

Introduction to the Fourth Edition

by Ian Hacking

'*Against Method* is more than a book: it is an event.'¹ That was what it felt like, when the work came out in 1975. Feyerabend was notorious, adored by the young, loathed by the established. The turbulent sixties were winding down, and here was an intellectual testament to the ferment. This was the Woodstock of philosophy. The book should now be read in two ways, both as a part of that era, and also as a contribution to intellectual life in the long term.

There are many lovely things about the book. The first is the Analytical Index, 'Being a Sketch of the Main Argument'. This is not some machine-readable abstract of the type now required by scholarly journals. Paul Feyerabend is telling *you*, in his own plain (and thereby elegant) prose, what he thinks is interesting, chapter by chapter. Yes, it is OK if you skip a couple of chapters, or read the book from back to front. This is not to say you should not read the work sentence by sentence, but the great merit of a book is that you can take it hitch-hiking or to a sit-in, and read a bit while you are munching a few pilfered tomatoes or sheltering from a storm. You can pick up an idea, chase it, and relocate it in the Analytical Index, all the while being in a physical relation to the pages upon which you can scribble expostulations, if that is your wont.

I have been saying 'this book'. That is doubly wrong. First because, as Feyerabend truly said, '*AM* is not a book, it is a collage.'² Secondly, because there is more than one collage. There is the first edition of 1975, and the radically revised one of 1988, and then the third edition of 1993, reprinted here. The 1988 version is far more manifestly a collage than that of 1975, although the earlier printing was much more handsome. Feyerabend went on changing the text, but the biggest changes were for 1988. I shall mention some of them below. He is not quite right about the final changes he made, as described in the preface to the third edition below. Yes, the 1988 Chapter 20, not found in 1975, has been dropped. It is all about objectivity and

1. Jean Largeault, at the end of his review of the book in *Archives de Philosophie* 39 (1976), p. 389. This essay, by the most rigorous French philosopher of the sciences of his day, was far more perceptive than most of the English-language reviews at the time.

2. Paul Feyerabend, *Killing Time*, Chicago, 1995, p. 139.

the construction of objects, scientific and other. The 1988 Chapter 19 ('What's so great about science?') has been much extended. He says that he rewrote Chapter 16, which is essentially the 1975 Chapter 17, for the 1988 edition. That is misleading. He chiefly cut six pages from it: a discussion of incommensurability, a topic which, as he indicates in the Preface to the Third Edition, had been worked to death by 1993. And he added the epilogue on relativism, a bone on which he chewed over and over again.

The publishers of all three books are in effect the same, for New Left Books was the original trade name of Verso. Feyerabend had his little battles with New Left Books – see his amusing letters to Imre Lakatos, which include a frustrated cable from Feyerabend in New Zealand to Lakatos in London, dated 2 August 1972.³ In the 1988 preface, Feyerabend indicated, in broad strokes, what he added, rearranged, or cut from 1975. I am by no means sure he was right to make the changes.

To Imre Lakatos

In 1975 there was a dedication, '*To IMRE LAKATOS Friend, and fellow-anarchist.*' It was removed in 1988. Nothing odd about that – Lakatos had died suddenly in 1974. In 1975 there was a single moving paragraph explaining that the book had been intended to be published in tandem with an equally vigorous response by Lakatos, one which was never written. In 1988 Feyerabend put this thought into a longer but not more effective preface. Here he repeated the dedication in clumsy embedded prose: 'I therefore dedicate also this second, already much more lonely version of our common work to his memory.' The 1975 front matter – a dedication on an empty page, followed by a brief paragraph on another empty page – is far more moving, and no less intellectually telling. And so, in my opinion, it goes. *Of course* the publishers could not reprint the first edition rather than the final one. Happily they have now put the 1975 original online.

One fundamental difference is that in 1975 the book had a long Chapter 16 on Lakatos, the ironically named 'fellow-anarchist' of the subtitle. It was deleted and in 1988 the analytical summary of the chapter was reduced to a mere footnote to the preceding chapter.⁴ It refers us to

3. *For and Against Method: Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend*, edited by Matteo Motterlini, Chicago, 1999, p. 290.

