The Philosophical Significance of Paul Feyerabend*

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In his Introduction to *The Tyranny of Science*, Eric Oberheim remarks that "Like Woody Allen's Zelig, Feyerabend seemed to adapt himself to his changing environment, always engaging directly with the interests of his times" (p. ix). But Zelig was a chameleon, who sought to blend in with his environment. That seems the wrong way to characterize Feyerabend. Neither trendy nor trend-setter, Feyerabend was more "maverick" or "iconoclast" than the comparison with Zelig suggests.

In a sense, Feyerabend's trajectory ran in the opposite direction to Kuhn, with whom he is often compared. Kuhn began as a philosophical outsider who sought, and to some extent achieved, acceptance by the philosophical community. By contrast with Kuhn, Feyerabend was the philosophical insider, who became more of an outsider as his career progressed.

Where the comparison with Zelig strikes a chord is in relation to Feyerabend's engagement with the "interests of his times". Here I am thinking particularly of Feyerabend's engagement with Wittgenstein, Popper, and later Lakatos, though Oberheim mentions Wittgenstein, Berkeley in the 1960's and post-modernism as well. I want to

* Remarks presented at roundtable discussion, Feyerabend 2012 conference (Humboldt University, Berlin) 29 September 2012.

focus my remarks on Feyerabend's engagement with logical empiricism and the emergence of scientific realism out of the critique of logical empiricism. I will also say something about his epistemological anarchism.

By the late 1950's, the double language model was orthodoxy among logical empiricists. On the double language model, observational vocabulary is interpreted on the basis of experience, and theoretical terms are partially interpreted by correspondence rules which link them to observational terms. Feyerabend subjected empiricist theory of meaning to searching critique. His thesis that theories are incommensurable emerged from this critique. Feyerabend first argued against empiricism that the meaning of observational terms may vary with theories. He then argued that in some cases the "primitive descriptive terms" of a theory may not be definable in another theory and may not be linked with them by an empirical hypothesis. Because of the lack of semantic equivalence, the theories were said to be incommensurable.

In rereading Feyerabend's critique of empiricist theory of meaning, I was struck by his description of the alternative to empiricism as a "realist interpretation of theories" ('Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism', p. 53). Feyerabend may not have been a scientific realist in the sense of arguing for the approximate truth of current theories as the best explanation of the success of science. But his work on the meaning of theoretical terms played an important role in the emergence of scientific realism in the 1960's. His insistence that theoretical terms have meaning independently of experience and that

observational terms derive meaning from theory fostered a realist as opposed to an instrumentalist reading of science.

Turning from meaning to method, it is here that Feyerabend's work may have had the broadest influence. Initially, Feyerabend argues for a principle of the proliferation of theories, according to which science would advance by the development of alternative theories, since this would increase the critical pressure on existing theories. From this seemingly Popperian idea, Feyerabend then developed the epistemological anarchist view that there is no single universal scientific method since all rules of method may be legitimately violated in at least some circumstances. Both the principle of proliferation and the anarchistic view of the violability of rules of method have contributed to both a theoretical and methodological pluralism that now seems to be widely accepted in the philosophy of science. In this turn, Feyerabend's work seems to have exercised a major influence.

The logical positivists endorsed a vision of the unity of science which was supported by a reductionistic conception of the relationship between the sciences. This unificationist picture of the sciences has given way to a more fragmentary or disunified conception of the sciences. Though philosophers such as Paul Hoyningen-Huene have attempted to show that there may be something (e.g., systematicity) that binds the sciences together, the idea of a common essence of the sciences that might be articulated in terms of a hard-and-

fast demarcation criterion does seem to be a thing of the past. Again, this seems to be a turn of events for which we have Feyerabend to thank.

Apart from pluralism and a more fragmentary conception of science, Feyerabend's work on method has had an influence on the way we think about rationality. Though Feyerabend may sometimes have written as if he was against rationality, I suspect he was really against a certain model of rationality. One might think of this as a model of rationality as based on binding rules, perhaps along the lines of the neutral algorithm of theory choice that Kuhn argued against. Feyerabend's view that rules of method may be legitimately violated in specific circumstances seems to me to resonate with Kuhn's idea that the rules of method constitute values which guide rather than dictate theory choice. A conception of rationality as non-rule-governed or non-algorithmic seems to me to be something that many philosophers now at least tacitly accept. This seems to me to be yet a further example of Feyerabend's contribution to our thinking about science.

References

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