X-ray did revolutionize medical practice, quite radically (Kevles 1998). The ability to image interiors, and in later use in engineering, radically changed what physicians and engineers could do. Indeed, one cannot easily imagine what the absence of X-ray imaging would mean for contemporary surgery.

The other post-Marx development, just beginning to be put in place at the end of Marx's life, but which would have actually helped him in his analysis of alienation, was "scientific management" or the spread of "Taylorism," particularly in the USA in the 1880s and 1890s until the 1930s. I choose this example because in retrospect, it is predictive. At its heart, Taylorism turned the labor process into a form of 'human-robotics,' prescient for today's widespread observation that automation—or increasingly AI-robotic driven—forms of labor technologies are causes for less and less human laborers working in select production processes. Taylorist transformations of labor practice had already made humans into quasi-robots. What Taylorism did was to reformulate labor practice, making more and more factory practice patterns human-proto-robotic. Friedrich Taylor believed that many labor practices were at most 30 percent efficient. Much of his analysis for what became known as "scientific management" was to break down, for each laborer, a small, repetitious action, repeated at speed, in an assembly line framework (i.e., an action which was a forerunner to automated, possibly robot-driven technologies). One can see how this process would, effectively feed into the Marxist claim that such productive practices increasingly "alienate" and "de-skill" the worker from any sense of holistic production.

Now, my twist. What shape would be less alienating? My contention is that at the heart of alienation theory is a nostalgic romanticism for an implicitly Medieval apprentice-craftsman type model. For example, some apprenticeships were needed to train people to become skilled craftspeople to make variations on statues (e.g., for saints in cathedrals, or gargoyles for same or other large buildings). In short, this was a technics in which the whole piece was produced by the individual apprentice or post-apprentice and in which there could be much pride. Such statue makers, for example, if asked why the backside of a saint or gargoyle was finished with as much detail as the forward facing side, could respond by claiming that after all, "God can see the backside." My suspicion is that this nostalgic-romantic view

permeates not only Marxism, but also Heidegger and a whole stretch of "labor romantics." Heidegger's hammer, for example, probably based upon his father's cobbler trade, is also a holistic, craft example. Looking forward, one can also note that much—but not all—art practice today is the closest approximation to Medieval whole product production. Most artists remain individual, and produce their artworks individually. Art technics, thus, are saving practices for many Heideggerians (e.g., Riis [2018]; Zabala [2017]). Of course such factory styled artists as late Anselm Kiefer are exceptions. But so would philharmonic orchestras be exceptions. Ironically, the single composer-player of a synthesizer would highly follow the individual craftsman model. Before leaving this observation, I refer to what I take as a significant modification of part of the alienation process from a postphenomenological variation.

Part of a Marxist alienation analysis, particularly related to factory practices, is the notion of "de-skilling." This, too, includes Taylorism. To reduce human action to some simplified process, can "de-skill" other more holistic processes. Two examples from recent literature include Kittler's recognition that when the typewriter was introduced, one unpredictable effect was that within less than a decade and a half, most secretaries had shifted from male to female. Kittler pointed out that many males felt "deskilled" when they had to abandon pens, became in effect "Luddites" and dropped a secretariat role. However, "pre-skilled" young middle class women, pre-skilled by almost universal piano keyboard skills, happily filled the gap and soon moved from domesticity to business by becoming secretaries (Kittler 1989).

I have added to this observation, a similar pre-skilling transformation in medical practice. Many "Nintendo" or laparoscopic surgeons, and add many distant sensing, drone to spaceprobe, operators are today pre-skilled from skills learned by playing computer games.[6] The point is that—often unpredictably—new practices can often be pre-skills for later development, with the implication that learning new skills may well be crucial for the rapid change in technics so common today.

