

Chapter 4: Feyerabend's Incommensurability Thesis and His Liberal Political Philosophy

4.1 Relativism and free society

I have mentioned in section 3.2.1 that Feyerabend's relativism is a consequence of his pluralism. Relativism is the main theme of Feyerabend's later philosophy of science, and it leads to his political philosophy. Relativism is "a very useful and, above all, humane approximation to a better view" (Feyerabend 1991a: 157, cited in Preston 1998: 438). However, Feyerabend does not view relativism as an arbitrate doctrine.

Relativism... says that what is right for one culture need not be right for another (what is right for me need not be right for you). More abstract formulations which arose together with Western rationalism assert that customs, ideas, laws are 'relative to' the culture that has them. Relativism in this sense does not mean arbitrariness... and it is not 'valid for' relativists only. Revealing major lacunae in the objectivist framework, it dissolves objectivism from the inside, according to the objectivists' own criteria. (Feyerabend 2002: 85-86)

Relativism has an important implication in later Feyerabend's philosophy, as it devastates the rational tradition of philosophy of science. His total swerve from rationalism to irrationalism, the opposition, makes him "the most confusing and paradoxical figure in the philosophy of science" (Ravetz 1991: 370). Feyerabend's relativism does not exhibit a vivid picture of his later thought, for he applies this new tenet ambiguously to re-examine the rationality of science. In another words, later Feyerabend's philosophy is a mixture of his political philosophy and philosophy of science.

It is not at all easy to decide whether he is a court jester, Zen master, or Fascist... because he still operates within the community of philosophy of science, engaging successfully in highly technical debates on problems within the dominant style. (Ravetz 1991: 370)

However, there is a concept that bridges up Feyerabend's early and later thought. According to Preston implicitly, it is the incommensurability thesis. Incommensurability thesis is rooted in scientific realism that extended to methodological pluralism. It goes further to the development of extreme pluralism, viz., relativism.

According to him [Feyerabend], each kind of activity, whether scientific or otherwise, is premised upon some theory. These theories should always be interpreted in their most uncompromising form, as attempts to describe the underlying nature of (certain parts of) reality. (Preston 1997: 210)

This role of incommensurable theories is derived from Feyerabend's rejection of empiricism and his broad definition of theory. When he detects the disunity of science, so are cultures (Feyerabend 1993b: 198, cited in Preston 1998: 429). For Feyerabend views cultures as theories in broader sense. Feyerabend stresses that science is a part of culture. There is no reason to privilege science because non-science consists of another part of culture. One, regardless rationalist or irrationalist, has no valid reason to claim that science is more reasonable and better than non-science, or vice versa, for he or she is eventually in the same predicament of leap of faith (Preston 1997: 195). Such predicament results when one's ultimate commitment to rationality or irrationality can only be made non-rationally (Preston 1997: 194-195). This leads to Feyerabend's dissatisfaction with rationalism eventually (Preston 1997: 194).

This objection to rationalism represents Feyerabend's belated recognition of one of Wittgenstein's central points: justification comes to an end, but it comes to an end (at the bottom of the 'language-game') not in some more basic theory but in action, our natural and common human propensity to act thus rather than in some other way. Our basic beliefs or commitments are, in this sense, groundless. (Preston 1997: 195)

... rationalists and scientists cannot rationally (scientifically) argue for the unique position of their favourite ideology. (Feyerabend 1978: 79)

As science and non-science are in conflict, viz., incommensurable, one has to choose between them. Feyerabend complains that a careful comparison¹ between them seldom being carried out before the conclusion has been drawn. It is because most of the people perceive science a supreme rational solution to everything. However, Feyerabend proves that scientific enterprise is not without irrational constituents.

Everywhere science is enriched by unscientific methods and unscientific results, while procedures which have often been regarded as essential parts of science are quietly suspended or circumvented. (Feyerabend 1978b: 305)

Apart from the unscientific components that found within, science is shaped by the external influences as well.

That interests, forces, propaganda and brainwashing techniques play a much greater role than is commonly believed in the growth of our knowledge and in the growth of science... (Feyerabend 1978b: 25)

Feyerabend argues further by claiming that such unscientific elements of science is unavoidable, for it is the nature of scientists being inclines to make irrational judgment.

