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Review Discussion

Reason in History: Paul Feyerabend's Autobiography*

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*Facts? Have a bit more grog sir, and you'll get over
the weakness of believing in facts.*

Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*

Multiple meanings haunt the title of this autobiography of Paul Feyerabend, one of the leading philosophers and philosophers of science of this century, and who died in 1994 aged 72 only weeks after the book's completion. Feyerabend was ostentatiously diffident about his world-famous scholarship in the philosophy and history of science, describing it as means to a steady income that he fell into almost by accident, just a way of 'killing time', rather than pursuing a career in opera for which he had an early talent and lifelong devotion. *Feyerabend* in German is 'knocking off time', taking it easy, and Feyerabend provided compelling advice about scientific method to make us all take a more relaxed attitude toward science and knowledge, to escape dogmatism, and especially to abandon the search for foundations for knowledge characteristic of much twentieth-century philosophy. There is also Feyerabend's past as an Austrian army officer during the killing time of World War II, and an injury which left him in lifetime pain, impotent, and partly crippled. The book ends unexpectedly with Feyerabend's death from a brain tumor, the last pages written during Feyerabend's own painfully final killing time, a sad farewell from the most joyous and raucous voice in post-War philosophy.

As no one else, Feyerabend undermined the false confidence in scientific method promoted through American and English successors to the Vienna Circle, logical positivism, and even the largely liberating influence of Feyerabend's one-time mentor, Sir Karl Popper (another influential Austrian emigré philosopher who died in 1994). Feyerabend was a great champion of

* Paul K. Feyerabend, *Killing Time: The Autobiography of Paul Feyerabend*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, vii + 192 pp., ISBN 0-226-24531-4, \$22.95.

science; he just argued that you didn't need to justify it, or any other form of knowledge, through a philosophical system or historical foundation. The secret of science is that there are no significant boundaries between science and other forms of knowledge, that no foundations ultimately justify science, and that scientists are free to pursue, and have pursued, most any kind of Faustian adventure they please in their quest for new ideas.

This philosophical trajectory is best-known through Feyerabend's one-time colleague at Berkeley, Thomas Kuhn, whose 1962 *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* created a revisionist vocabulary of 'normal science', 'incommensurable theories', 'crisis', and 'paradigm shifts', characterizing successive phases of major scientific change. Kuhn introduced the key problems of language, perception, social history, and historiography to be faced by historicist philosophy of science, but without working out their considerable nuances. Like Kuhn, Feyerabend's advanced training in physics and astronomy provided essential credibility in deposing many standard dogmas. While Feyerabend devoted fewer pages to original history than did Kuhn, his extensive use of historical and primary sources, combined with brilliant analysis, made the whole topic of scientific rationalism a question of philosophical history rather than armchair logic.

Most people had trouble reading Feyerabend correctly while he was alive, and he's right in his autobiography when he laments the 'illiteracy' with which his most famous book, *Against Method* of 1975, was received. The book's motto, 'anything goes' meant that if you want a single set of rules or a governing methodology for science, then the only rule that works is an array of historical counterexamples Feyerabend brought to bear against standard methodological advice such as 'don't allow theories in contradiction with observations', 'only allow theories which can be potentially falsified', 'generalize inductively from facts', 'maintain a clear distinction between theories and facts', 'don't give metaphysical ideas a central role in scientific theorizing', or 'how you discovered a theory should not make a difference in how it is justified'. Not that these nostrums were always wrong, but Feyerabend showed shrewdly that *always* enforcing such rules would have eliminated several of the great achievements of Galileo, Newton, Boltzmann, Einstein, Bohr, and others of Feyerabend's scientific heroes.

