Was Feyerabend a Postmodernist?

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Abstract
This paper asks whether the philosophy of Paul Feyerabend can be reasonably classified as postmodernist, a label applied to him by friends and foes alike. After describing some superficial similarities between the style and content of both Feyerabend’s and postmodernist writings, I offer three more robust characterisations of postmodernism in terms of relativism, ‘incredulity to metanarratives’, and ‘depthlessness’. It emerges that none of these characterisations offers a strong justification for classifying Feyerabend as ‘postmodern’ in any significant sense. Indeed, what does emerge is that Feyerabend’s work was fundamentally informed by a humanitarian vision of the value of science that is, in fact, strikingly modern.

1. Introduction
Throughout his eclectic career, the work of Paul Feyerabend has been described, either by critics and commentators or by the man himself, using various epithets. Some, such as ‘relativist’, are the topics of vigorous scholarly discussion, but others are not. ‘Postmodern’ is a case in point. The feminist philosopher of science, Sandra Harding (1986, 194), has judged Against Method to espouse an ‘apolitical postmodernist philosophy’, while another commentator credits Feyerabend with contributing to the ‘heavy armamentarium’ deployed by postmodernists to promote a ‘dismissive, cynical attitude’ towards science (Reaven 2000, 23). Others talk instead of Feyerabend’s ‘affinities’ with or ‘proximity’ to postmodernism, but hold off making any stronger claims (see Campbell 2011 and Norris 1997).

Such classifications matter: they affect our perceptions and evaluations of Feyerabend as a philosopher, guiding our understanding of the value and development of his ideas. Noretta Koertge (2000, 668) derogatorily locates postmodernism among the ‘Oz-land’ topics of a new, unwelcome glut of ‘new-age’ philosophies of science, alongside feminism and social constructionism. If one agrees with that, then clearly classifying Feyerabend as a postmodernist is no good thing. Certainly many philosophers of science agree with Koertge’s judgment, even if their own reservations are developed with reference to more specific issues and concerns, as evident in articles by Nancey Murphey (1990) and Zuzana Parusniková (1992) – a debate whose political context is described by Joseph Rouse (1991).

Since these judgments about the status and seriousness of both Feyerabend and postmodernism are contested, any claims about their proximity ought to be done carefully.¹

Certainly one can easily point to obvious affinities or parallels between the style and content of Feyerabend’s work and general features of postmodernism at large. To start with, there is a vivid enthusiasm for an eclectic literary and intellectual style – provocative, playful, and energetic, marked by humour and irony, in self-conscious contrast the established norms of academic discourse. Next, there is the vibrant pluralism, the delight in diversity – of ideas, values, lifestyles – unencumbered by the dead weight of cold tradition or parochial certainty. Coupled to this is a disorienting
willingness to sympathetically engage with people, traditions, and beliefs that seem, to most enlightened ‘moderns’, absurd – think of the famous defences of astrology and other ‘eccentric’ ideas. In Feyerabend’s writings, the provocative styles of thought and expression and the delight in eccentricity, eclecticism, and diversity converged in his infamous slogan, ‘Anything goes!’, taken from the Cole Porter song - a use of popular culture to capture a pluralistic sentiment.

The final shared feature is the clear reactionary spirit, directed primarily at the values and convictions characteristic of Enlightenment modernity, or at least to their subsequent, degenerated forms. At its broadest, postmodernism is animated by a ‘fundamentally critical perspective’ on many of the ‘concepts, social institutions, and traditions of thought’ characteristic of the Enlightenment (Heise 2004, 137). Specific figures of course nominate more specific targets or themes— for Richard Rorty (1989, 40) the bête noire is ‘Enlightenment scientism’ while for Jean-François Lyotard (2006, 218) it is the conceit that only rational discourses, modelled on the sciences, can exhibit a legitimating ‘self-sufficiency’. Taken together, the usual bugbears are broad ‘isms’ – scientism, rationalism, individualism – that have been subsequently challenged by cultural and intellectual developments that have provoked what Lyotard calls a ‘crisis of legitimation’. Similarly reactionary sentiments run through Feyerabend’s writings: think, for instance, of his attacks on the ‘myths’ of methodological monism and ‘Western rationalism’ as ‘monsters’, hostile to our freedom and liberty, that betray a powerful ‘totalitarian element’ (Feyerabend 1999, 243). Indeed, the reactionary spirit perhaps receives its fullest expression in the ‘critique of scientific reason’ that Feyerabend (1976, 109) proposed, whose neglected, ‘fundamental’ question was: ‘What’s so great about science?’

