



Challenging Expertise: Paul Feyerabend vs. Harry Collins & Robert Evans on democracy, public participation and scientific authority



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ABSTRACT

This paper compares Feyerabend's arguments in *Science in a Free Society* to the controversial theory of expertise proposed by Harry Collins and Robert Evans as a *Third Wave of Science Studies*. Is the legitimacy of democratic decisions threatened by the unquestioned authority of scientific advice? Or does, on the contrary, science need protection from too much democratic participation in technical decisions? Where Feyerabend's political relativism envisions democratic society as inherently pluralist and demands equal contribution of all traditions and worldviews to public decision-making, Collins and Evans hold a conception of *elective modernism*, defending the reality and value of technical expertise and arguing that science deserves a privileged status in modern democracies, because scientific values are also democratic values. I will argue that Feyerabend's political relativism provides a valuable framework for the evaluation of Collins' and Evans' theory of expertise. By constructing a dialog between Feyerabend and this more recent approach in Science and Technology Studies, the aim of this article is not only to show where the two positions differ and in what way they might be reconciled, but also how Feyerabend's philosophy provides substantial input to contemporary debate.

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In his political philosophy, Paul Feyerabend ardently defended democratic rights against what he perceived as abusive and unjustified exertion of scientific authority. Most notably in his 1978 *Science in a Free Society*, Feyerabend criticized expert advice as a threat to the plurality and freedom of choice within democratic society and demanded public involvement in scientific decision-making. Questions regarding the authority of scientific knowledge in public discourse and the role of scientists in democratic policy-making continue to arouse vivid discussion in both philosophy and science and technology studies (STS). Feyerabend's original input is scarcely referred to¹ in contemporary approaches, although his ideas might be sensed as resonant in some.

My task in this paper will be to investigate whether Feyerabend's claims concerning the relationship between science and society can be made sense of in terms of more recent debates. To accomplish this, I will compare Feyerabend's position of *Science in a Free Society* to one particular approach within STS offered by [Harry Collins and Robert Evans \(2002, 2007\)](#). Their *Studies of Expertise and Experience*, embedded within a broader program of a "Third Wave of Science Studies", define and investigate several degrees of expertise, thus aiming to reliably identify those possessing the relevant special knowledge to be entrusted with decision-making. Collins & Evans are chosen because their approach shares important traits with Feyerabend's and is, therefore, particularly suitable for comparison: Both aim at a normative framework for science–society relations rather than describing actual processes. They define the suitable roles of scientific specialists and citizens in political decisions and provide for those definitions in terms of their commitment to a specific vision of a "good society". Necessarily, such normative outlines are also much more abstract and simplified than the detailed analyses

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¹ Kitcher's (2011) *Science in a Democratic Society* is a notable exception, discussing Feyerabend briefly in addition to the reference in the title.

contemporary STS research (e.g. Irwin & Wynne, 1996; Jasanoff, 2005, 2012) offers for the same processes and relations. To deliberately abstract away from many of those insights in favor of a prescriptive approach earned Collins & Evans much criticism right from the start: high potential for controversy is another one of the communalities with Feyerabend's work. Most importantly however, Collins & Evans try to defend exactly what Feyerabend has been attacking in his political philosophy, namely the notion of scientific expertise as an important and indispensable resource for democratic culture. It is the persuasiveness of this defense that I will investigate by deliberately interpreting and formulating Collins' and Evans' account as a response to Feyerabend's attack on scientific authority.

First, Feyerabend's reasoning for a framework of *political relativism* and lay supervision of science shall be sketched out. It will be shown that Feyerabend's argumentation rests mainly upon the rejection of (scientific) rationalism as a universal measure for human conduct. An overview of Collins' & Evans' approach will then be given by formulating their main theses in correspondence to Feyerabend's. By comparing both views in the third section, I will discuss how Feyerabend's more explanatory arguments can be rejected within the Collins/Evans framework, especially with regard to the concepts of *interactional expertise* and *experience-based experts*. Yet if my approach is successful, it will also show what the opponents have in common, and how Feyerabend's demands can be reconciled with most of the normative guidelines to technological decision-making proposed by Collins and his co-authors. This result indicates that even where Feyerabend's political ideas are not explicitly revived in contemporary debate, they still provide a useful frame for the evaluation of subsequent theories.

