



## Introduction: Reappraising Paul Feyerabend



### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Feyerabend  
 Scientific realism  
 Scientific pluralism  
 Political philosophy of science  
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 Thomas Kuhn

This volume is devoted to a reappraisal of the philosophy of Paul Feyerabend. It has four aims. The first is to reassess his already well-known work from the 1960s and 1970s in light of contemporary developments in the history and philosophy of science. The second is to explore themes in his neglected later work, including recently published and previously unavailable writings. The third is to assess the contributions that Feyerabend can make to contemporary debate, on topics such as perspectivism, realism, and political philosophy of science. The fourth and final aim is to reconsider Feyerabend's place within the history of philosophy of science in the light of new scholarship.

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'Feyerabend's philosophy of science has little to recommend itself and is losing whatever importance and significance it once had within philosophy of science'—Frederick Suppe (1977), p. 643

### 1. Introduction

This special issue is devoted to a critical reappraisal of the significance of the philosophy of Paul Feyerabend to current and long-standing debates, and to the place and significance of his work in the history of the philosophy of science. It is the first collection dedicated to his work in almost fifteen years, being preceded by an edited volume, *The Worst Enemy of Science*, in 2000, and a *fest-schrift* published in 1991, to mark Feyerabend's retirement, entitled *Beyond Reason*.<sup>1</sup> There are also now three book-length studies of his philosophy, authored by John Preston (1997), Eric Oberheim (2006a, 2006b), and Robert Farrell (2003), and a steady stream of papers on various aspects of his work, and increasingly from philosophers working in Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America.<sup>2</sup>

Such continuing interest has been encouraged by the appearance of new pieces of Feyerabendiana, including several works previously unknown, including a complete monograph. These include *Conquest of Abundance*, edited by Bert Terpstra and published in

1999, consisting of an uncompleted manuscript and a series of contemporaneous published articles on closely related themes. This 'tale of abstraction versus the richness of Being' was intended, by Feyerabend, to be his last book—or in his preferred terms—a 'collage ... on the topic of reality', and especially of the ways in which scientific and philosophical 'abstractions' can dissolve our sense of its richness and complexity.

Another closely related work is *Naturphilosophie*, edited by Helmut Heit and Eric Oberheim, published in 2009 and awaiting translation into English. This was a long-slumbering project of Feyerabend's, for one can find references to it in his correspondence with Imré Lakatos in the early-to-mid 1970s. It offers a grand history of 'philosophies of nature' in the Western tradition, beginning with the Stone Age, and continuing via the ancient Greeks through early modern science to twentieth century physics. A final piece of recent Feyerabendiana, again edited by Eric Oberheim, is a set of four lectures published under the title *The Tyranny of Science*. Though the title fits popular images of Feyerabend's ideas and character, the original title of the lectures, originally delivered at the University of Trent in May 1992, was far more sober: 'What is Knowledge? What is Science?'. These public lectures range across a variety of topics, but their guiding theme is that science can be a force for good in the world, just as long as it is protected from false, distorting 'myths', such as its isolation from social and political values and concerns.

Another useful source is the edited correspondence between Feyerabend and Lakatos during the late 1960s and early 1970s, covering the period during which they were working on the volume that was to be *For and Against Method* (Lakatos & Feyerabend,

<sup>1</sup> See Preston, Munévar, and Lamb (2000) and Munévar (1991a, 1991b), respectively.

<sup>2</sup> The new work on Eastern European, Asian, and South American scholars' work on Feyerabend is referenced and discussed in Kidd (2010), p. 168.

1999). Unfortunately Lakatos' untimely death prevented completion of his brief 'for' method, and so Feyerabend went ahead with the book that we now know as *Against Method*—though, of course, there are a number of his works with that title. This volume also includes several other pieces by Lakatos and Feyerabend on philosophical and educational themes, and it gives a lively account of their life, ideas, politics, and characters.

Several other pieces of Feyerabendiana are also currently in progress. The fourth volume of Feyerabend's philosophical papers, gathering together his writings on the history and philosophy of physics, appeared while this volume was in press (Feyerabend, 2015). Other forthcoming works include correspondence with Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, and Paul Hoyningen-Heune. Anglophones might also hope for the translation, into English, of other writings by Feyerabend, including *Der wissenschaftstheoretische Realismus und die Autorität der Wissenschaften, Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*—a variant of *Science in a Free Society*—and a short work entitled *Wissenschaft als Kunst*.<sup>3</sup> With this point about language, it is important that Anglophone monoglots—like the editors of this volume—record their thanks to the editors and translators of Feyerabend's works, the staff at the Feyerabend Archive at Konstanz, and Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend for their intellectual and personal efforts in making his work available.<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, then, these books, lectures, papers, and sets of correspondence offer a rich resource for those with a scholarly interest in Feyerabend's life and work. In the next section, we address the complicated question of its contemporary relevance.

## 2. 'The worst enemy of science'

It is well-known that Feyerabend has a complicated reputation within the philosophy of science. Despite his considerable influence on mid-twentieth-century philosophy of science, including important exchanges with Kuhn, Popper, and Lakatos, and despite his importance and citation outside of the discipline, these days his reputation is rather messy.