Stirring as all this might be, considerable care has to be taken when considering the reactionary character of Feyerabend’s writings. The well-known rhetorical excesses of his writing, and the significant shifts in his ideas, make it hard to keep careful track of the objects of, and reasons for, his critiques. In Against Method, for instance, Feyerabend (1993, 40) clearly states that he ‘does not criticize science’, but only to the facile conceptions of science that emerge when philosophers, ignorant of its history and practice, ‘subject it to their simpleminded rules’. But other, more reactionary calls – to abandon science, embrace voodoo, and so on – of an overtly polemical character have tended to distract attention away from the sensible critical targets. The more polemical claims about merits of astrology and alternative medicine are, if carefully considered, far less radical than they seem – or so I have argued elsewhere (see Kidd 2013a and 2016a). But the damage done by indulgence in dramatic rhetoric and polemical excess is difficult to undo, not least when the claims being made take the form of calls for the termination of the philosophy of science as a discipline (see Feyerabend (1970) and (1973)). Those calls met a hostile reception, of course, as were the similar announcements and anticipations of the ‘death’ or ‘end’ of philosophy issued not so long after by postmodernists like Rorty and Lyotard (see Cooper 1993).

Such features converge in a familiar image of Feyerabend as a self-styled ‘epistemological anarchist’ – a playful provocateur iconoclastically set ‘against method’, who urges us to join him in bidding ‘farewell to reason’. By adopting such stances, he thereby ‘shows himself to be a radical postmodernist’ (Best and Kellner 1997, 251). But that judgment is too quick. For one thing, the term ‘postmodernism’ itself, whether in ‘radical’ forms or not, needs careful articulation before it can be put to use. For another thing, one must be similarly careful about the periods of Feyerabend’s work to which it is being applied. Over his career, his positions and
concerns changed considerably, even if there are broadly stable themes, such as the underlying ‘philosophical pluralism’ deftly documented by Eric Oberheim (2006). But such latent pluralism is not, by itself, enough to justify classification of Feyerabend as a postmodernist, for one can be a pluralist without being a postmodernist.2

The difficulty of settling terms for a discussion of Feyerabend’s relation to postmodernism is evident in the handful of papers devoted to that topic. John Preston (1998, 425) explains that his aim is less to ‘clinch the case’ either way for Feyerabend’s having ‘become a postmodernist’, than to use the idea to explore and evaluate themes in his later writings. Similarly, Paul Hoyningen-Huene (2002) gives the downbeat verdict that, at best, Feyerabend had some influence on postmodernism, but only due to consistent misunderstandings of the ‘Anything goes’ slogan (see Tsou 2003). Although there are other ideas that would be closer to postmodernist sensibilities, such as the famous ‘ocean of alternatives’ image or the idea of the ‘free society’, they are, as Hoyningen-Huene notes, never mentioned by postmodernists. (Similarly muted verdicts are given by Nola (2012:73) and Parusniková (1992:25)).

Such downbeat verdicts are partly a consequence of the paucity of explicit remarks by Feyerabend on postmodernism, although the few he did make are interesting. In the preface to the third edition of Against Method, written during the early 1990s, one finds deconstruction praised for having provoked people to critically rethink certain ‘philosophical commonplace’ — although no details are given — but then criticised for having effects only in a ‘small circle’, due partly to its difficult literary styles (Feyerabend 1993, xiv). A few pages on, the admiration is tempered further by the remark that although postmodernism had, in early years, helped to challenge overheated forms of rationalism, it had, by the 1990s, gone too far in the other direction. The urgent task, by then, was to restore the ‘authority of reason’ (Feyerabend 1993, 12)—a prescient remark, given the ensuing ‘Science Wars’.

If this sounds rather rich coming from a man who, a few years earlier, had published a book called Farewell to Reason, it should be remembered that context mattered to Feyerabend. Sometimes science needs ‘anarchism’, at other times, monism—hence the remark, at the start of Against Method, that ‘epistemic anarchism’ is not a universal panacea, but a ‘medicine’ needed to cure philosophy of science of the mid-twentieth-century of an acute bout of monism. Feyerabend (1993, 13) in fact cites postmodernism among the emerging cultural and intellectual developments that prompted his new conviction that ‘reason should now be given greater weight not because it is and always was fundamental but because it seems to be needed, in circumstances that occur rather frequently today … to create a more humane approach’. If so, then Feyerabend’s view was that postmodernism is good, as far as it goes, but that it had, by the early ‘90s anyway, gone too far (see Latour (2004)).