Even the most puritanical rationalist will then be forced to stop reasoning and to use propaganda and coercion, not because some of his reasons have ceased to be valid, but because the psychological conditions which make them effective, and capable of influencing others, have disappeared. (Feyerabend 1978b: 25)

He thus concludes,

Thus science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits. (Feyerabend 1978b: 295)

Feyerabend deems science as one of the ideologies which is a matter of personal choice. It is neither good nor bad, as "traditions are neither good nor bad—they just are" (Feyerabend 1978: 81). The value of science is relative, that is, the incommensurable traditions project their own value on each other (Feyerabend 1978: 81). However, Feyerabend reminds us that science should not be the only ideology that prevails. It is because the objectivity and rationality that guaranteed by science do not improve the social conditions as expected.

... let us free society from the strangling hold of an ideologically petrified science just as our ancestors freed us from the strangling hold of the One True Religion! (Feyerabend 1978b: 307)

In his suggestion of breaking the monopoly of scientific ideology in daily life, Feyerabend asserts that it is impossible to arouse one's self-awareness unless we undercut the political authority that exerts on science. This view on the nature of knowledge resembles Foucault's thesis of power-knowledge².

And as the accepting and rejecting of ideologies should be left to the individual it follows that the separation of state and church must be complemented by the separation of state and science, that most recent, most aggressive, and most dogmatic religious institution. Such a separation may be our only chance to achieve a humanity we are capable of, but have never fully realized. (Feyerabend 1978b: 295)

Feyerabend asserts that the purpose of the separation of state and science lies in achieving greater humanity, that is, to improve the living condition of society. A better society in this sense is termed as "free society", by Feyerabend. Free society can be achieved only by a series of political acts (Feyerabend 1978: 107). However, Feyerabend does not propose any concrete political acts to construct a free society. He appears to emphasize that such political acts are aimed at encouraging citizen initiatives. They can be realized through communication between citizens. Communication can enhance the maturity of humanity and rationality of human, but it must be carried out in the rational manner³.

The maturity I am speaking about is not an intellectual virtue, it is a sensitivity that can only be acquired by frequent contacts with different points of view. It can't be taught in schools and it is vain to expect that 'social studies' will create the wisdom we need. But it can be acquired by participating in citizens' initiatives... citizen initiatives are the best and only school for free citizens... (Feyerabend 1978: 107)

The reason that free society should be favorable is that it respects human's rationality, that is, it allows human to make their choice freely without suppressed by higher authority. Feyerabend claims that "free society is a society in which all traditions have equal rights and equal access to the centres of power" (Feyerabend 1978: 106). Thus,

incommensurable traditions are encouraged by epistemic anarchism and the best will stand out from the comparison among them.

People in a free society must decide about very basic issues, they must know how to assemble the necessary information, they must understand the purpose of traditions different from their own and the roles they play in the lives of their members. (Feyerabend 1978: 107)

... anarchism helps to achieve progress in any one of the senses one cares to choose. (Feyerabend 1978b: 27)

Feyerabend's notion of free society is the manifestation of his cultural relativism. For relativism can improve better life by accepting various disciplines, technologies, methodologies and doctrines. It is for this reason Feyerabend seems to assert that free society is desirable regardless the desirability of its citizens. However, the legitimacy of cultural relativism, that is, the legitimacy of various incompatible doctrines, sciences, and non-sciences has implied that relativism is grounded upon a broader sense of rationalism from the cultural perspective. Though Feyerabend rejects scientific rationalism, he has not objected cultural rationalism as the cornerstone of his cultural relativism. It is simply because the project of constructing a better society is always a reasonable move.

According to Preston, the main focus of Feyerabend's "political philosophy and the keystone of his idea of a free society was what he originally referred to as 'political relativism'" (Preston 1997: 200). Later Feyerabend calls this view as "democratic relativism"⁴, which asserts that all traditions have equal rights (Preston 1997: 200). This term is a combination of Feyerabend's methodological pluralism and political philosophy. It is worth noting that he understands democracy from the perspective of progress⁵. According to Feyerabend, a democratic society embraces progression of civilization. A civilized society is humane-oriented. He claims that the most democratic, that is the most progressive, society is the most humane-oriented in nature.