Most obviously, his name was, and still is, associated with a range of striking, and often negative epithets. Depending upon whom you read, Feyerabend is a 'cultural relativist', 'epistemological anarchist', 'the Salvador Dali of philosophy', 'the wild man of twentieth-century philosophy of science', and—for one particularly expressive commentator—'the *agent provocateur*, the Shakespearean Fool, and the gifted charlatan all rolled into one'. Perhaps the most persistent label is the one given by two writers for *Nature*, who judged Feyerabend to be 'the worst enemy of science' (Theocharis & Psimopoulos, 1987). The name 'Feyerabend' conjures up an image of a philosophical trickster, wickedly willing to praise voodoo and astrology and demean science and reason. Peculiar legends have grown up around him, colleagues often delightedly report stories and anecdotes about him, and many have criticized him for being nasty and aggressive and for his wanton disregard for academic and scholarly norms and conventions. Several of these complaints are not without some basis, and even sympathetic admirers must admit that Feyerabend often did himself no favours; for instance, by berating the discipline and practitioners of philosophy of science as an obsolescent discipline populated by 'creeps and incompetents'. Indeed, such criticisms, legends, and epithets

loom so large that the first chapter of Oberheim's book, entitled 'Facing Feyerabend', is devoted to dismantling them.

Still, despite such efforts, it seems that, for many people, Feyerabend still suffers the title given to him by two writers for *Nature*: 'the worst enemy of science'. As Peter Godfrey-Smith (2001, pp. 102–103) once pointed out, however, though one might call Feyerabend "the" wild man ... there have been various other wild men—and wild women' in the philosophy of science, even if Feyerabend was 'uniquely wild'. Many encyclopaedia and biographical dictionary entries still repeat this image of Feyerabend as a raving 'anti-science' irrationalist. A bad reputation is, indeed, hard to shake.

The contributors to this volume seek to challenge this inherited perception of Feyerabend in three main ways. The first is to offer critical reappraisals of his claims, arguments, and theses, often by connecting them with subsequent developments in philosophy of science, epistemology, and the history of science and culture. Feyerabend's status as a 'relativist', for instance, is shown by Lisa Heller and Martin Kusch (this volume) to be far more complex than it initially appears. The second is to explore the ways in which Feyerabend's own ideas can contribute to current areas of debate within the philosophy of science, especially on topics, such as science and democracy, that were unusual in his day, but quite mainstream today. The papers by Helene Sorgner and the two editors each explore how Feyerabend's work can contribute to central topics of debate in socially engaged philosophy of science, such as expertise, education, and democratic politics.

The third way to challenge the inherited perception is to offer a reappraisal of Feyerabend's status within the history of the philosophy of science and his relationship to the wider history of philosophy and science. This includes 'usual suspects' such as Einstein, the Popperian school, and positivism, as explored by Eric Oberheim, Matteo Collodel and Daniel Kuby, respectively, as well as to ancient Greek thought, which is treated by Helmut Heit, Gonzalo Munévar, and Preston. Many other influences and precedents have been identified and explored, including Søren Kierkegaard, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and John Stuart Mill.<sup>5</sup> There is also rich scope for further studies of Feyerabend's relationship to wider intellectual and political developments, including early analytic philosophy, the Cold War, the 1970s 'counterculture', postmodernism, and contemporary feminist and postcolonial philosophies of science among others.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside these three sets of reasons, it is worth noting a further point about Feyerabend's 'bad reputation'. This is that many of the claims that Feyerabend, in the 1970s, and which earned him his status as a radical anarchist are now the received wisdom within mainstream philosophy of science. As Howard Sankey (2012, p. 475) has pointed out, 'many of Feyerabend's key themes are now commonplace', such as the fact that 'science' is pluralistic, disunified, value-laden, and complexly bound up with social and political concerns.

Indeed, the call to take seriously the practical and political context of the scientific enterprise that earned Feyerabend his 'anarchistic' status is now honoured by a rich community of pluralist, feminist, political, and socially-engaged philosophies of science—even if only a few of them appreciate Feyerabend's status as a precursor of their interests and approaches. More generally, many of the other claims that Feyerabend made that seem radical, may, be more sensible than is often supposed. Helen Longino (1990, p. 65) has pointed out that, in fact, many of Feyerabend's claims, for instance that 'objectivity has been fetishized'—are, on analysis,

<sup>3</sup> See Feyerabend (1978, 1980, 1984), respectively.

<sup>4</sup> With the mention of Grazia, we also invite readers to look at the work of the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation, founded in 2006, which (to quote its mission statement) 'promotes the empowerment and well being of disadvantaged human communities'. The Foundations' website, <http://pkfeyerabend.org/paul-k-feyerabend/?lang=en>, also includes photographs and an audio recording of Feyerabend—a real treat!

<sup>5</sup> See Kidd (2011, 2012) and Lloyd (1997), respectively.

<sup>6</sup> See Floyd (2006), Kidd (2016), Preston (1998), and Stadler (2006).

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