My suggestion is that to make progress in exploring the relationship of Feyerabend to postmodernism, we ought to start with more substantive characterisations of postmodernism.

2. Postmodernism, relativism, and ‘incredulity to metanarratives’

To make progress in that search, one needs some operative characterisation of ‘postmodernism’, of a sort that commentators typically omit to provide—Koertge, despite her criticisms, does not cite or discuss a single postmodern author in the paper cited earlier. But the term ‘postmodernism’ refers to a range of different conceptions, attitudes, and proposals, developed, within philosophy, by a set of
figures, including Lyotard, Rorty, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard. But their views diverge significantly from one another, not least on their status as postmodernists, a label some of them reject as incoherent or as inapplicable to their own work.

The search is therefore for a plurality of characterisations of postmodernism, ones evident in the writings of ‘self-selecting’ usual suspects, such as Derrida and Lyotard. I focus on three, though take neither of them to be a definitive account of the ‘essence’ of postmodernism, which is anyway a suspect notion given the diversity of things gathered under that label. Rorty (1991, 2), for one, reported that he had ‘given up’ his attempts to find ‘something common’ to the various trends, ideas, and activities described as ‘postmodern’. But one does not need a rigid ‘essence’ to talk meaningfully of postmodernism, any more than of logical positivism or scepticism. I start with two familiar characterisations of postmodernism, in terms of relativism and incredulity to metanarratives, and then proceed, in the following section, to a less familiar third.

The first characterisation treats postmodernism as virtually equivalent to some form of relativism, as when Rorty (1979, 308) urges us to use the term “true” to mean ‘what you can defend against all-comers’, thereby relativizing truth-claims to the social community in terms of which one is either an ‘attacker’ or ‘defender’. In a similar move, Lyotard (1984, 7) proposes that knowledge be defined in terms of what is ‘accepted in the social circle of the “knower’s” interlocutors’. For the criterion for a knowledge-claim is not its ‘relation to reality’, but rather its ‘strategic value’ in relation to the interests and concerns of a community. Underlying such remarks is the sense that epistemic claims are relative to – defined by and confined to – certain contingent conditions, such as a social community or ‘form of life’. It is this characterisation that, argues Maria Baghramian (2004, 79), accounts for the sense, among many analytic philosophers, of its being ‘a truism … that postmodernism is nothing but a jumble of incoherent, self-refuting relativistic claims’.

It is easy to imagine why this characterisation as an exotic form of relativism would fit many paradigmatically postmodernist philosophers. During much of the late 1970s well into the 1980s, he was notorious for his defences of relativism, including the thirteen different versions one finds in the first chapter of Farewell to Reason. But the fit with Feyerabend is not as tight as it might seem. Into the late 1990s, Feyerabend decisively rejected relativism in both its epistemic and cultural sorts, embracing a more robust epistemic realism and cultural universalism — of a sort that would surprise those familiar only with the earlier, better-known, defences of a stark relativism (see Heller (2016) and Kusch (2016)). Moreover what was defended from the 1970s was a specific political form that Feyerabend dubbed ‘democratic relativism’, rather than the epistemic forms invoked by Rorty and Lyotard. Indeed, in his very last writings, in fact, he explicitly states that he is not ‘a relativist for whom there are no ‘truths as such’ but only truths for this or that group and/or individual’ (Feyerabend 1993, xiii).³ So, although a characterisation of postmodernism in terms of relativism fits many paradigmatically postmodernist philosophers, it does not fit Feyerabend’s later, mature writings.

The second characterisation of postmodernism is perhaps the most famous, for it invokes Lyotard’s influential definition from his widely cited 1979 classic, The Postmodern Condition. In his now-famous phrasing, postmodernism expresses an ‘incredulity to metanarratives’, a remark now cited in practically every book on postmodernism and very much the motto of many self-identifying postmodernists. ‘Incredulity’ is directed towards any and all ‘grand narratives’ – like the dialectics of
Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, or the emancipation of the working subject – that serve to ‘legitimate’ a discourse or science. In a postmodern culture, such narratives are rejected in favour of an eclectic plurality of local, particular micro-narratives and petits récits (Lyotard 1984, xii and xxiv). The yearning for a single, unifying grand narrative will fade, upon realisation of their paradoxical, authoritarian, dogmatic tendencies and of the pervasive role of ‘extra-rational’ factors in scientific enquiry, say. Instead, postmodernists embrace a plurality of local, changing, ‘little narratives’ (see Sim 2011, 102-103). (Claims about the status of Nietzsche and Foucault as precursors to postmodernism are justified by their ‘genealogical’ exposure of the pudenda origo of earlier ‘grand narratives’).

