

Feyerabend, truth, and relativisms: Footnotes to the Italian debate<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

There is a substantial literature on Feyerabend's relativism—including a few papers in this collection—but fewer specific studies of the ways that his writings and ideas have been taken up among the non-academic public. This is odd, given his obvious interest in the lives and concerns of persons who were not 'intellectuals'—a term that, for him, had a pejorative ring to it. It is also odd, given the abundance of evidence of how Feyerabend's relativism played a role in a specific national and cultural context—namely, contemporary Italian debates about relativism. This paper offers a study of how Feyerabend's ideas have been deployed by Italian intellectuals and cultural commentators—including the current Pope—and critically assesses them.

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A spectre haunts human thought: relativism. If truth has many faces, then not one deserves trust or respect.

Ernest Gellner (1982: 181)

## 1. Introduction

After being a rather hot topic in the 1960s and 1970s, relativism gradually lost its appeal to philosophers of science. It remained an open issue, though, surfacing from time to time in works of very different nature and scope. In the past few years, due to a number of important events foreign to philosophy, but which affected philosophy and society in a profound way, it regained the center of the stage. This is especially true for Italy, which more than any other country witnessed (and still witnesses, to some extent) a vehement clash between supporters of a so-called 'healthy' relativism,

upholding it as the only way to defend freedom of thought and to contrast intolerance and fundamentalism, and defenders of the right to speak of truth, warning against the dangers of relativism and their nihilistic drifts.

Italy saw a robust intensification of the presence and influence of the highest hierarchy of the Catholic Church on Italian politics. In fact, the Church cleverly took advantage of the actual division between the political representatives of Italian Catholics into two opposing coalitions—center-left and center-right—in order to bar a number of legislative innovations (concerning end of life procedures and common-law marriage) as well as to promote other, opposite innovations (on human fecundation, for instance). These facts, together with a few others, triggered a heated discussion, in which upholders of truth have been portrayed as fundamentalists, and upholders of relativism have been blamed of giving up Western culture and values, thereby becoming accomplices to terrorists.

The debate led to the publication of a good number of books, but mostly took place on newspapers, radio and television, earning its protagonists (academics, public intellectuals or committed journalists) a considerable audience. What is striking, however, is the confusion about what, from time to time, is the specific issue that is being discussed—so much so that the reader occasionally wonders whether and to what extent such lack of clarity is actually on purpose. A few philosophers tried to clarify and carefully distinguish the various issues at stake in what is a truly complex and multi-faceted debate (see, for instance, Coliva, 2009; ch. 1;

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D'Agostini, 2010; and Marconi, 2007; especially pp. 225–249), but little, if anything, of such sophistication and clarity eventually reached out of the narrow community of 'professional' philosophers, even though a good number of Italian most prominent intellectuals played an active role in shaping public opinion on newspapers and other media.

Many of the intellectuals involved in the Italian debate made ample use of Paul Feyerabend's arguments for relativism; some referred to Thomas Kuhn as well—and this is fully understandable, of course. Oddly, however, others explicitly stated their agreement with Karl Popper, his clear and often repeated opposition and criticism of relativism notwithstanding (see especially Popper, 1962; for a few comments, see Gattei, 2006).

In this paper I shall try to outline the main trends in the Italian debate about relativism, highlight their roots in Feyerabend's (and Kuhn's) philosophy, and provide a critical assessment of them.

## 2. Feyerabend on relativism

According to Wikipedia—the source of all knowledge and ignorance—"The philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend wholeheartedly embraced relativism at many points of his career".<sup>1</sup> The widespread idea of Feyerabend's philosophy is that of a relativist one and, indeed, this is the received view in Italy as well. In fact, Feyerabend did little to dispel such a myth: like many of his contemporaries, he came to fight the view that there is no single rationality, no unique way of attaining knowledge, and no single truth, however ideal, our theories are getting closer and closer to. He grew increasingly skeptical about the ambitions and achievements of 'Western Rationalism' (which he often mocked by using capital letters and scare quotes). And he downgraded the relevance of empirical arguments by suggesting that esthetic criteria, subjective elements and social factors do play a far more decisive role in the history of science than rationalist and empiricist historians and philosophers would be ready to admit.

Feyerabend's work is particularly well-known in Italy: not only have most of his works been translated into Italian, but he also gave a number of talks, as well as newspaper and popular press interviews throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (when he was living with Grazia Borrini in Rome), and was often invited to contribute to special journal issues and collective books in Italian.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Feyerabend's works were first introduced into Italy as part of the so-called 'post-Popperian' debate, alongside the names of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos, as well as Joseph Agassi, Norwood R. Hanson, Stephen Toulmin, John Watkins (see Giorello, 1976a and 1976b, particularly pp. 257–269 and 292–297)<sup>3</sup>—but soon became the subject of specific studies by authors with various backgrounds.