A democracy, on the other hand, is supposed to treat the enemy in a humane fashion even if this should lower the chances of victory. It is true that only few

democracies ever live up to such standards but those that do make an important contribution to the advancement of our civilization. (Feyerabend 1978: 87)

The legitimacy of each tradition in a democratic society is not determined by its intrinsic values. Every tradition, regardless good or bad, has its own rights to exist on its own foot. This assertion is based on two views, viz., (1) the assumption that citizens are capable of making rational judgment; (2) Feyerabend's incommensurability thesis and pluralism. They imply that citizens are educated and matured. They incline to goodness and avoid bad traditions. Hence, it is favorable to have more competing traditions for citizens to choose from. A large pool of alternatives is more likely to improve the quality of life style, and thus drives the society towards progress. Viewing from this cultural perspective, it is a rational decision to preserve a variety of incommensurable traditions. In addition, Feyerabend also claim that each tradition is a closed system and there is no communication between traditions. Hence, one shall not worry if the existence of an inhumane or bad tradition will have any impact on the society as a whole.

... democratic relativism seeks to guarantee equal rights to all traditions. It will of course be objected that this means tolerating certain 'traditions', like Nazism, which liberals and democrats usually oppose, and may even seek to suppress. In response, Feyerabend reassures us that although such traditions must be allowed to exist, this liberty will not carry any licence to impose their form of life on others: every tradition will be protected (by its own members, or by the State's apparatus?) from outside interference. (Preston 1997: 201)

A relativistic society will therefore contain a basic protective structure. (Feyerabend 1978: 84)

Democratic relativism does not merely license the ontological legitimacy for tradition. It has a practical significance in daily life as well. According to Feyerabend, democratic relativism is a canon of practice that shall be adhered to in order to maintain a free society. He always emphasizes on one example to do so, that is, to practice democratic judgment in making social decision. Such judgment is vital in the sense that it is to overrule the expert's opinion (Feyerabend 1978: 86). Feyerabend distinguishes two aspects of this practice, "one concerns the rights of citizens and traditions in a free

society, the other the (perhaps disadvantageous) consequences of an exercise of these rights." (Feyerabend 1978: 86)

The first implies that every member of a society having equal rights to their own daily affairs. It means that everyone has an absolute right in making choice to improve his or her own life. Feyerabend focuses on the rights to choose, not the human rights in particular. However, he holds implicitly that a citizen has no rights to the affairs that do not involve his or her personal interest⁶.

In a democracy an individual citizen has the right to read, write, to make propaganda for whatever strikes his fancy. If he falls ill, he has the right to be treated in accordance with his wishes, by faithhealers, if he believes in the art of faithhealing, by scientific doctors, if he has greater confidence in science... This right is given to the citizen for two reasons; first, because everyone must be able to pursue what he thinks is truth, or the correct procedure; and, secondly, because the only way of arriving at a useful judgement of what is supposed to be the truth, or the correct procedure is to become acquainted with the widest possible range of alternatives. (Feyerabend 1978: 86)

When an affair involves mutual interest of a community, democratic procedure has to be carried out in reaching a final decision. Thus, Feyerabend asserts, concerned laymen can and must supervise science (Preston 1997: 96). For science is an enterprise that has impact in the quality of citizens' life. Here the second aspect of democratic relativism comes into picture.

Feyerabend denies the view that a specific decision related to a field must be made by the experts only. On the contrary, he holds that experts are always trapped in blind spots. Thus, Feyerabend suggests the concerned laymen to take the role as a supreme judge to the experts' judgment. It is vital for the progress of society, for the laymen know what are the alternatives to realize their interest maximally.

... it would not only be foolish but downright irresponsible to accept the judgement of scientists and physicians without further examination. If the matter is important, either to a small group or to society as a whole, then this judgement must be subjected to the most painstaking scrutiny. Duly elected committees of

laymen must examine whether the theory of evolution is really as well established as biologists want us to believe... (Feyerabend 1978: 96)

Feyerabend aware that laymen do not possess special knowledge in making a specific judgment. However, he contends that the maturity, that is the awareness of social participation, of laymen is more important.

Maturity is more important than special knowledge and it must be pursued... Participation of laymen in fundamental decisions is therefore required even if it should lower the success rate of the decisions. (Feyerabend 1978: 87)

Though laymen might make mistakes, Feyerabend does not think that it will retard progress.

... it is not at all certain that taking fundamental decisions out of the hands of experts and leaving them to laymen is going to lower the success rate of the decisions. (Feyerabend 1978: 87)

The crucial point from the pragmatic perspective of Feyerabend's democratic relativism is that incommensurable cultures must be comparable. According to Feyerabend, the success of cultures is gauged "in terms of general humanitarian criteria such as whether they sustain lives which are meaningful and desirable to the people concerned." (Preston 1998: 437)

If we are intent on comparing unlike, Feyerabend insists that many (all?) traditions and cultures, some of them wildly unscientific, succeed in the sense that they enable their participants to live moderately rich and fulfilling lives. (Feyerabend 1994c: 220-221, cited in Preston 1998: 437)

According to Feyerabend's cultural relativism, traditions are closed system (Feyerabend 1991: 508, cited in Preston 1997: 209). They are incommensurable, as taken from the perspective of his broader sense of theories. This is consistent with Feyerabend's early thought on the incommensurable scientific theories, where he also claims that they are closed system.

