

## Feyerabend's relationship to the Liberal Art of Government: Comments on Stephen Turner on Free exchange and collective decision-making

In his erudite essay, Stephen Turner invites us to use Feyerabend to reflect on the “distinctive coercive power of the new technology of digital world.” I like his treatment of the way ‘disinformation’ itself has become a “novel form of coercion, based on a novel form of authority over what is treated as true.” And he is right to suggest that the very idea presupposes an ideal theory deviation from whose elements “is taken to be a source of error.” Turner and I agree that our epistemic environment is always populated by strategic actors (including ourselves) constituted, in part, by differential power relations.<sup>1</sup>

Turner himself draws repeatedly on Feyerabend's (1978) *Science in a Free Society*.<sup>2</sup> In particular, according to Turner, Feyerabend's “critique represents a recognition that the regimes of science and expertise are ineradicably political and coercive. But if regimes of science and expertise are ineradicably political and coercive, what remains is the problem of our choice of regimes, and how to accommodate them in a democratic order.”

I argue that by stretching the meaning of coercion so widely, Turner has misrepresented Feyerabend's position. In fact, I show that Feyerabend offers a vision of liberal politics and science that can be made uncoercive, or at least worth having. And while I note some tensions in Feyerabend's position, I use it to criticize Turner.

In *Against Method*, Feyerabend repeatedly draws on Mill often explicitly quoting *On Liberty* and Mill's *Autobiography*.<sup>3</sup> At one point, Feyerabend also exhibits familiarity with Mill's *System of Logic* (Feyerabend 1993: p. 260, n. 8). Feyerabend summarizes the initial key take-home message of his treatment of Mill as follows, “pluralism of ideas and forms of life is an essential part of any rational inquiry concerning the nature of things,” (Feyerabend 1993: p. 31; see also the reiteration at the end of the chapter on p. 38.) Let's call this the ‘pro-Mill reading.’

The repeated references to and apparent centrality of Mill has generated something of a specialist literature both using Mill's *On Liberty* to interpret Feyerabend as well as trying to establish, how exactly, Feyerabend's use of *On Liberty* can be reconciled with Mill's account of science in *System of Logic*.<sup>4</sup>

What's peculiar about the quoted passage from *Against Method* is that it seems that pluralism of ideas and — echoes of Wittgenstein — forms of life are treated as ingredients in and so as a *means* toward rational inquiry. To put this in quasi-Kantian terms, this seems to make practical knowledge subservient to theoretical knowledge. Or to put it differently again, the justification for (let's stipulate) our good ways of living appears to be the advance of knowledge. There is

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<sup>1</sup> I have a very similar diagnoses Schliesser, Eric. "Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People: Levy, Neil, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, 224 pp.,£ 55.00, ISBN: 9780192895325 Free to download from: <https://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/academic/pdf/openaccess/9780192895325.pdf>." (2022): 189-203.

<sup>2</sup> I cite from the 1982 Verso edition of *Science in a Free Society*.

<sup>3</sup> *Against Method* was first published in 1975. I am quoting from the third edition, published in 1993 London: Verso. Mill also figures indirectly in a memorable footnote, “There is no Harriet Taylor in Popper's life” (Feyerabend 1993: 34, note 2).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lloyd, Elisabeth A. "Feyerabend, Mill, and pluralism." *Philosophy of Science* 64.S4 (1997): S396-S407; Staley, Kent W. "Logic, liberty, and anarchy: Mill and Feyerabend on scientific method." *The Social Science Journal* 36.4 (1999): 603-614. Jacobs, Struan. "Misunderstanding John Stuart Mill on Science: Paul Feyerabend's bad influence." *The Social Science Journal* 40.2 (2003): 201-212.

something decidedly anti-humanistic about this stance. It's an open question to what degree this is Mill's position, but it would be surprising if it were Feyerabend's all things considered view.