5. Conclusion: Postphenomenology, Post Critical Theory, and Andrew Feenberg

I conclude with a brief look at a type of re-convergence of phenomenology and critical theory in which I point to what many often take as a parallel convergence between a modified phenomenology and a modified critical theory. In July 2018, Peter-Paul Verbeek, perhaps Europe's most recognized postphenomenologist, or-

ganized a major philosophy of technology conference at Twente University in the Netherlands. As part of the program, a book discussion on Andrew Feenberg's latest book *Technosystem* (2017) was organized; I was a respondent and I suggested that Feenberg's position could be called "post critical theory," a suggestion he found appropriate. As it turns out, Feenberg, along with many other twentieth-century philosophers, were all part of a diverse, but mutually friendly group. His *Critical Theory of Technology* (1991) was among those taking up a philosophical concern with technology. Feenberg and I, known to each other since the early 1970s, turn out to have several prominent stances which parallel each other in our approach to technology, which I want to highlight here:

- *Concreteness*. Although Hans Achterhuis called this "the empirical turn" in his *American Philosophy of Technology* (2001), what is meant is that his collection of philosophers of technology all chose specific, concrete technologies for analysis, and did detailed work upon the chosen technology. In Feenberg's case the French *minitel* system, followed by long distance electronic education, aspects of factory production, and other technologies were both experientially dealt with and discussed in his publications. In my case, imaging technologies, especially in science, but also in a range of practices from computer games to medicine, were concretely and experientially dealt with.
- *Multiculturality*. Feenberg usually spends at least part of his year in France, with also frequent spans of time in Japan; I have lived, sometimes repeatedly and for extended lecture tours in many European, Australian and Asian countries. Both of us have developed sensitivities of cultural differences and incorporate these into our takes on technologies.
- *Multiple and Variational Flexibilities*. What Feenberg calls "Gestalt switches" and I, more usually term "multistabilities" are considered as technological flexibility. In *Technosystem,* Feenberg claims to recognize as a significant part of my analysis of technology just such a Gestalt switch. Indeed, I claim to be the first philosopher to break the 2–3 stability limit traditionally held in the long variational history of phenomenological gestalt, resulting into today's multistability theory.
- *Fallibilism*. Although use of this term is rare, both postphenomenology and post Critical Theory, espouse changes in technology impacts, and are

> open to "nudges," "reforms" and smaller than macro and revolutionary changes embedded in classical Marxism and classical phenomenology.

I shall not here follow significant divergences that also mark our approaches to philosophy of technology, other than to acknowledge that Feenberg's interpretation remains more social-political and enlightenment rationality themed than my more existential and postmodern interpretations. What this says is that what I am calling "post critical theory" and "postphenomenology" now are more convergent than not. And the implicit motivation comes from similar experiential praxes. Feenberg sees that there is a partial shelf life to earlier Marxian notions and I see the same phenomenon with respect to classical phenomenology.

Notes

1. As an aside, but relevant here, I note that in our early days of Vermont summers, we were frequent attenders of the local Kinhaven Music Camp, then directed by the Duchins, also exiled anti-Nazis, who had a close tie to Stravinski whose music was frequently played in the summer faculty concerts.

2. Pinch writes: "Just compare what Ihde was doing back then with what philosophers of science were doing. Most were focused upon the 'high church' of physics. The beauty of sound and Ihde's approach to it is that there is no 'high church'" (Pinch 2006, 50).

3. Mendieta was the first to recognize that Stony Brook, with its strong physics department, closely linked to the Brookhaven National Laboratory—together a nexus of physicists, engineers, astronomers, and also the Cold Spring Harbor research facility which employed James Watson and much of early Big Science biology, were all part of my science context (2018).

4. These philosophers include: Albert Borgmann, Hubert Dreyfus, Andrew Feenberg, Donna Haraway, Don Ihde, Langdon Winner.

5. Many of Marx's predictions are questionable. For example, he apparently thought that the introduction of a railway system in India would lead to the collapse of the Caste System (Marx 1853)! It did not.

6. See Ihde 2016 for an expanded version of this argument. There is irony here in that players of computer games were often early taken to becoming de-skilled because concentrated eye-hand coordination was thought of as reductive of more complete bodily motility.

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