'Anti-science philosopher' dies, wrote the *New York Times* for Feyerabend's obituary, but that is just false. Feyerabend had an obviously great love and admiration for the feats of classical science, which differ from ideological claims for its privileged status made by philosophers or scientists themselves. Feyerabend often characterized science as being hindered by official methodologies promoted by 'churches' of philosophical reason, and the analogy was exactly correct. Next to Feyerabend's mastery of historical detail, with a few exceptions other post-War philosophers of science looked

like scholastic doctors speculating about a corpse, never bothering to examine how it might function while still alive. Kuhn and others provided comparable historical detail as well, but unlike Kuhn, Feyerabend had definitive views about the normative implications of his skepticism for the practice of science and the role of science in a free society. In particular, Feyerabend provided compelling arguments about why *violating* many standard methodological rules *promoted* the proliferation of novel theories and hence the *progress* of science. Scientific method was advertised as an account of scientific achievement, but many traditional claims for science's special role *vis-à-vis* other ways of knowing the world were largely and demonstrably false.

Feyerabend was not an 'irrationalist', whatever that slander by dozens of his critics around the world was supposed to mean. He was just a thoroughgoing skeptic about the foundations of knowledge. The hero of *Against Method* is Galileo, whom Feyerabend portrayed not as a simple victim of the Church, but as a cunning rhetorician who, beside writing in popular Italian instead of Church Latin, subtly reframed natural interpretations of motion and the apparent stationarity of the earth to promote the new anti-Aristotelian physics. Today, Feyerabend's kind of combined conceptual, social, and rhetorical analysis of science has become commonplace, but in the 1960s and early 1970s it was revolutionary. No 'irrationalism' then, just one of the most impressive challenges to received thinking about scientific method ever mounted. What mattered in the end was to have made history the ultimate backdrop for any serious conception of scientific method. 'All sciences are *geisteswissenschaften*', or human sciences, wrote Feyerabend in *Problems of Empiricism*; 'all traditions are historical traditions'; 'the history of ideas is an essential part of scientific method'; and so on, for four decades. The ideological impossibility of Anglo-American philosophers to think in historical terms left them paralyzed to respond, while marxists were stymied by a strange type of non-dialectical historicism.

The first edition of *Against Method* is dedicated to Feyerabend's close friend and foil, Imre Lakatos, a Hungarian emigré and successor to Karl Popper at the London School of Economics. Lakatos died in 1974, before he could finish the response intended to be co-published with *Against Method*, and which Feyerabend says is a 'long and very personal letter to Imre'. Lakatos wanted to maintain at least a sense of relative historical progress by turning Popper's inchoate historicism into his own '*changing* logic of scientific discovery'. Feyerabend, playing Brecht to Lakatos's covert Hegelianism, saw no such need for dialectical unity. Thus a German volume published on Feyerabend, *Versuchungen*, reminds of Brecht's *versuche*, 'draft', or 'essays', and Feyerabend describes *Against Method* as a 'collage' and a 'pamphlet'. (Brecht had even once offered Feyerabend a job which he turned down.) Like Brecht, Feyerabend combined elements of

anarchy and discipline with a thorough-going contempt for 'respectability'. Productive ideas didn't come from 'systems', but rather they were developed through enlightened self-interest: Feyerabend exhibited successful mixtures of freedom and cunning in the history of science, like Einstein's scientist, who, the latter wrote, 'must appear to the systematic epistemologist as a type of unscrupulous opportunist'.

Feyerabend's style therefore reflected the stagecraft of a wide-ranging, synthetic intellect, and in the fray over *Against Method* it led some to miss Feyerabend's unusual combination of historicized philosophy and skepticism. *Against Method* refers to the Greek skeptics and many Pyrrhonian texts of Sextus Empiricus, including 'Against the Logicians', 'Against the Physicists', 'Against the Mathematicians', and so on. Feyerabend learned all the ancient skeptical tropes, making him the master relativist of this century. He really had the attitude of a skeptic too: 'A book, a film, a theatrical performance, or a casual remark could move me in any direction'. But Pyrrhonian skepticism was more than an attitude; its critical power made it supremely popular during the early years of the scientific revolution after Sextus's writings were rediscovered in the late Renaissance, so Feyerabend's was not the first repeat performance of ancient skeptical method. With the irony of Socrates, it just all proved his constant point that the whole of history was available in the scientific present.