4. Note 11, p. 161 below.

an adequate but passionless paper printed elsewhere.⁵ So the 1988 book is no longer, as Feyerabend put it in 1975, 'a long and rather personal *letter* to Imre' – one such that 'every wicked phrase it contains was written in anticipation of an even more wicked reply from the recipient'.⁶

Lakatos and Popper

Feyerabend speaks for himself. An introduction by someone else is wanted only to suggest the historical setting in which the first book was published. The following notes are for people born after 1975, for whom the event called *Against Method* is somewhere back in prehistory, like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since the book is dedicated to Imre Lakatos (1922–1974), we can start with their relationship, although that means I shall subsequently have to move backwards in time. For a deeper grasp of the friendship between Lakatos and Feyerabend, dip into *For and Against Method*.⁷ It includes 250 pages of rambunctious, irreverent, but astute letters between the two men, written between 1967 and 1974, exactly the period when *Against Method* came into being.

Lakatos, educated in Budapest, had a turbulent youth. Towards the end of the Second World War he led a cell in the Communist resistance against Hungarian fascism. He became an influential figure in the party, was disgraced, jailed, released, and left Hungary after the failed rebellion of 1956. He arrived at the University of Cambridge. His PhD thesis was published as *Proofs and Refutations*. It is one of the most original twentieth-century contributions to the philosophy of mathematics, although it is usually regarded more as pedagogy than as philosophy. He turned to the philosophy of the sciences and gravitated, in 1960, to the London School of Economics, where Karl Popper ruled.

No philosopher of the sciences was more admired by working scientists than Popper. His watchword, or phrase, was 'Conjectures and Refutations'. Science is hypothetico-deductive. Scientists frame conjectures and test their logical consequences. A proposition is scientific if and only if it is falsifiable. Otherwise it is 'metaphysical' – not meaningless or useless, as logical

5. Paul Feyerabend, 'The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in *Problems of Empiricism: Philosophical Papers II*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 202–31.

6. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, New Left Books, 1975, p. 7 (not numbered).

7. See note 3.

positivists tended to say, but in need of clarification, dialectical analysis, and deep thought, in order to be reworked into something testable. On numerous occasions Feyerabend was to recall that Popper began his class by saying that there is no scientific method. And then (said Feyerabend) he began to go wrong, enunciating, in effect, the method of conjectures and refutations.

In 1969, Lakatos inherited Popper's chair. He devised a 'Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes' which was, in Lakatos's own terminology, a progressive problem shift from Popper's inquiry into the nature of rationality and science. Lakatos continued the tradition of the 'Popper Seminar', a weekly happening during term. Under both Popper and Lakatos it was famous for confrontation. An invited guest seldom got through more than ten minutes of exposition before being subject to violent criticism. A great many people hated the experience and feared what they thought was hostility. Some loved the ambience. One was Feyerabend. I do not know when the two men, Lakatos and Feyerabend, first met; in the early 1960s, perhaps. By 1967, when the published correspondence between them begins, they were soulmates.

In 1965, Lakatos organized an important meeting in London, the first major collective response to Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). There were already plenty of conservative criticisms of Kuhn published or in the works. But the core of the meeting was radical criticism from a Popperian and 'post-Popperian' point of view. Lakatos thought that conference proceedings ought to be written after the conference, so that the authors learned from what had gone on. The boring papers of his own conference were published in standard channels, three forgotten volumes, but the main upshot was the memorable *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*.⁸

It includes pieces by Feyerabend, Kuhn, Popper, Toulmin – and Lakatos's first sustained statement of his new methodology, which constitutes almost half of the book. Feyerabend says in a note that his own essay for the volume, 'Consolations for the Specialist', was presented at the Popper seminar in 1967, but to judge by later letters to Lakatos, it was still being reworked in 1968. In fact it is not clear which work in progress becomes which final work. He speaks of 'my Kuhn paper'⁹ and, six weeks later, 'my latest anti-Parmenidian

8. *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, Cambridge, 1970.