4.2 Feyerabend's post-modernism

Feyerabend's last significant change of his thought is the repudiation of relativism that he proclaims earlier (Preston 1997: 209). This marks distinctly his post-modernist approach to philosophy of science and political philosophy (Preston 1998). Such turn can be found undoubtedly in Feyerabend's later *Conquest of Abundance*, which "derides relativism and rails against 'the champions of incommensurability'" (Munévar 2002). In his autobiography, Feyerabend concludes that both objectivism and relativism, which represent his early and later thought, are both "untenable as philosophies [and] bad guides for a fruitful cultural collaboration" (Feyerabend *KT*: 152, cited in Preston 1997: 209).

Relativism... believes that it can deal with cultures on the basis of philosophical fiat: define a suitable context (form of life) with criteria etc. of its own and anything that happens in this context can be made to conform it. As opposed to this, real cultures change when attempting to solve major problems and not all of them survive attempts at stabilization. (Feyerabend 2001: 240)

Feyerabend's objection to relativism was initiated after the publication of his *Farewell to Reason* in 1987 (Preston 1998: 438). In *Concluding unphilosophical conversation*, a reply to critics published in 1991, Feyerabend affirms that he is not a fully relativist (Preston 1998: 438). He does not, and perhaps unable to, define his stance clearly. However, Feyerabend is still being regarded as a relativist in the eyes of his critics though he denies such dub. For "he never doubted that the 'practical intentions of the relativist' must always be protection and tolerance" (Feyerabend 1991a: 42, cited in Preston 1998: 438)

A: And so we come to your relativism.

B: Yes, so we come to my so-called relativism.

A: What do you mean – so-called? Do you deny having defended relativism? Do you deny that there are many relativistic passages in your writings? Do you really want to assert that those who were encouraged by your books... were mistaken and should return to the prison of Western rationalism?

B: No – not at all! The trouble is that the word 'relativism', like many philosophical terms, is ambiguous and while I confess to be a fervent relativist

in some senses, I certainly am not a relativist in others. Besides, I changed my mind.

(Feyerabend 1991: 507)

Feyerabend appears to reject the use of terminology “relativism”, for it is incapable of exemplifying his new idea. Though he does not conceive a new term for his new idea, Feyerabend does provide some clues about its themes by identifying and attacking the undesirable relativism. Feyerabend calls it “armchair relativism” (Feyerabend 1995a: 151-152, cited in Preston 1998: 438).

... the first thing he recanted was ‘democratic relativism’, the normative ethical view that all traditions should be given equal rights and equal access to power. He became uneasy with this view because it reflects on traditions ‘from afar’... it is an ‘armchair’ relativism... More significantly, he regretted having introduced the general principle ‘hands off traditions’ because not all cultures are insulated, as relativists represent them. (Preston 1998: 438)

The objection to the tenet of closed theoretical and cultural system is the main theme of Feyerabend’s thought at this stage. In *Killing Time*, Feyerabend admits that he views cultures as “more or less closed entities with their own criteria and procedures” (Feyerabend *KT*: 151, cited in Preston 1997: 209) has “ignored the fact that cultures change and interact” (Preston 1997: 209). The reason, according to Preston, Feyerabend swerves from his relativist view of culture to the postmodernist perspective of culture is that he has “lost confidence in our ability to identify any unambiguous basic principles underlying a culture” (Preston 1998: 438). Feyerabend denies his earlier assertion that incommensurability implies closed semantic domain of theory (Preston 1998: 438). Feyerabend has recognized that there is communication during scientific revolutionary transitions (Preston 1998: 438).