Let me rephrase the point of the previous paragraph. If we take the treatment of Mill by Feyerabend at face value as Feyerabend's own considered view, it would seem to treat political life as subservient to or a subset of scientific life. This is at odds with Feyerabend's wider program, as Turner discerns, of what we may call disestablishing science from its political pre-eminence and epistemic monopoly position in society.

In fact, upon closer inspection, Feyerabend is *also* a fierce critic of Mill. In order to illustrate this and also develop my wider argument, I quote a passage that appears in *Against Method* and (with minor modifications) in *Science in a Free Society*:

There are therefore at least two different ways of collectively deciding an issue which I shall call a guided exchange and an open exchange respectively.

In the first case some or all participants adopt a well-specified tradition and accept only those responses that correspond to its standards. If one party has not yet become a participant of the chosen tradition he will be badgered, persuaded, 'educated' until he does and then the exchange begins. Education is separated from decisive debates, it occurs at an early stage and guarantees that the grown-ups will behave properly. A rational debate is a special case of a guided exchange. If the participants are rationalists then all is well and the debate can start right away. If only some participants are rationalists and if they have power (an important consideration!) then they will not take their collaborators seriously until they have also become rationalists: a society based on rationality is not entirely free; one has to play the game of the intellectuals.<sup>10</sup>

An open exchange, on the other hand, is guided by a pragmatic philosophy. The tradition adopted by the parties is unspecified in the beginning and develops as the exchange proceeds. The participants get immersed into each other's ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving to such an extent that their ideas, perceptions, world-views may be entirely changed - they become different people participating in a new and different tradition. An open exchange respects the partner whether he is an individual or an entire culture, while a rational exchange promises respect only within the framework of a rational debate. An open exchange has no organon though it may invent one, there is no logic though new forms of logic may emerge in its course.—*Against Method* (1993), pp. 227-228; see also *Science in a Free Society* (1982): p. 29, which omits the next paragraph which starts with "An open exchange establishes connections between different traditions and transcends the relativism [of points iii and iv]..."

I offer eight observations on this passage. First, Feyerabend has moved from philosophy of science to political theory here. We are in the realm of *all* collective decision making. Scientific decision making is merely a subset of wider decision-making. So, second, this reverses the impression one gets from the pro-Mill reading of *Against Method*.

Third, before we misunderstand Feyerabend, he is clearly using the two kinds of decision making as Weberian ideal types. In practice, there is a lot more diversity within them and features of the ideal types can be mixed.

Fourth, and crucially, while contemporary readers may assume that something like Habermas' account of deliberative democracy – one of Turner's targets -- is also Feyerabend's intended

target (as the exemplar of guided exchange), Feyerabend's *actual* target is Mill! (That's note 10. In *Science in a Free Society* it is note 14 on p. 29.) Feyerabend's note 10 reads: "It is perhaps hardly necessary to say", says John Stuart Mill, 'that this doctrine (pluralism of ideas and institutions) is meant to apply only to human beings in the 'maturity of their faculties' - i.e. to fellow intellectuals and their pupils. 'On Liberty.'" Thus, Feyerabend sees Mill as *the* advocate of guided exchange.

Feyerabend seems to have been unfamiliar with Maurice Cowling's (1963) *Mill and Liberalism*, which drawing on such passages and especially Mill's *System of Logic*, treats Mill (quite plausibly), as advocate of technocracy and epistemocracy.<sup>5</sup> As an aside, that's to say, the way to reconcile *On Liberty* and Mill's *Logic* hinges on political philosophy common to both not through the scattered remarks on philosophy of science in *On Liberty*. In fact, in wider context of Feyerabend's argument it's also quite clear that Feyerabend is picking up on the cultural superiority that Mill exhibits about which peoples have such maturity.<sup>6</sup>

This last point is central in the material in *Science in a Free Society* that goes beyond the argument of *Against Method*, and simultaneously reveals Feyerabend's reliance on and use of Millian assumptions. At one point, in responding to Agassi, Feyerabend writes:

The effect is that scientists and 'liberal' rationalists have created one of the most unfortunate embarrassments of democracy. Democracies as conceived by liberals are always embarrassed by their joint commitment to 'rationality' - and this today means mostly: science - and the freedom of thought and association. Their way out of the embarrassment is an abrogation of democratic principles where they matter most: in the domain of education. Freedom of thought, it is said, is OK for grownups who have already been trained to 'think rationally'. It cannot be granted to every and any member of society and especially the educational institutions must be run in accordance with rational principles. In school one must learn what is the case and that means: Western oriented history, Western oriented cosmology, i.e. science. Thus democracy as conceived by its present intellectual champions will never permit the complete survival of special cultures. A liberal-rational democracy cannot contain a Hopi culture in the full sense of the word. It cannot contain a black culture in the full sense of the word. It cannot contain a Jewish culture in the full sense of the word. It can contain these cultures only as secondary grafts on a basic structure that is constituted by an unholy alliance between science, rationalism, and capitalism. This is how a small gang of so-called 'humanitarians' has succeeded in shaping society in their image and in weeding out almost all earlier forms of life.—*Science in a Free Society* (1982), pp. 135-136

Here Feyerabend relies on Millian assumptions in order to reveal a deep tension within contemporary accounts of liberal democracy.<sup>7</sup> I have three things in mind: (i) Feyerabend stipulates a kind of stadial conception of human cultures. The special cultures are "earlier formers of life." And (ii) the essentialism in which whole cultures are treated. Finally, the idea that (iii) only the grownups (members of a particular culture, and within them those that have special intellectual status) can really participate in political life. In the passage, Feyerabend

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<sup>5</sup> See Cowling, Maurice. *Mill and liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Pitts, Jennifer. *A turn to empire: The rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton University Press, 2005, especially pp. 133-164. Duncan Bell (ms) "John Stuart Mill on Federation, Civilization, and Empire" forthcoming in *History of Political Thought*.

<sup>7</sup> In the section, "A Guide for the Perplexed," in the chapter titled, "Marxist Fairytales from Australia," Feyerabend explains his fondness for immanent critique (Feyerabend 1982: pp. 156-163).

clearly rejects (iii). I doubt Feyerabend accepts (i) and (ii) because his normative account of ‘open exchange’ implies, as noted above, that such essentialism is wholly inadequate normatively as a treatment of culture and individuals (which, as I show below, are intrinsically hybrids). In fact, Feyerabend is explicit that he treats Mill’s liberalism as “the first” and not final “step in the direction” of a “more mature world.” (Feyerabend 1982: 132-133.) So, Feyerabend rejects the pro-Mill reading, even though he treats Mill as a partial anticipation of his own program.

In addition throughout, from the perspective of political decision-making, Feyerabend treats scientists and their intellectual champions as rent-seekers (viz. his ‘capitalism’), who use their privileged access to state violence to silence others. This violence is, as Turner correctly implies, initiated with *mandatory* early education. By contrast, Feyerabend’s own position is that all individuals and the collectivities that they form part of have the *liberty* to turn their backs on science and may well be carriers of traditions of knowledge very much worth preserving (his favorite example is Chinese medicine). He views the “United States” of his time as “very close to a cultural laboratory...where different forms of life are developed and different modes of human existence tested.” (Feyerabend 1982: 133) What prevents Americans from achieving their full potential are the restrictions found in the “*brains* of human *beings*; they are not found in the *constitution*.” (Emphases in original. Feyerabend 1982: 133) This last passage is surprisingly Kantian. For Feyerabend, we suffer fundamentally from a self-imposed tutelage.

Lurking here is a more radical understanding of freedom. For, fifth, in ‘open exchange’ something like transformative experience (in L.A. Paul’s sense)<sup>8</sup> occurs: “they become *different people* participating in a new and different tradition.” (emphasis added.) The significance of this for political ontology is rather far-reaching. Open exchange is a process of *intense* hybridization—all sides end up radically altered. After hybridization new “modes of human existence” come into being.