9. *For and Against Method*, p. 120.

paper,¹⁰ both of which the editor of the correspondence identifies as 'Consolations'. A postscript to the first letter says he is thinking of calling his anti-Kuhn paper 'Against Method', adding parenthetically 'this in analogy to Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*.'¹¹ In the autobiography he refers to his 'pro/anti Kuhn paper'.¹² Certainly in 'Consolations' we get Feyerabend's most famous utterance, 'anything goes'.¹³ But he published a paper with the title 'Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge', also in 1970.¹⁴ This really is a preliminary version of parts of the 1975 book.

Now flash backwards some twenty years, to 1952. Feyerabend, in Vienna, arranged to go to Cambridge to study under Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein died in that year. So Feyerabend went to work with Popper at the LSE. His autobiography, *Killing Time*, tells how he quickly established a reputation in the English-speaking world and was offered a job at Berkeley, where he took up a position in the autumn of 1958. He tells how America opened up his life in a way that England never could.

Kuhn and Feyerabend

In his autobiography Feyerabend never even mentions that he soon began having intense conversations with Thomas Kuhn, in which, together, they hatched the idea of incommensurability that was soon to take the world by storm.¹⁵ He rightly connects his thoughts on incommensurability with N. R. Hanson's wonderful but now largely forgotten book, *Patterns of Discovery*, a book that insisted that observational statements are theory-loaded, so that a change in theory implies a change in the meaning even of reports of observations.¹⁶ But he did read a draft of Kuhn's *Structure*

10. Ibid. p. 129.

11. Ibid. p. 125.

12. *Killing Time*, p. 128.

13. 'Consolations for the Specialist', in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, pp. 197–230, on p. 229.

14. Paul Feyerabend, 'Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge', *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 4 (1970): pp. 17–130.

15. However the pro/anti Kuhn paper, 'Consolations' (see note 13), begins on p. 197 with the statement: 'In the years 1960 and 1961, when Kuhn was a member of the philosophy department at the University of California in Berkeley, I had the good fortune of being able to discuss with him various aspects of science. I have profited enormously from these discussions and I have looked at science in a new way ever since.'

16. N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, Cambridge, 1958.

'around 1960'.¹⁷ Kuhn as a person is not mentioned until, at the end of the autobiography, he becomes 'my old friend'.¹⁸ In the autobiography there is a photo of the two men sitting side by side, in a café near Zurich.

In other work, of course, he grants that Kuhn had the most important ideas about science outside the LSE circle. (Hanson, who did stunt aerobatics among many other things, died when he crashed his plane in 1967 at the age of forty-two.) By the preface to this third edition of *AM*, you will finally find him speaking of 'Kuhn's masterpiece'. In the autobiography, conversely, Feyerabend has many kind things to say about men such as Rudolf Carnap and Herbert Feigl, one-time logical positivists from Vienna, who together with other German-speaking immigrants and refugees changed the face of American philosophy forever. Elsewhere, he was really quite rude about the Vienna Circle. How about 'rodents of neopositivism' in the 1988 Preface to the Chinese edition?¹⁹

The differences between the personalities of Kuhn and Feyerabend were profound. One of them is best indicated by two adjectives which out of context would be condescending. Kuhn was dogged, and Feyerabend was flighty. Kuhn gnawed at incommensurability for the rest of his life, and left as yet unpublished material which, in my personal judgement, goes wrong in an attempt to produce a theory of incommensurability that would suit linguists and cognitive scientists. Feyerabend revelled in his off-the-wall illustration of the incommensurability of archaic and ancient Greek systems of thought.

Anything goes

Feyerabend will be forever cursed by a statement of his own making, and for which he is fully responsible, the notorious aphorism 'anything goes'. In the Chinese preface, he says it is 'the terrified exclamation of a rationalist who takes a closer look at history'. Yet he would sometimes argue, not in terror but with delight, that even Lakatos's methodology shared with Feyerabend's anti-methodology 'a position of "anything goes"'.²⁰

17. *Killing Time*, p. 141.

18. *Ibid.* p.162.

