



Feyerabend on politics, education, and scientific culture



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer a sympathetic reconstruction of the political thought of Paul Feyerabend. Using a critical discussion of the idea of the ‘free society’ it is suggested that his political thought is best understood in terms of three thematic concerns—*liberation*, *hegemony*, and the *authority of science*—and that the political significance of those claims become clear when they are considered in the context of his educational views. It emerges that Feyerabend is best understood as calling for the grounding of cognitive and cultural authorities—like the sciences—in informed deliberation, rather than the uncritical embrace of prevailing convictions. It therefore emerges that a free society is best understood as one of epistemically responsible citizenship rather than epistemically anarchistic relativism of the ‘anything goes’ sort—a striking anticipation of current debates about philosophy of science in society.
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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to ask what sense, if any, can be made of the various political ideas and proposals offered by Paul Feyerabend and to ask how, if at all, they might relate to contemporary debates about the authority of the sciences in modern societies. The cautious phrasing of those two questions is a reflection of the fact that Feyerabend’s political thought is generally poorly regarded by even the more sympathetic commentators, and also judged to be of less value and sophistication than his contributions to the history and philosophy of science.¹ Indeed, proposals such as the formation of a ‘free society’ and of the ‘separation of science and the state’ are often cited as self-evident indications of the immaturity, if not irresponsibility, of Feyerabend’s political thought, especially when considered alongside his putative enthusiasm for ‘anarchistic epistemology’. Such concerns naturally motivate sincere worries that the ‘worst enemy of science’ might not have anything sensible to contribute to political philosophy beyond ‘fanciful speculations about a utopia’ in which, epistemically and socially, ‘anything goes’ (Chalmers, 1999: p. 159).

Although it is easy to sympathize with concerned critics, and often difficult to disagree with them, there still remains the fact that political ideas and concerns were clearly central to Feyerabend’s philosophical interests. An idea like the ‘free society’ may be problematic, but it does seem to reflect certain deep concerns and pre-occupations that were important to Feyerabend studying those concerns may therefore be instructive. Certainly when one looks to his later writings, from roughly the mid 1970s through to his death in 1994, a variety of politically charged themes emerge. These include the protection of cultural diversity against the predations of ‘Western imperialism’, the social and epistemic marginalization of subordinated groups within developed world societies, environmental destruction and the ‘homogenization of global cultures, and the social and spiritual alienation endemic to late modern societies—all of which contributed to Feyerabend’s status as ‘a hero of the anti-technological counter-culture’ (Preston, 2012; §2.17). Moreover those themes are often clearly related to Feyerabend’s more obviously philosophical concerns about scientific methodology, and also converge, intelligibly if not inevitably, in the narrative of the ‘conquest of abundance’ described in his last, unfinished book.²

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¹ See, e.g., Oberheim (2006), p. 22f and Preston (1996), ch. 10.

² See Feyerabend (2001).

There are, then, good reasons to suppose that a study of Feyerabend's political thought will help us to better understand core themes of his work as a whole, even if the ideas, in themselves, fail to pass muster. My strategy here will therefore be to use a critical analysis of the 'free society' as a way into Feyerabend's political concerns, to identify and articulate his guiding 'principles' and themes, and then to examine how those concerns inform his views on education. It emerges that although the political proposals that Feyerabend offered should be rejected as they stand—as critics have suspected—they can still be usefully seen as reflecting an intelligible and, indeed, plausible set of concerns about the authority of the sciences in modern societies. The paper closes by articulating those concerns and placing them in the context of growing contemporary interest in 'philosophy of science in society'.

2. The free society

The ideal of the free society featured in Feyerabend's work from the late 1970s through to the early 1980s and was regarded by him during that time as the centerpiece of his political philosophy. The very term *free society* can be understood in terms of, at least, two sets of motivating ideas. The first is the suspicion about what Feyerabend calls the increasingly 'tyrannical' character of the modern sciences. Specifically, of their constituting a 'comprehensive system of thought ... that reigns without checks and balances', being both 'exempted from criticism' and prone to employ 'dogmatic defense against any 'attempted resistances' (Feyerabend [1975] 1999, pp. 181–182). The studies of the history and philosophy of science that occupied Feyerabend during the 1960s and early 1970s were not simply intended as epistemological correctives—to correct positivist confusions, say—but also as contributions to the identification and exposure of self-serving 'myths' about science. Perhaps the obvious myth is that of methodological monism: the claim that science enjoys a privileged epistemic authority owing to its employment of a distinctive set of context invariant methodological rules—a 'frozen image of science' that distorts our judgments about the proper scope of scientific methods (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 2).