In ‘open exchange,’ Feyerabend predicts what we may call the possibility of ‘political transformative experience (hereafter: PTE), which involves a social experience that is epistemically and politically transformative. PTE arises in situations where collective agents are conditioned by cognitive and epistemic limitations; thus PTE is -- like Laurie Paul's account of transformative experience on which it is explicitly modeled -- a species of epistemic (subjective) true or *Knighian* uncertainty. In particular, PTE is a theory of unforeseen (and, thus, unintended) consequences in which those consequences change political actors in ways they could not have willed, or expected. PTE assumes the intelligibility of collective agents (and collective intentionality) without taking a stance on the ontology of such agents.

Be that as it may, Turner treats Feyerabend’s account of the coercive nature of science as a kind of (partial) anticipation of recent interest in testimonial injustice. In particular, according to Turner, for Feyerabend “the role of epistemic coercion in science and in society in general was intrinsic and ineliminable.” This interpretation of Feyerabend makes sense because Feyerabend has a tendency to treat contemporary science as taking on the same functional and authoritative role in witnessing truth as the Church once had. Of course, Feyerabend is a critic of such roles for science.

But the claim that epistemic coercion is intrinsic to science and society is too strong when offered as an interpretation of Feyerabend. After all one of the theses Feyerabend wishes to

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<sup>8</sup> Paul, Laurie Ann. *Transformative experience*. OUP Oxford, 2014.

defend is: (VIII) “...a free society will not be imposed but will emerge only where people solving particular problems in a spirit of collaboration introduce protective structures of the kind alluded to. Citizen initiatives on a small scale, collaboration between nations on a large scale are the developments I have in mind.” (Feyerabend 1982; p. 30 emphasis in original) So, regardless whether epistemic coercion is ineliminable in science, a considerable form of epistemic non-coercion seems possible in a free society according to Feyerabend.

Before I continue, while much of Feyerabend reads as an embrace of social experiments in living,<sup>9</sup> it is worth noting how Echte-liberal Feyerabend is in (VIII). At least from (1952) *The Sensory Order* onward, emergence plays a crucial role in the thought of (say) Hayek.<sup>10</sup> And Hayek, too, was enamored of voluntary interstate federalism and, while critical of majoritarianism, not adverse to citizen initiatives.<sup>11</sup> They both exhibit a fondness for allowing traditions to develop on their own terms. To be sure, I don't mean to suggest that Feyerabend is a Hayekian liberal—Feyerabend is not interested in defending commercial society and Feyerabend is fond of a strain of *direct* democracy -- “A democracy is an assembly of mature people and not a collection of sheep guided by small clique of know-it-alls” (Feyerabend 1982: 87) -- that Hayek has always been mistrustful of.

Sixth, back in 2016, Martin Kusch, when commenting on this material, also must have discerned the affinity with liberalism because he writes “[t]his idea of “open exchange” is of course closely related to the idea of Tolerance.” By ‘tolerance’ Kusch means something like the willingness not to eliminate or to endure “epistemic systems or practices other than one's own.”<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, while I agree that something like such tolerance is, under some conditions, a necessary condition for the initial possibility of open exchange, it has a very different spirit. Toleration involves an attitude taken by a majority toward a minority. It is then very much treated as a privilege extended by the former, understanding itself as a physically and morally superior majority, toward the later. That is, the very idea of toleration also presupposes that such a privilege can be revoked at the majority's discretion. In fact, toleration is a bad way to conceive the self-understanding of liberalism. Rather, as conservatives and post-liberals discern (and hate), liberalism's trust in the pursuit of meaningful choice by individuals and associations of individuals creates the conditions of the permanent possibility of new identity formations that cut across existing social groups and risks altering pre-existing affective ties. One of the means to get there is, as Feyerabend explicitly recognizes, open exchange.