1. Feyerabend: protecting democracy from science

The primary source for Feyerabend's political ideas, probably in their most provocative fashion, is his 1978 *Science in a Free Society* (Feyerabend, 1982). For the following overview, I will concentrate on the program of *political relativism* outlined in this book.² Feyerabend's main claims rely upon his argumentation in *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1978): It can be shown that scientists invent their methods as they go along, employing everything to promote their ideas from ad hoc-hypotheses to sheer propaganda, and that they are just as fallible and vulnerable to prejudice and political or economic pressure as ordinary people. Science can therefore hardly be viewed as the best and foremost access to universal truth. However, Feyerabend's target is not science per se, but what he perceives as Western rationalism and its main characteristics. Among them is the preference of reason, abstract rules and universal standards over practice and pragmatic thinking. In *Science in a Free Society*, Feyerabend argues that reason is not the opposite of practice, but a specific kind of practice exposing its formal rather than its accidental and implicit features (Feyerabend, 1982: 26). Science is yet another practice, following its own conduct and threatened by the application of abstract rationalistic measures. Reason in the abstract sense of a universal set of rules "does not fit science and could not have contributed to its growth" (Feyerabend, 1982: 16). A historically orientated investigation also generates solid doubt about science's unimpaired excellence today or anytime in the future. There is no reason to assume that modern science is

flawless and would not benefit from adopting unorthodox standards.

Key to Feyerabend's *political relativism* is his concept of *tradition*, which is a generic term for any kind of world view or form of life: humanitarianism and antisemitism (Feyerabend, 1982: 27) are mentioned as well as "black culture", "Jewish culture", magic, religion, myth (Feyerabend, 1982: 78) and science. Political relativism demands that "all traditions have equal rights: the mere fact that some people have arranged their lives in accordance with a certain tradition suffices to provide this tradition with all the basic rights of the society in which it occurs" (Feyerabend, 1982: 82). The truth value of traditions is of no interest to the political relativist, because he believes that traditions can only be judged from within and by their own measures. Also, a consequence of Feyerabend's historical analysis is the view that "rationality is not an arbiter of traditions, it is itself a tradition or an aspect of a tradition" (Feyerabend, 1982: 27). Since "[t]raditions are neither good nor bad" and assume "desirable or undesirable properties only when compared with some tradition" (Feyerabend, 1982: 27), Western science and rationalism cannot rightfully reject the findings of other traditions (e.g. voodoo or tribal medicine) on the grounds that those do not fulfill scientific and rational standards.

Nevertheless, Feyerabend complains, has the "assumption of the inherent superiority of science" moved beyond science and become "an article of faith for almost everyone" (Feyerabend, 1982: 74). Science is now even "part of the basic fabric of democracy just as the Church was once part of the basic fabric of society" (Feyerabend, 1982: 74). However, the superiority of science cannot even be established by its own means: First, because "there is no single procedure, or set of rules that underlies every piece of research and guarantees that it is 'scientific' and, therefore, trustworthy" (Feyerabend, 1982: 98). Second, the results achieved in scientific research do not prove its excellence for two reasons: Science's sovereignty today was not achieved by fair competition but by colonization and suppression of non-Western cultures (Feyerabend, 1982: 102), and "there is not a single important scientific idea that was not stolen from elsewhere" (Feyerabend, 1982: 105). These considerations may be summed up as following:

F1) Compared to other traditions, science does neither provide a superior method nor superior results. There is no special value to scientific standards and no special authority to scientists' advice.

In a free society as Feyerabend envisions it, all traditions will consequently have equal access to public institutions and equal say in public debate (Feyerabend, 1982: 30). Only such a framework, Feyerabend argues, would allow all value systems to be equally represented in public life, and for each individual to accomplish a maximum amount of personal freedom. Accordingly, Feyerabend demands that "[p]roblems are solved not by specialists (though their advice will not be disregarded) but by the people concerned" (Feyerabend, 1982: 9f.). Public affairs should be settled in open debates (with 'open' here meaning even disposing of rational guidelines) by democratically elected committees. The underlying assumption is that (liberal) democratic procedures best guarantee equal access to power and recognition in public life for all traditions. Feyerabend extends the demand for public participation even to genuinely scientific debates, his reasons being the following: Whereas experts often either arrive at different results or show unanimity only due to their profession's shared prejudices and narrow-mindedness, laymen can discover the mistakes of scientists and successfully contribute to research progress. Einstein, Bohr, Born, Schliemann, Columbus and many more serve as examples that "the ignorant, or ill-informed can occasionally do better than

² Some of the claims of political relativism recur in *Farewell to Reason* (1987) under the label of *democratic relativism*, and political ideas can of course also be found in Feyerabend's later work. For the purpose of this paper and to avoid confusion, only the initial demands and arguments found in *Science in a Free Society* will be discussed.

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