

OBITUARY OF PAUL K. FEYERABEND (1924–1994)

exam in 1942, he was first drafted to the working service

Paul Feyerabend died on February 11, 1994 in Genolier, Switzerland, at the age of 70.

He was born and grew up in Vienna. After his high school (*Arbeitsdienst*) and then to the German army. In 1945, he was hit by a bullet in his spinal chord by which he became partly paralyzed from the waist down; for the rest of his life, he could walk only with the aid of a crutch. He studied theater production, history of the theater, and singing at the Weimar Institute for the Methodological Reform of the German Theater in 1945. From 1946 to 1951, he studied history, physics, and astronomy in Vienna. He graduated in astronomy and received his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1951. After shorter postgraduate studies in philosophy of science in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo, he left for England in 1952 to study with Karl Popper at the London School of Economics (the original plan had been to study with Wittgenstein who had died in the meantime); his principal subjects were Wittgenstein's philosophy and quantum mechanics. In 1955, after some time back in Vienna, Feyerabend accepted a lectureship in philosophy in Bristol, England. An invitation to spend a year at Berkeley reached him in 1958, which he accepted; the following year he was appointed with tenure. With some interruptions, he taught there until his retirement in 1990. In the meantime, Feyerabend held positions also in Minneapolis, Auckland (New Zealand), Berlin, London, Yale, Brighton, and Kassel (Germany). From 1980 to 1990, he was appointed both at the ETH Zürich and at Berkeley; during the summer term he lectured in Zürich and during the fall term at Berkeley.

Feyerabend's early reputation was mainly based on his work in the philosophy of physics, especially of quantum mechanics. He was one of the first professional philosophers who dealt seriously with Bohr's

notion of complementarity. However, contrary to a widespread impression, Feyerabend's very early critique of the received view in the philosophy of science was not primarily inspired by historical studies. It was rather an abstract discussion in the spirit of the Vienna circle, but supplemented with Popperian ideas. The subjects of some of his earlier papers were, for instance, the distinction of observational and theoretical terms, the mind body problem, or the question how to formulate empiricism in a coherent way. His most important paper from the early sixties, however, dealt with reductionism. In this 1962 paper, Feyerabend introduced his version of the concept of incommensurability as a weapon against reductionism, which then reigned among philosophers, and much of the intense philosophical discussion of reduction and incommensurability in the sixties started off from Feyerabend's work. In other papers from the 1960's, Feyerabend advanced the idea of a proliferation of theories as the only efficient antidote against dogmatism, since a given theory can be severely criticized only from the point of view of competing theories.

Feyerabend became widely known also outside the philosophy of science through his famous 1975 book *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, which was eventually translated in at least 17 languages; revised editions appeared in 1988 and 1993 (the changes to the latter edition were especially important to Feyerabend). The book was, however, mostly not received the way it was intended, which led to sharp reactions from Feyerabend. Essentially, the book consists of two parts: an epistemological part and a part drawing political consequences. The epistemological part was mostly read as advancing the thesis that in the sciences, there were no restrictions to scientific behavior whatsoever. "Anything goes", the famous slogan from this book, seemed to say just that. But this slogan was meant as an ironic answer to somebody who insisted in getting an answer to his or her request at a method of science which was absolutely binding, i.e., whose violation would be contrary to the very idea of science and its rationality. Since Feyerabend did not believe in the existence of such normative rules, his answer to that request could only be, given his temperament, ironic. Though many others have noted the non-existence of the scientific method conceived as a set of absolutely binding rules,

Feyerabend is certainly the one who has articulated and argued this most vigorously. In the history of philosophy of modern times, his most marked opponent in this respect is thus probably Descartes. In an even wider perspective, it is Socrates and Plato whom Feyerabend opposes, side by side with the later Wittgenstein. Against their search for abstract and universal principles, be it for rules of actions of any sort or for definitions of concepts, Feyerabend insisted on the loss of concreteness that any abstract approach involves.

The political consequences of his epistemological views resulted for Feyerabend from the sciences' loss of any distinguishing mark. Since there is no qualitative demarcation of the sciences from other traditions, and since all traditions should have equal rights in a liberal state, there is no reason why science should have a special status in society in comparison to other traditions. Rather, in a free society all traditions should have equal backing by the state. As in the sciences where he advanced pluralism of theories, his vision of a free society demanded a peaceful coexistence of a plurality of cultures. Feyerabend developed these ideas in two of his subsequent books, in *Science in a Free Society* (1978) and in *Farewell to Reason* (1987). Especially in the latter, he discussed extensively his ideas on cultural diversity and cultural change, pleading for relativism as "an attempt to make sense of the phenomenon of cultural diversity". In his last years, he tried to develop a more all-embracing world view in which cultures are never static nor easily separated from one another. In this view, reality is always culture-specific and responds to the approaches and attitudes of observers.

Feyerabend was one of the most controversial figures in the philosophy of science. Praised by some, including top scientists, as someone who had an supreme insight into the workings of science and its history, he was condemned by others as "the worst enemy of science" or dismissed as a mountebank. He was loved by some for his humanity, independence, humor and intelligence, and hated by others for his relativism and his harsh and even offensive criticism. For a teacher, this mixture almost guarantees success. Indeed, Feyerabend drew immense audiences, both faculty and students, and kindled lively and controversial discussions.

In his earlier times, Feyerabend used to travel a lot, giving talks,

attending conferences, and visiting friends. Later, he lived a more private life. He could not be reached by phone (apart from his friends who knew a special code) but he answered practically every letter, many on handwritten postcards. He loved lonely walks in the woods. Terminally ill in hospital, he finished his autobiography entitled *Killing Time*. This book will appear soon; it will show Paul Feyerabend from an angle familiar to his friends: witty, self-ironic, and gentle.

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