Seventh, in a recent paper, Jamie Shaw suggests that “In open exchanges, Feyerabend is picturing representatives of different traditions having on-going discussions in good faith who actively seek to understand other traditions and, possibly, revise their own beliefs as a result.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, Elizabeth S. "John Stuart Mill and experiments in living." *Ethics* 102.1 (1991): 4-26.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, Paul. "Emergent properties in the work of Friedrich Hayek." *Journal of economic behavior & organization* 82.2-3 (2012): 368-378. Feyerabend knew Hayek personally, but there is no reason to believe they took each other very seriously, and undoubtedly there are common sources of influence in Viennese psychology.

<sup>11</sup> DiZerega, Gus. "Democracy as a spontaneous order." *Critical Review* 3.2 (1989): 206-240.

<sup>12</sup> Kusch, Martin. "Relativism in Feyerabend's later writings." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 57 (2016): 106-113.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, Jamie. "Feyerabend's well-ordered science: how an anarchist distributes funds." *Synthese* 198 (2021): 419-449.

This strikes me as largely correct. But I don't see much textual evidence for the idea that for Feyerabend open exchange involves *representatives* of different traditions.<sup>14</sup>

I don't mean to suggest that it is impossible to treat Feyerabend as relying implicitly on a notion of representation or representatives of different traditions. After, all it is difficult to imagine "collaboration between nations" without some kind of representatives in a mass society. And it is not entirely obvious how one can listen to an "entire culture" if the culture is not mediated by some kind of representative.

However, Shaw's reading of Feyerabend mistakenly nudges Feyerabend toward a 'pillars model' of deliberation as articulated and made famous in (say) Arend Lijphart's treatment of Dutch politics, *The Politics of Accommodation*. The problem with emphasizing representation here is that it risks a structural disconnect between the immersive and in-principle-transformative experiences of elites (who represent) from the experience of ordinary members of a tradition who are not part of the exchange and how go on with their lives unaware of the hybridization happening elsewhere on their behalf. That would involve replacing one kind of tutelage for another.

Eight, one crucial feature of Feyerabend's conception of free exchange is that he views social decision-making as itself a mechanism of tradition formation: (to repeat) "The tradition adopted by the parties is unspecified in the beginning and develops as the exchange goes along." That is to say, Feyerabend's approach to collective decision-making, where hybridization or political transformative experiences are possible, is decidedly forward-looking. This contrasts with what happens *within* existing traditions which curate or invent/revive their own past on an ongoing basis (and, on Feyerabend's view) should always have freedom to do so even if this involves quite heavy-handed forms of cultururation. But Feyerabend seems to draw a sharp contrast between state sponsored coercion and the non-state forms of coercion needed to maintain a cultural form of life.

In fact, Feyerabend seems to treat cultural traditions as richly embedded voluntary associations that may well impose some coercion on their members (as long as exit from tradition is guaranteed). Recall Feyerabend's emphasis on "freedom of thought and association." In many ways Feyerabend anticipates the liberal project that Chandran Kukathas defended in his *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom*.<sup>15</sup> This is a way to create a broad liberal framework in which many different kinds of social experiments of living are possible.

Feyerabend appears to treat participation in the sciences as itself a form of life worth having as long as it is severed from the state apparatus as a source of rents and the state's coercive capacity to impose science as the pre-eminent cultural tradition over and beyond other traditions. Obviously, this would have radical implications for the nature of science funding in our society. I suspect such a change would be quite salutary for the development of the sciences. But it would also require a rethinking of the many ways in which science is intertwined with the state in the liberal art of government.

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<sup>14</sup> In Shaw's paper this seems to me imported from Jasanoff's account of the use of public reason. Shaw seems to treat Feyerabend's version of the all-affected principle — "problems are solved and solutions are judged by those who suffer from the problems and have to live with the solutions" — as evidence for the claim about representation. He also seems to conflate Feyerabend's advocacy of direct democracy with representation.