Such claims were of course hardly original to Feyerabend, being part of the intellectual climate of the mid-twentieth century, and it is worth noting that they were common currency in major Continental European philosophical traditions, perhaps best exemplified by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979).

The second sets of factors informing Feyerabend's enthusiasm for the idea of the free society are the prevailing cultural conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is well-established amongst commentators that Feyerabend adapted easily and intensely to the trends and figures with whom he was engaging; that he was a 'chameleon' able to 'adapt to [the] changing interests and attitudes' of both academic and popular culture (Oberheim, 2006, pp. 15 and 24). The free society is an adaptation to and reflection of a period of recent cultural history that was liberal and pluralistic: a time of 'flower power' and counterculture, 'free love' and cannabis.³ It also reflects, if imperfectly, a broadly Millian vision of a society that respects and embraces a plurality of different 'modes of life' and welcomes 'experiments in living' untrammelled by the oppressive constraints and conservatism of entrenched social and intellectual authorities (even if the fidelity of the vision to Mill's own liberalism is debatable). Indeed, it was also around this culturally turbulent time that Feyerabend first encountered *On Liberty*, whether by

chance or design.⁴ The impact of the much-misunderstood slogan 'Anything goes!' surely owes as much to this cultural mood as it does to the emergence of post-positivist philosophies of science and the lyrical stylings of Cole Porter.⁵

The ideal of the free society therefore finds its origins in concerns about the putatively tyrannical character of the modern sciences and a prevailing cultural enthusiasm for the inclusion of a greater diversity of cultures and traditions. Certainly these two themes are visible throughout the characterizations that Feyerabend offers of the free society as one in which 'all traditions have equal rights and equal access to the centers of power', and which 'recognizes the value of any particular mode of life' (Feyerabend, 1978, p. 106 and [1980] 1999, p. 112). Indeed, a defining feature of a free society is that it is not based on 'any particular creed', and which would replace our 'faith' in the 'excellence of science' with the recognition that it is on a par with 'all other beliefs', including 'astrology and black magic' (Feyerabend, [1970] 1999, p. 125 and 1993, p. 228). The emerging picture is of a society that accommodates a rich plurality of cognitive and cultural traditions, including many that the denizens of late modern societies would regard as metaphysically and epistemologically incredible—an early presage, perhaps, of the 'abundance' that would be celebrated some thirty years later in Feyerabend's last, unfinished book.

These ideas and themes can be understood in terms of two principles, implicit in but not articulated by Feyerabend, which I'll dub the *hegemony principle* and the *liberation principle*. These provide the normative basis for his political thought. Unfortunately each is also untenable—or so I'll argue.

The hegemony principle is the conviction that the predominance or entrenchment of any one tradition, or a closely related set of traditions, necessarily constitutes a politically and epistemically restrictive hegemony. This principle manifests itself in different ways throughout Feyerabend's life and work, including in his enthusiasm for Mill's liberalism, the obvious dislike of cultural 'homogeneity', and the conviction that Homeric polytheism is more attractive and humane than the 'god-monster' of Xenophanean monotheism. Each of these reflects the sense that hegemony necessarily follows when some one society, tradition, or mode of living dominates. Indeed, one might go further and suggest that resistance to hegemony, and to allied traits like dogmatism and constancy, was a powerful conviction definitive of Feyerabend's character or temperament: a hatred of being 'nailed down', 'confined', or otherwise trapped within a single fixed scheme of thought or way of life. Many passages in his autobiography testify to his being 'reluctant to be nailed down' and to an abiding sense of 'restlessness' that only passed when he found himself 'confronted with an outside challenge' (Feyerabend, 1995, p. 105). But though this psychological claim strikes me as plausible, based on Feyerabend's own autobiographical writings and conversations with his friends and intimates, it is mentioned here speculatively rather than assertively.

The liberation principle is the positive counterpoint to the hegemony principle: political and epistemic freedom requires the presence of a plurality of alternative and equally regarded traditions. 'The freedom of a society', argued Feyerabend, 'increases as the restrictions imposed on its traditions are removed' (Feyerabend [1980] 1999, p. 220). Again, this principle manifests in diverse ways throughout Feyerabend's writings: his vigorous defense of pluralism in both science and philosophy, the hostility towards dogmatism and conservatism, the defenses of 'eccentric' beliefs and practices like voodoo and astrology, and the constant need to experiment with (in Mill's sense) and shift between different ideas, styles, outlooks.⁶

³ On the cultural and political context of Feyerabend's philosophy, see Kidd (2016).

⁴ See Kidd (2010), ch. 5.

⁵ On the slogan, see Tsou (2003).

⁶ See, e.g., Oberheim (2006), Part III.

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