



Was Feyerabend a Popperian? Methodological issues in the History of the Philosophy of Science



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ABSTRACT

For more than three decades, there has been significant debate about the relation between Feyerabend and Popper. The discussion has been nurtured and complicated by the rift that opened up between the two and by the later Feyerabend's controversial portrayal of his earlier self. The first part of the paper provides an overview of the accounts of the relation that have been proposed over the years, disentangles the problems they deal with, and analyses the evidence supporting their conclusions as well as the methodological approaches used to process that evidence. Rather than advancing a further speculative account of the relation based on Feyerabend's philosophical work or autobiographical recollections, the second part of the paper strives to clarify the problems at issue by making use of a wider range of evidence. It outlines a historical reconstruction of the social context within which Feyerabend's intellectual trajectory developed, putting a special emphasis on the interplay between the perceived intellectual identity of Feyerabend, Feyerabend's own intellectual self-concept, and the peculiar features of the evolving Popperian research group.

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'[N]o set of circumstances absolutely dictates a particular interpretation of the possibilities contained in them. [...] Identical institutions and practices may be perceived in remarkably different ways, and it is perceptions, not realities as such, that enter into the constitution of roles' (Ringer, 1990, pp. 283–284)

Although it is widely acknowledged that Karl R. Popper and his critical rationalism played a significant role in Paul K. Feyerabend's formative years and intellectual development, the nature of the relation between Feyerabend and Popper has become a contentious matter. The main aim of this paper is to reconsider the question "Was Feyerabend a Popperian?" and to try to solve the controversies that have arisen around it.

The first part of the paper focuses on the debate over the relation between Feyerabend and Popper. It provides an overview of the accounts of that relation that have been proposed, disentangles the various problems they deal with, and analyses both the evidence supporting their conclusions as well as the methodological approaches used to process that evidence. It will be emphasized that the question of Feyerabend's "Popperianism" can be fruitfully

spelt out as a series of related sub-questions concerning Feyerabend's relation to Popper as a scholar, his relation to an alleged "Popperian School" as an institution, and his relation to critical rationalism as a philosophical position. It will then become clear that, to assess extant answers to these questions, one must first evaluate the historical accuracy and significance of Feyerabend's autobiographical remarks. This raises new challenges concerning the role of biography and autobiography in the history of philosophy. Such challenges have hardly ever been openly faced, let alone thoroughly or systematically scrutinized.¹ However, they must be

¹ Although the significance of philosophers' biographies for the historiography of philosophy has been emphasized since the modern establishment of the history of philosophy as a discipline (see Catana, 2005) and despite the fact that autobiographical writings have a venerable tradition within the history of Western philosophy, with intellectual or philosophical autobiographies having become a common output for leading academic or professional philosophers in the 20th century (for an overview, see Mathien, 2006; Schuster, 2003, Chapter 1), no historiographic debate has developed which is even remotely comparable to the one that has flourished around biographical criticism in literary studies. Recent contributions, such as Conant (2001), Monk (2001), Schuster (2003), Baggini (2002), Mathien & Wright (Eds.) (2006), Gross (2008), Wright (2006), however, point to a growing attention and interest in this topic.

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engaged if any step forward is to be made within Feyerabend scholarship. In particular, an adequate appraisal of Feyerabend's late self-presentation calls for a systematic exercise of source criticism and, as a consequence, an enlargement of the relevant evidential basis upon which to build a robustly founded historical reconstruction of the complex and evolving relationship that bounded together Feyerabend and Popper.

The second part of the paper strives to provide a sketch of such a historical reconstruction. It will make essential use of unpublished materials of archival origin as selected and processed through the methodological approaches and by the conceptual tools developed over the last four decades by sociological and socio-psychological research, which only lately have been applied in social studies of philosophy. In this regard, the notion of philosophical “research school,” as conceived in terms of both interpersonal small-group dynamics and larger institutional ones within a specific intellectual field, is here considered as pivotal in connecting the biographic dimension of an individual life to the social dimension of an academic discipline.

The present paper, therefore, aims at contributing a case study in a novel kind of scientific or naturalistically-oriented, though no less hermeneutic, intellectual history of philosophy. If every historiographic entity, including philosophers and their work, has a narrative identity and becomes problematic as soon as conflicting accounts centring around it are put forward, as is the case with the “(un)Popperian Feyerabend”, a tentative resolution cannot escape the form of story-telling. However, the resulting account will be the more convincing and fruitful—one would daresay explanatorily powerful with respect to particular intellectual choices and, more generally, to entire intellectual trajectories or sections thereof—the wider the evidential basis on which it is built and the more solid the principles that guide the process of its elaboration.