<sup>15</sup> Chandran Kukathas. *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom*. By Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

In fact, the earliest liberals (Adam Smith, Humboldt, Bentham, Constant, etc.) all explicitly noted that support of science is a major exception to their *laissez faire* preference.<sup>16</sup> The state presupposes scientific (and technological) know-how, and also promotes a wider program of scientific development.

These features are visible in the US Constitution, which Feyerabend claims to admire. Article 1, section 8, states: “To coin money, regulate the value thereof, and of foreign coin, and fix the standard of weights and measures; To provide for the punishment of counterfeiting the securities and current coin of the United States... To promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries.” On this view of the liberal art of government, the state itself witnesses truth (fixing standards, securing uniform coinage, etc.) based on technical and scientific expertise and grants patents and property rights to scientists and inventors (etc.). The reasons for this are manifold.

I grant that Feyerabend wishes to remove the state’s role in witnessing truth altogether. I have some sympathy with Feyerabend’s view; we should reject, where possible, the idea that the state should be in the business of constituting the truth, especially where this is likely to generate political controversy. This rejection is driven by the realization that no compromise is possible on truth; something is either true or false. The politics of truth only generates, like class warfare, winners and losers. The great achievement of turning the state’s back on religion, for example, is to avoid having the state arbiter a number of theological conflicts without possible opportunities to compromise. To what degree it is wholly desirable to keep the state altogether out of witnessing truth is an open question. Let me explain, and conclude.

Feyerabend is not a science abolitionist. In the passage immediately following his diagnosis of our self-imposed tutelage, he adds that it “can be removed by propaganda, enlightenment, special bills, personal effort (Ralph Nader !) and numerous other legal means.” (Feyerabend 1982: 133) I view the inclusion of enlightenment as evidence that Feyerabend thinks that science may also be a *means* to liberate our minds or resist sources of coercive power. That entails a significant correction to Turner’s approach.

The source of the disconnect between Feyerabend and Turner is that Turner misunderstands the nature of what he calls ‘epistemic autonomy’ in the liberal tradition. He treats this as centered on “the individual as thinking and valuing.” Turner is correct that in this tradition “the individual thinker is her own final “authority.” But it doesn’t follow that the liberal tradition leaves the individual thinker as an isolated atom “vulnerable” without socially embedded intellectual resources. For example, liberals assume that individuals can draw on authoritative sources of belief that they acquire through a whole range of institutions: e.g., a free press, unions, or business associations, consumer protection groups, churches, and scientific organizations. These institutions provide us with *authoritaded* beliefs, we accept those based on a trusted authority. In liberal theory, institutional pluralism is not just a social fact, but it is also a source of resistance toward hegemonic thought. Feyerabend’s own repeated emphasis on social and political pluralism recognizes the virtues of this.

None of these institutions need to be infallible or perfectly public spirited. What’s required is that they are a system of countervailing powers that can provide trustworthy and reliable cues

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Bentham’s (1843) *A Manual of Political Economy*. Von Humboldt, Wilhelm. *The limits of state action*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.4.

and proxies for what and whom to believe. Given that the state is itself an extensive machinery of record that reliably tracks births, deaths, property-deeds, etc. it can also witness truth. This explains why the complete decoupling of science and the state is unlikely; the state's capacity as a machinery of record and a witness to truth often presupposes non-trivial scientific expertise, and may – despite the riskiness involved -- itself be marshalled in resisting concentrated forms of technological power.

In so far as there are new sophisticated forms of epistemic coercion then we will also need sophisticated countervailing powers. There are hints of this in Turner's argument when he emphasizes the significance of neutral procedures of justice. But Turner does not avail himself of the full range of possible sources of a pluralist society. He is simply wrong about the fact that we are "most vulnerable where we have little tacit background that enables us to resist;" rather we are most vulnerable when we have no idea who and whom to turn to for assistance in our resistance.

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