Chapter 6: Conclusion

Feyerabend's incommensurability thesis arose as a consequence of his repudiation of neutral observation sentence. This empiricist tenet, which is denounced consistently by Feyerabend throughout his life, presupposes the existence of a theory-independent observation sentence which serves as an adjudicated ground for theory comparison. Feyerabend's thought was formed in the course of his attack on three accounts of empiricism which entail neutral theory of observation, viz., stability thesis, principle of deducibility, and principle of meaning invariance. The common salient feature of these claims is their positivistic nature from the perspective of meaning. Feyerabend condemns this stance because the meaning of successive theories is determined by the neutral observation sentence, which is assumed fixed. Fixed observation sentence yields fixed theoretical sentence. It leads naturally, in Feyerabend's account, to a stagnant scientific enterprise since progress can hardly be achieved in scientific theory. Hence, Feyerabend's efforts in developing incommensurability thesis originated from the Wittgensteinian contextual theory of meaning[1]. He believed that the incommensurability thesis supports the notion of scientific progress and scientific realism[2].

However, this semantic perspective of the incommensurability thesis was the theme of the early Feyerabend. It is a seed of his later thought, for Feyerabend attributes incommensurability a pluralistic nature. He asserts that incommensurable theories are competing without a monolithic meaning. Feyerabend's theory of proliferation, on the contrary, encourages mutual existence of multiple and diverse theories. According to him, plurality of theories increases the likelihood of the emergence of the best theory in the theory appraisal process. However, Feyerabend fails to provide a satisfactory account for theory comparison, as accused by his critics, for he has rejected observation sentence as a neutral tool for crucial test[3].

Feyerabend's later approach to incommensurability has received little attention from scholars. It is because there is a common belief that Feyerabend's incommensurability is considerably consistent in his philosophy. This perception is justified by some volumes

of Feyerabend's later works such as *Against Method*, *Science in a Free Society,* and *Farewell to Reason*. However, many have overlooked the change of position that has taken place in Feyerabend's posthumous publication *Conquest of Abundance*. In this very book, Feyerabend has abandoned his early advocacy of incommensurability. This change of position is attributed to the shift in focus from the semantic perspective of incommensurability to a cultural perspective. The main reason for the repudiation of this tenet is that Feyerabend now believes incommensurable cultural systems[4] prevent inter-cultural communication, something which is not desirable in a democratic society. Hence, Feyerabend's later rejection of incommensurability thesis ensues from the espousal of an open cultural system.

It is ridiculous that the significance of Feyerabend's later approach to Incommensurability thesis has not been sufficiently studied, although an immense amount of light has thrown on his postmodernism. Obviously there is a close connection between Feyerabend's postmodernism and incommensurability in his later thought. The main factor which contributes to such indifference among scholars, perhaps, is Feyerabend's de-emphasis of relativism in his later works. Relativism appears as an underlying theme in Feyerabend's later philosophy, which evidently leads to postmodernism. However, it is worth noting that Feyerabend does not explicitly label himself as an irrationalist, for this would leave sciences and cultures on a shaky ground. Advocacy of an irrationalist stance requires sacrifice of a rational communication between interlocutors. This results in the impossibility of communication. Feyerabend does not wish to give up this last resort of rationality, for this would severely destroy democratic society that he deems favorable.

It is faintly noticed that Feyerabend's relativism in his later works has a connection with his early stance of principle of proliferation. The latter has turned into epistemological anarchism in the later Feyerabend. Relativism seems to be a bridge to understand the transition of Feyerabend's thought, for his principle of proliferation is a form of weak relativism whereas his epistemological anarchism is of a strong one. However, Feyerabend, in his autobiography, has rejected both objectivism and relativism that

represent his early and later thought respectively (Feyerabend *KT*: 152, cited in Preston 1997: 209). It is because both tenets treat theories and cultures as closed systems[5]. He does not propose any terminology to characterize this change of mind. Nonetheless, this new approach is still considered as a new form of relativism by Feyerabend's critics[6]. This new relativism aims at advancing democratic society with the warranty of open communication between scientific theories, cultures, and societies. Thus, progress of science and society is the primary concern in the course of Feyerabend's philosophical career.

Thus far the above exposition can hardly demonstrate a sign of straightforward equivalence between Feyerabend's postmodernism and French postmodernism. The salient feature of French postmodernism is its deconstruction of logocentrism, a traditional rational epistemological approach to texts, viz., a monistic perspective to the interpretation of meaning. A typical postmodernist is enthusiastic in undertaking a skeptical position to existing culture, theories, and social systems. This can be explained by the canon of anti-tradition that held firmly by postmodernist, who wishes to break the myth of doctrinal monism. Feyerabend's relativism is different from these characteristics of French postmodernism, for it is not a tenet to subvert existing cultures and theories. Feyerabend is not a skeptic in the first place to question the rational ground of sciences and cultures. It would be more appropriate to treat Feyerabend as a rational postmodernist who preserves an open platform of communication that is absent in French postmodernism. The deconstructive nature of the latter can hardly tolerate such a monistic communication background, for it presupposes the existence of rationality, or in another words, of logocentrism.

In a nutshell, it has been a common practice to divide Feyerabend's thought into two distinct stages. Perhaps new lights may be gained if they are studied holistically, with relativism as a common thread running through both. A study of the evolutionary development of Feyerabend's thought may provide new insights into Feyerabend's incommensurability thesis.

End note

(1) Please refer to chapter 1 of this thesis.

(2) Please refer to chapter 2 for Feyerabend's conception of scientific progress; whereas his scientific realism can be found in chapter 3 of this thesis.

(3) Please refer to chapter 3.

(4) The term "theory" and "culture" are interchangeably used in Feyerabend's philosophy.

(5) See chapter 4.

(6) See chapter 4, section 4.2.