An additional novelty in Feyerabend's skeptical repetition was roles for history and the languages of science. In the 1950s he had understood the latent anthropological message in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that language and meaning were essentially embedded in what Wittgenstein called 'forms of life', meaning the customs and practices of ongoing historical communities, including those of scientists, philosophers, their patrons, and clients. The orientation of *Against Method* is that of an anthropological history placing modern science as one more style of thought, one more set of practices, much as an enlightened anthropologist would use the coherent traditions of other cultures skeptically to suspend judgment on our own. The polymathic Homeric world antedating Greek science and rationalism, organized around the 'paratactic' lists of the Iliad-lists of actions for warriors, lists of ships, lists of booty, but never culminating in an 'essence' – became Feyerabend's ultimate skeptical counterexample to the 'necessity' of rationalism. The Homeric world was utterly pre-dialectical and pre-theoretical in most modern senses, and its conceptual economy meshed well with Wittgenstein's minimalist, anti-essentializing lessons that linguistic meaning largely was the expression of language in tribal or scientific life. Argue for the historical existence of a culture which excludes many of the conceptual tools needed for rationalist traditions, but out of which Western rationalism arose, and the place of reason in history is changed indeed.

Killing Time is not an intellectual autobiography, but set against Feyerabend's scholarship, it displays a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward history, with Feyerabend's memories of Austria and National Socialism coming across as almost a vague dream in contrast to the richness of his philosophical essays or his detailed memories of operatic and theatrical performances dating back to his 'teens. It is a little hard to grasp that while Feyerabend appears to have read everything and forgotten none of it, he was almost oblivious to political events. Yet, as Feyerabend writes, 'much of what happened I learned only after the war, from articles, books, and television', almost as if he wasn't *there*, and when he learned during his early army years of his mother's suicide, 'I was sitting in the common room trying to devise a simple and convincing diagram of the Lorentz transformations . . . I felt absolutely nothing . . . [my military companions] were astounded, even appalled at my behavior . . . people commented on how cold and unmoved I looked throughout [the funeral]'.

Feyerabend, though rising to a lieutenant's rank in the army, says he never joined the Nazi Party, nor committed criminal acts of war. But 'I can't take credit for that – the occasion simply didn't arise. I don't know what I would have done had I been asked to become a *Partigénosse* or ordered to kill civilians'. So Feyerabend had a bit of Brecht's 'good soldier Schweik' in him too, in that he admitted to cowardice and urged that survival is more important than striking heroic attitudes. There's not much of a link, then, between the irrationalism of National Socialism and Feyerabend's astute philosophical views, since the charges of 'irrationalism' against him are mostly ill-informed anyway. But as far as 'irrationalism' may mean 'abandonment of received conceptions of scientific method', that was Feyerabend's program, and *that* possibility has become more substantively real than whatever 'irrationalism' might be implied by the esoteric abstractions of literary critic Paul de Man or the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the latter two having been 'exposed' in recent years as Nazi supporters through various historical and scholarly controversies. The positive side of Feyerabend's critique of method makes him a modern Mephistopheles, goading Faust-scientists on to bigger and better adventures. But Feyerabend's attack on 'method', and what he described as the 'decay of the philosophy of science', is also a reminder that 'method' may be for those who have nothing left in an era of philosophical and historical decline, and are losing much faith in scientific reason. Had his career occurred *before* the war, Feyerabend could have been the model for Mephistopheles in *Doktor Faustus*, Thomas Mann's tragic historical novel of twentieth-century creativity and decline, and of course, National Socialism. But that's the cunning of *reason* for you.

'Are we studying methodology?' asked a student in one of Feyerabend's packed lectures. 'We are studying everything', responded Feyerabend, with

no special emphasis, and moving on without hesitation. One of Feyerabend's standard lecture series began with just three questions: *What is knowledge? How do you get it? What is it good for?* 'Welcome, lovers of knowledge, seekers of darkness', he might incant, *sotto voce*, to nobody in particular as he entered the classroom from offstage and created his theater of ideas. Paul Feyerabend was a dialectician without a system, a skeptic with an unslakable thirst for all forms of knowledge, a master-critic of science who would defend it against all misrepresentations, and a champion of classical philosophy who would just as quickly level Western rationalism down to a historical form of life exhibiting much progress but an equal amount of decline. He was, in short, a philosophic original, many-sided and contradictory, not unlike his account of knowledge and scientific practice itself.

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