

Andrew Feenberg. *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School.* Verso 2014. 304 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781781681732); \$17.97 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781781681725).

Andrew Feenberg's *Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School* offers an erudite study of the foundation and development of critical theory, shows the continued vitality of this line of thought, and demonstrates Feenberg's own position within it. This excellent book stands out especially for its treatment of Lukács, its discussion of reification and its explication of the antinomies as understood by philosophers of praxis.

The book includes a preface and introduction, along with 9 chapters and an appendix. Rather than using the term 'philosophy of praxis' as a covering term for Western Marxism more generally, as Gramsci had, in the first chapter Feenberg indicates that he understands it as one form of thought rooted in Western Marxism (1)—namely that form that emphasizes that political praxis is integral to solving the problems of rationality. Other chapters of the book take up particular themes within the philosophy of praxis, including the concept of nature in this tradition, reification and rationality, issues of subject-object identity, theory and practice, as well as particular views of Marx, Lukács, and members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. The book culminates in a discussion of Feenberg's own influential appropriation and development of this philosophical perspective.

Feenberg thinks that the philosophy of praxis 'has resources for addressing the crisis of rationality that have been overlooked' (vii); for questions of rationality are at the heart of its political conceptualization (ix). In particular, it connects questions of rationality to the question of the forms of political practice in existence and views the resolution of philosophical problems as dependent upon the resolution of material problems. As Marx famously sees it, philosophy only realizes itself by surpassing itself.

An underlying theme of the book of relevance to this conception of rationality is the connection of human beings to one another and to the larger world. The focus within the philosophy of praxis is not on the individual but on a social subject, which ultimately includes humans, along with the natural and the social world, and is unfolding in human history. Related to this, in both Marx and Lukács reason is not to be realized in the transcendental ego or the Cartesian cogito, but in a collective subject in the process of history (xiii). While discussion of a 'social subject' might lead one to think of an amalgamation of human subjects, it is important to see that elements comprising this subject are not necessarily just human individuals; rather, social conditions can be viewed as creating part of the structure of the collective subject. It is in part for this reason that even philosophical problems are not to be viewed as mere intellectual dilemmas of human individuals but as existential issues tied into forms of social existence that mediate our interaction with the natural and social worlds and that are themselves historical products. Feenberg offers a fruitful discussion of the social subject and an insightful discussion of its historical character. As he notes, 'the truth of being is historical becoming' (49).

For Lukács and the philosophers of praxis more generally, '*reality* is historical, and history itself is to be understood as in essence an object of human practice' (5). This serves Feenberg as a basis for one of the most fruitful discussions of the book—namely of the antinomies as understood within the philosophy of praxis. As Feenberg notes, Marx had already come to the conclusion that

‘social change could not only accomplish such goals as reconciling individual and society, moral responsibility and self-interest, but that it could also unite subject and object, thought and being, man and nature’ (4). A foundational idea of the philosophy of praxis is that the antinomies that the Western philosophical tradition, and the German ideological tradition in particular, had attempted to work out theoretically are to be worked out in praxis—in reshaping life in accord with human needs and interests. The reified forms of thought dominant under capitalism result in a ‘split between subject and object, freedom and necessity, value and fact, form and content’ (93). In Lukács’ view, ‘the sole concern of reason’ is to transcend these (93); and this is not to be done by thought alone, but requires changes to social life (94).

In a dereified, realized philosophical worldview, subjects will see that they have long been shaped by and shaped the natural and social worlds, so the antinomy between subject and object will be overcome. They will recognize that this occurs in line with human values, so the antinomy of fact and value will be overcome. They will see that they are able to do this according to collective and freely chosen criteria rather than according to ahistorical necessary laws, so the antinomy of freedom and necessity will be overcome.

Feenberg offers of the richest English language discussions of the antinomies as understood within this tradition. In this context, however, it will disappoint historians of philosophy that he presupposes rather than demonstrates the truth of the self-assessment of the thinkers of the philosophy of praxis that they in fact have the means to resolve the classical antinomies. In an otherwise excellent discussion of these antinomies, it is a bit surprising that the complex and shifting view of the antinomies from Kant to Hegel to the philosophers of praxis is not even mentioned in a footnote. Such an assessment of the broader understanding of the antinomies might better show that the philosophers of praxis do not so much solve the antinomies raised by Kant and Hegel as initiate a paradigm shift regarding what the antinomies are and what types of questions are worth asking.

The book’s key discussion of alienation and reification sets out from the understanding of the interlinked character between human, social and natural dimensions of life, unfolding in a historical dialectic. This is reflected in the most diverse thinkers of this tradition. As Lukács writes: ‘We have...made our own history and if we are able to regard the whole of reality as history (i.e., as *our* history, for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which reality can be understood as *action*’ (5). Against this background, it is clear that realizing reason and achieving freedom is dependent, first, on an understanding of the self as a social self and of history as our collective creation, and second, on taking conscious collective control of the action through which we shape the social and natural world. This amounts to creating conditions for dereification. Indeed reason demands political change that institutes forms of life where human relations are not treated as mere ‘relations between things’ (62).

A main point—driven home very effectively—focuses on the reifying character of capitalism. Economic forms are connected to meaning generation within a culture. The call for socialism is thus not only a call for new economic structures but also for new cultural meanings. For Lukács, ‘concepts enter culture through social processes’ (78). Reification occurs under capitalism precisely because individuals adopt a ‘contemplative attitude’ toward nature, ‘conceiving themselves as individual agents, interacting through objective systems such as markets’ (82). ‘Here the totality, as the actual moving force of history, the reality behind the reified appearances, emerges independently of the social laws and confronts them with forces they cannot control’ (83). To overcome reification it is

necessary first to recognize the social origin of what are otherwise viewed as ‘social facts’ beyond our control (88) and to comprehend facts and meaning as socially embedded in practices. Given all of this, the (class) struggle over practices is implicated in the struggle over meaning (87 ff.). It is necessary to change practices in order to change meanings, resolve the antinomies, and overcome reification—in short to realize reason.

Feenberg’s own focus on technologies clearly builds on the thought outlined in this tradition. He is nearly singular among those now working in critical theory in his insistence on the importance of ‘struggles over technology’ and in highlighting that attitudinal changes are not sufficient but that it is necessary ‘to reconstruct the industrial system in accordance with different values’ (201). With his unrelenting focus on the importance of bringing technologies under collective control Feenberg has emerged as the most important representative of the critical theory of technology of this generation. Feenberg’s exemplary book on the philosophy of praxis also secures his position as one of the most important interpreters of this tradition of thought.

In this short review it is of course not possible to do justice to the intricate arguments of the book or the detailed analysis of conflicting interpretations that Feenberg unpacks regarding the diverse issues among the theorists treated. Given the rich topics addressed in the book and the detailed analysis offered, the work will spur critical discussion of the correct interpretation of Lukács and reification, of whether science and technology are more tightly linked than Feenberg argues, and of much else besides. However, precisely for those interested in such details, this book will serve as an invaluable resource.

Darrell P. Arnold, St. Thomas University, Florida