Relativism would be correct if scientific nature and scientific procedures were well-defined, unambiguous, and ‘closed’. But they are not... We are a long way from the disaster systematised by champions of incommensurability. (Feyerabend 1994d: 19, cited in Preston 1998: 438)

The openness of cultures that promulgated by Feyerabend has gone as far as to the slogan of “potentially every culture is all cultures” (Feyerabend 2001: 33). However, he tells us that he is “not denying differences between languages, art forms, customs.” (Feyerabend 2001: 33) It is a critique that projected towards objectivists whom appear as searchers of strict rule of behavior (Feyerabend 2001: 33), for “they fail to recognize ‘how much of life happens in ways that one neither plan nor expects’” (Feyerabend 2001: 33). Feyerabend agrees with Rosaldo that the openness of cultures provides us “the full resources of a culture” (Feyerabend 2001: 33). In his insight of the life of a citizen in such open culture, Feyerabend quotes Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth* at length:

A person copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Rosaldo 1993: 216, cited in Feyerabend 2001: 33)

Feyerabend’s agreement with Rosaldo’s viewpoint indicates that he is still a cultural pluralist. According to him, open culture is favorable than closed culture, for it caters more for human nature.

If every culture is potentially all cultures, then cultural differences lose their ineffability and become special and changeable manifestations of a common human nature. Authentic murder, torture, and suppression become ordinary murder, torture, and suppression, and should be treated as such. Feminism has tasks not only in the United States, but even more so in Africa, India, and South America. Efforts to achieve peace need no longer respect some alleged cultural integrity that often is nothing but the rule of one or another tyrant. (Feyerabend 2001: 34)

Feyerabend appears to hold that there is a unity of human nature. The pluralistic of cultural influence is conceived towards shaping a monolithic human nature. When the existence of a common human nature is affirmed, it is vivid that not all cultures entail and result it. Furthermore, it is still obscure how a multiplicity of cultures can be accommodated consistently in the establishment of such a common human nature.

However, it is obvious that in the above quoted passage Feyerabend favors western culture as a “dominant culture”, though he never admits it explicitly. The examples he uses above, such as murder, torture, suppression, feminism, and peace have revealed so.

In addition, the abandonment of incommensurability, viz., the denial of closed cultural system is not without a problem. Feyerabend refuses, and actually unable, to answer the question of culture choice. For every culture is potentially all cultures, a bad culture is presupposed to become a good culture in the future, and the contrary is also true. Thus Feyerabend has no ground in saying that murder is unfavorable, for it is on the same ontological level with humanity, based on his slogan of “every culture is potentially all cultures” ; he is also not supposed to assert that peace is favorable, for it is on the par with war. There is stopping point in the course of culture appraisal. Hence, it is unimaginable when Feyerabend’s so-called “common human nature” is attainable. Nonetheless, if Feyerabend’s claim is true, it is certain that social chaos will be the consequence before common human nature has realized.

End note

- (1) Note that Feyerabend still stresses that incommensurable theories, traditions, and cultures can be compared in his later years.
- (2) Foucault is a putatively recognized post-modernist. His acquaintance with Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's philosophy offers him a new perspective to interpret philosophy in the new light. Power-knowledge is one of Foucault's important concepts which recognizes "all systems of thought as embedded within a network of social relations." (McNay 1994: 27)

Knowledge is not a form of pure speculation belonging to an abstract and disinterested realm of enquiry; rather it is at once a product of power relations and also instrumental in sustaining these relations. (McNay 1994: 27)

In his letter dated 23 June 1972 to Lakatos, Feyerabend reveals that he has read one book by Foucault, that is, *Madness and Society*. He claims that he likes the case study illustrated in the book. However, he "did not like Foucault any longer when he became general and started to speak about the human condition (language etc. etc.)..." (Motterlini 1999: 280). It is not clear if there is any impact of Foucault's thesis of power-knowledge on Feyerabend's later philosophy.

- (3) Though Feyerabend does not say that communication must be rational, he is forced to admit so. For it will be pointless if irrational communication were to be carried out. Free society is possible only if its citizens act in a rational way.
- (4) Perhaps the relativistic element in Feyerabend's political philosophy distinguishes his conception of free society from Popper's conception of open society.
- (5) "Progress" is the main theme in Feyerabend's philosophical career. He never abandoned this belief.
- (6) It is because Feyerabend always discusses the rights which are belonged to or supposed to be belonged to someone in the light of interestedness. For example, the policy of science has impact on citizens' life. Hence it is the interest of every member of a society. Thus the right to the making of scientific policy is concerned every single individual. Feyerabend does not seem to think that the outsiders of this society have any such right, for it is not of their interest. This clarification of rights explains the role of an individual in the progression of a society. Furthermore, Feyerabend's philosophy does not allow social chaos due to the dispute of social judgment, for this implies regression.