19. In case you think he could not possibly have meant the Vienna Circle by this term of abuse, compare the passage here with the diagram in a letter to Lakatos, *For and Against Method*, p. 245.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Since the aphorism is often taken to be anti-science, a sort of New Age waffle, we must emphasize that Feyerabend never meant for one minute that anything *except* the scientific method (whatever that is) 'goes'. He meant that lots of ways of getting on, *including* the innumerable methods of the diverse sciences, 'go'. He also meant that an anti-rationalist, like himself, was perfectly entitled to use rationalist arguments to discomfit the rationalists whom he opposed. What he did dislike was any kind of intellectual or ideological hegemony. His favoured text was Mill's *On Liberty*, even if his preferred style was Dada. Single-mindedness in pursuit of any goal, including truth and understanding, yields great rewards. But single vision is folly if it makes you think you see (or even glimpse) *the* truth, the one and only truth. Hence the need for the counter-irritant maxim 'anything goes'.

Anarchism and Dada

For some time Feyerabend cheerfully accepted Lakatos's label 'anarchist'. On 10 October 1970 he wrote to Lakatos that he considered saying in the Preface to *Against Method*: 'I am for anarchism in *thinking*, in one's *private life*, BUT NOT in *public life*.'²¹ He did not insert that thought, but he went one better: in 1975, *Against Method* had a subtitle, *Outlines of an anarchistic* theory of knowledge*. Yes, with a footnote to the subtitle, directing the reader to explanations in the text of the term 'anarchism', including the passage that I shall quote in a moment.

The subtitle was abandoned in 1988, although the initial discussion of anarchism in the Introduction is much the same. Moreover, that footnote to the subtitle referred to a chapter that was deleted, though to some extent pasted back here and there in 1988. An important part of that chapter is a discussion of the relation between Dada and intellectual anarchism. The footnote to the subtitle also referred to a very long footnote 12 in the Introduction to the 1975 book. Feyerabend wrote it out in a letter to Lakatos, 7 August 1972.²² Since it was deleted in 1988, I shall quote it here.

When choosing the term 'anarchism' for my enterprise I simply followed general usage. However anarchism, as it has been practised in the past and as it is being practised today by an ever increasing number of people has

21. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 294–5.

features I am not prepared to support. It cares little for human lives and human happiness (except for the lives and the happiness of those who belong to some special group); and it contains precisely the kind of Puritanical dedication and seriousness which I detest. (There are some exquisite exceptions such as Cohn-Bendit,²³ but they are in the minority.) It is for these reasons that I now prefer to use the term *Dadaism*. A Dadaist would not hurt a fly – let alone a human being. A Dadaist is utterly unimpressed by any serious enterprise and he smells a rat whenever people stop smiling and assume that attitude and those facial expressions which indicate that something important is about to be said. A Dadaist is convinced that a worthwhile life will arise only when we start taking things *lightly* and when we remove from our speech the profound but already putrid meanings it has accumulated over the centuries ('search for truth'; 'defence of justice'; 'passionate concern'; etc., etc.). A Dadaist is prepared to initiate joyful experiments even in those domains where change and experimentation seem to be out of the question (example: the basic functions of language). I hope that having read the pamphlet²⁴ the reader will remember me as a flippant Dadaist and *not* as a serious anarchist.

Let us remember him, then, as a Dadaist. Lakatos objected to the claim that a Dadaist would never hurt a fly: sometimes a Dadaist has to do harm when it is the lesser of two evils. Lakatos undoubtedly had in mind a controversial incident in his own past as a resistance fighter, when he compelled his cell to order a young woman to take poison because if caught she would compromise the group. Feyerabend said he accepted Lakatos's criticism. But the argument seems to me not to harm Feyerabend's footnote but, rather, to show that there are times when Dada is not enough. Feyerabend had the moral luck to have been physically injured in war but

23. Daniel Cohn-Bendit (born 1945) was a central personality in the Paris student uprisings, May 1968, denounced alike by the Gaullist right and the communist left. In the 1970s he edited a German magazine of anarchist orientation, which increasingly moved toward environmental politics. In 1994 he was elected to the European Parliament as a green, and in 1999 he became leader of the French Green Party. In the June 2009 elections to the European Parliament he was extraordinarily popular with French voters. The right despises him as favouring immigrants, lessening penalties on drugs, and general welfarism, while the left hates his policies of armed intervention in the former Yugoslavia and his fierce support for the European Union.