Amongst the most quoted and referred-to works of his by Italian authors, three are particularly relevant in this context: *Against*

*Method* (1975; there is also an Italian translation, in book form, of its preliminary version, published in 1970 as a contribution to vol. IV of the *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*), *Science in a Free Society* (1978) and *Farewell to Reason* (1987).

These works substantiated the claims of those who portrayed Feyerabend as an outspoken relativist, and given their provocative style and breadth, managed to reach a much wider audience than the relatively small community of philosophers and historians of science they were originally addressed to. Feyerabend came to be seen as an opponent of science—which he never was—and as a leading cultural relativist, both as an advocate of the incommensurability of scientific theories and as a defender of relativism in politics. As John Preston observed, "His denunciations of aggressive Western imperialism, his critique of science itself, his conclusion that 'objectively' there may be nothing to choose between the claims of science and those of astrology, voodoo, and alternative medicine, as well as his concern for environmental issues ensured that he was a hero of the anti-technological counter-culture" (Preston, 2012), and sadly turned him, in the eyes of many rationalist philosophers, into "the worst enemy of science" (Horgan, 1993; see also Kidd, 2013). From this point of view, Feyerabend is definitely one of the best-known, most admired, and least comprehended philosophers of the second half of the past century.

Feyerabend was no relativist in the 1950s and early 1960s. As John Preston convincingly showed, "This is a myth, originally generated by critical commentators, then reinforced when Feyerabend himself did succumb to relativism. It is a myth fostered also by Feyerabend's later suppression of passages from his own earlier work" (Preston, 1997: 122). Indeed, in a passage from 'Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism' (original version, not the one in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1), we read:

Modern science is the result of a conscious criticism of the theses propagated and the methods employed by the great majority of scholastic philosophers. [...] Against such conformism it is of paramount importance to insist upon the normative character of scientific method. (Feyerabend, 1962b: 61–62)

Relativism is a threat to the critical power of the scientific method,

For what the suggested procedure amounts to is increased leniency with respect to questions of test. [...] Expressed in more pedestrian terms, this maneuver propagates the acceptance of unsatisfactory hypotheses on the grounds that this is what everybody is doing. It is conformism covered up with high-sounding language. (Feyerabend, 1962b: 61)

Later on, beginning with the 1970s, Feyerabend's disenchantment with traditional epistemic ideals such as 'the Truth' became evident, and the standard association of his name with relativism acquired a meaning of sort. In *Science in a Free Society* (1978a) Feyerabend argues that all value-judgments are implicitly relational, and that any such judgment not explicitly relativized to a tradition is fatally incomplete. To this, he adds that reason is but a tradition among others (see Feyerabend, 1978a: 24–26). "Reason" and "practice", he claims, "are [...] two different types of practice" (Feyerabend, 1978a: 26, emphasis suppressed), and from this draws a number of characteristically relativist implications, among which are the following:

i. *Traditions are neither good nor bad, they simply are.* [...] Corollary: rationality is not an arbiter of traditions, it is itself a tradition or an aspect of a tradition. It is therefore neither good nor bad, it simply is.

ii. *A tradition assumes desirable and undesirable properties only when compared with some tradition, i.e. only when viewed by*

<sup>1</sup> In its entry on "Relativism" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relativism>), Wikipedia lists Feyerabend among its main advocates. His name follows that of "Indian religions", and comes before that of Thomas Kuhn. In between them, no less than L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology.

<sup>2</sup> See Matteo Collodel's annotated bibliography of Feyerabend's works at <http://www.collodel.org/feyerabend/PKFanbib.htm#B11po>.

<sup>3</sup> Feyerabend's first work to appear in Italian was *Problemi dell'empirismo*, in 1971 (gathering the two parts of his "Problems of Empiricism", published in 1965 and 1970); *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Lakatos and Musgrave in 1970, was translated (by Giorello) in 1976, as volume 15 of the series "Filosofia della scienza", edited by Ludovico Geymonat for the left-wing publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (Geymonat also welcomed in the series Lakatos' *Proofs and Refutations*, but rejected Feyerabend's *Against Method* and *Science in a Free Society*, as well as Hanson's *Patterns of Discovery*, whose Italian translations were nonetheless all published by Feltrinelli).

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