1. The debate over the relation between Feyerabend and Popper

1.1. *Conflicting accounts*

Examining the secondary literature on Feyerabend's work that has been steadily growing since the mid-1970s, six noteworthy accounts concerning his relation to Popper can be identified. All of them acknowledge that Popper exerted some influence over Feyerabend's intellectual trajectory, that at some point Feyerabend turned against at least some tenets of Popper's critical rationalism, and that also their personal relationship happened to break down. Yet, they offer contrasting narratives of this course of events, highlighting different periods as key in its development, and emphasizing different causes behind the intellectual and personal rift that opened up between the two.

Joseph Agassi (b. 1927), a friend of Feyerabend since January 1953 when they were both attending Popper's classes at the London School of Economics,² has provided the following reconstruction:

[Feyerabend] became a student and a disciple of Popper's. (Oh, I know that he is in the habit of denying this claim of mine. One of us is obviously a liar [...]). He became a passionate defender of science and of rationality as he understood them, preaching logic, quantum mechanics, and, above all, the philosophy of Karl Popper. [...] Things changed after the student revolution, so-called. From that time on, and increasingly,

² For further details about the relation between Feyerabend and Agassi, see below, §2.1.

Feyerabend preached his odd slogan [...] ‘anything goes’. [...] It was clear to me at once that the move was political, not intellectual, and I could see its allure, but also its dangers (Agassi, 1980/1988, pp. 422–424)

Thus, Agassi stresses that Feyerabend was one of Popper's foremost pupils, that he initially intensely advocated and promoted Popper's philosophy and that it was only later, in the mid-to-late 1960s, that he radically changed his attitude towards his master. On different occasions, Agassi has also pointed out that in the early 1960s Feyerabend tried to develop critical rationalism by highlighting some tensions and inconsistencies within Popper's theories of explanation and scientific progress (see Agassi, 1974/1988, pp. 291–300). Moreover, Agassi has insisted on the political nature of Feyerabend's detachment from Popper, claiming that during his university studies the young Feyerabend was “converted to Trotskyism, from which he was never freed (though he managed to put it aside and, while a disciple of Popper, even expounded rather anti-Trotskyite views)” (Agassi, 1980/1988, p. 422). Agassi thus implied that the student revolution somehow succeeded in awaking Feyerabend's dozing political commitment and in changing his attitude towards Popper.

The picture of the relation between Feyerabend and Popper outlined by Roy Edgley (1925–1999) shortly after Feyerabend passed away features similar political nuances. A philosopher with strong socialist leanings, Edgley befriended Feyerabend upon becoming colleagues at the University of Bristol in the autumn of 1955. However, they temporarily lost touch three years later, when Feyerabend took up a position at the University of California, Berkeley. They reunited again in the mid-1970s, when Edgley—who in the meantime had moved to the University of Sussex, becoming one of the leading figures of the New Left group that coalesced around the journal *Radical Philosophy*—was instrumental in bringing Feyerabend to Brighton on a one-term visiting appointment. According to Edgley's recollections:

Feyerabend came to England in 1952 and soon ‘fell for’ [Popper's] falsificationism. But during his time in his first university post, at Bristol from 1955, and on to Berkeley in 1958, he began to move away from Popper. He developed a cluster of ideas that converged with Thomas Kuhn's [...], though reached independently. [...] These ideas decisively undermined falsificationism, and empiricism in general, and in the process undermined also the critique of Marxism that Popper had based on his (mis) conception of science. It's little wonder that the Left took Feyerabend to their hearts. (Edgley, 1996, pp. 155–156)

When compared with Agassi's, Edgley's account does not only stress the critical element in Feyerabend's relation to Popper much more forcefully, but also provides a different timing for it, dating the gradual detachment of Feyerabend from critical rationalism back to the mid-1950s.³ Furthermore, the political connection between Feyerabend and the New Left is here considered a consequence of his criticism of Popper's philosophy of science rather than one of its possible causes.

A third colleague and a friend of Feyerabend from the early 1960s, John W. N. Watkins (1924–1999), has apparently submitted a more irenic and conciliatory interpretation of Feyerabend's moves against critical rationalism, regarding them as at best minor and in any case internal attempts at amending Popper's position from

³ The first sentence in the reported passage by Edgley is only marginally interesting as a testimony since it repeats *verbatim* a turn of phrase used by Feyerabend in his autobiography (see below, n7 and p. 13).

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