24. The 'pamphlet' is of course *Against Method*: this is the word Feyerabend used in writing to Lakatos, and he left the paragraph intact when he put it in to the book.

(so he made out) never morally touched. He had the privilege of being able to practise a kind of Dada throughout his life. But it is important to insist that Dada implies passion, not indifference. It may help to understand this by quoting 'a letter to the reader' which was intended to precede his last book, *The Conquest of Abundance*. Although written for another purpose, it can usefully be read by those embarking on *Against Method*.²⁵

FEYERABEND'S LAST LETTER

Dear reader,

In a few pages you will find a story written in a style you may be familiar with. There are facts and generalizations therefrom, there are arguments and there are lots of footnotes. In other words, you will find a (perhaps not very outstanding) example of a scholarly essay. Let me therefore warn you that it is not my intention to inform, or to establish some truth. What I want to do is to change your attitude. I want you to sense chaos where at first you noticed an orderly arrangement of well behaved things and processes. It is clear that only a trick can get me from my starting point – the footnote-heavy essay I just mentioned – to where I would like you, the reader, to arrive.

My trick is to present events which dissolve the circumstances that made them happen. Given the circumstances the events are absurd, unheard of, frightening, evil – they simply do not make sense. I take a closer look at the circumstances and find features that may be regarded as anticipations of the event. The features are not unknown; they are not hidden either; however, they can be read in a variety of ways and only some readings create trouble.

The absurdity is therefore not laid out in advance; it is created by living in a certain way – and so is the sense perceived by those who produce the disruptive event. What is interesting is that both parties use the same material; they start from the same life, but they continue it in different directions. (The same applies to the scholars who years and even centuries later try to figure out 'what really happened'.)

I conclude that the life we lead is ambiguous. It contains not only one future, but many, and it contains them neither ready-made nor as possibilities that can be turned into any direction. It is not at all different

25. The letter was found by Grazia Borromini-Feyerabend on a disc on 11 October 1999, and was first printed in the *London Review of Books*, 22 June 2000, p. 28.

from a movie, or a specially constructed play. Imagine such a play. It has gone on for about forty minutes. You know the characters, you have become accustomed to their idiosyncrasies, and you are already tired of their peculiar habits. Now they stand before you with their familiar gestures and it seems that nothing interesting is ever going to happen – when suddenly, because of a trick used by the writer, the ‘reality’ you perceived turns out to be a chimaera. (Alfred Hitchcock, Anthony Shaffer and Ira Levin are masters of this kind of switch.) Looking back you can now say that things were not what they seemed to be, and looking forward with the experience in mind you will regard any clear and definite arrangement with suspicion, on the stage, and elsewhere. Also, your suspicion will be the greater the more solid the initial story seemed to be. This is why I have chosen a scholarly essay as my starting point.

It is very important not to let this suspicion deteriorate into a truth, or a theory, for example into a theory with the principle: things are never what they seem to be. Reality, or Being, or God, or whatever it is that sustains us cannot be captured that easily. The problem is not why we are so often confused; the problem is why we seem to possess useful and enlightening knowledge.

You must also resist the temptation to classify what I say by giving it a well-established name, for example the name of relativism. Relativism as defined by philosophers and sociologists is much too definite a view to fit the situation – unless it is regarded as a passing chimaera, or as a rule of thumb. You cannot even deny the existence of eternal truths unless the denial is again meant as a cautionary hint given to those visiting the theatre of life. Is argument without a purpose? No, it is not; it accompanies us on our journey without tying it to a fixed road. Is there a way of identifying what is going on? There are many ways and we are using them all the time though often believing that they are part of a stable framework which encompasses everything. Is there a name for an attitude or a view like this? Yes, if names are that important I can easily provide one – mysticism – though it is a mysticism that uses examples, arguments, tightly reasoned passages of text, scientific theories and experiments to raise itself into consciousness.

This, my dear reader, is the warning I want you to remember from time to time, and especially when the story seems to become so definite that it almost turns into a clearly thought out and precisely structured point of view.