Characterising postmodernism in Lyotard’s terms an active ‘incredulity to metanarratives’ resonates with stable themes in Feyerabend’s thought. Since at least the late 1950s, his calls on the philosophy of science to engage with the history and practice of science reflected hostility to grand narratives about science. The criticisms of Kuhn’s model of science and the insistence on historical case studies on a fairly small scale – such as the famous Galileo case in Against Method – were both examples. Searching for ‘grand narratives’ was prone to distract and distort, especially if it took our attention away from the complex interplays of knowledge, power, and money that shape science. In fact, Lyotard’s emphasis in The Postmodern Condition on the entanglement of science with money and power is commended by Feyerabend (1987a, 4; see Grebowicz (2005). Indeed, right up to Feyerabend’s final writings, a main reason given for adopting a ‘local, episodic’ approach is that it enables one to tell properly detailed stories about the role of myriad, murky ‘extra-scientific’ interests in science (Feyerabend 1999, 17). Indeed, this emphasis on the local and episodic is the basis for Sim’s (2013, 94) nomination of Feyerabend as a ‘key postmodernist thinker’.

But there is a further feature of Feyerabend’s philosophy that sits badly with this second characterisation of postmodernism, namely, its own commitment to a very modern legitimating narrative for science. Despite the entrenched perception of Feyerabend as a critic of science, closer attention to his writings, and due disregard for his rhetoric, shows quite the opposite. Central to his project is a deep faith in science as a source of cognitive and other goods for the amelioration of life. That is why it matters to challenge methodological rules that would stultify inquiry and to urge deep sensitivity to the history and practice of science and to defend a thoroughgoing pluralism that checks the dangers of dogmatism. Science matters because, if conceived and pursued properly, it can serve the human good—a theme made fully explicit in the neglected, early paper ‘Science, Freedom, and the Good Life’ (Feyerabend 1968). The main claim of the polemical essay, ‘How to Defend Society against Science’, is that the capacity of science to serve our needs is contingent upon it being conceived and organised for the human good (Feyerabend 1975) – an early instance of what Philip Kitcher, some twenty five years later, dubbed ‘well-ordered science’.

Translated into Lyotard’s terms, Feyerabend is clearly committed to a legitimating narrative about science as a source of goods that can and should contribute to the amelioration of human life. Crucially, this narrative is paradigmatically modern, obviously inherited from the Enlightenment, and its centrality to Feyerabend’s account of science underscores his modern, rather than post-modern, credentials. Science, on his view, ought to be conceived and respected as being ‘necessary’ not only to the pursuit of ‘objective knowledge’, but also for a ‘humanitarian outlook’ (Feyerabend 1993, 32).
I suggest that two of the more familiar characterisations of postmodernism – one in terms of relativism, the other in terms of ‘incredulity to metanarratives’ – both have only a limited capture on Feyerabend’s thought. The former sits badly with his eventual rejection of relativism, while the latter sits badly with his evident commitment to a typically ‘modern’ Enlightenment narrative about science. Though each illuminates certain aspects of Feyerabend’s relationship to postmodernism, each has its limits. I now want to consider a third characterisation, one taking its cue from that term’s use in the arts.

3. Postmodernism, art, and ‘depth’

The term ‘postmodern’ originated in a 1945 paper by an architect and within thirty years had gained wide currency in the arts – poetry, painting, photography – and also throughout literary theory, political and cultural studies, and philosophy. A deep theme of postmodern art is, ironically, its hostility to depth and this is also evident in postmodern philosophising. The rejection of ‘depth’ recurs throughout the reflective remarks of postmodernist artists. David Harvey (1989, 7) explains, in his book The Condition of Postmodernity, that their aspiration is to a ‘contrived depthlessness’ – to create art works without any ambition to reveal ‘the true nature of a unified … underlying reality’. If there is no ‘true’ underlying order to the world, then there is nothing ‘deep’ for artists to struggle and strive to ‘reveal’, no object of depth to aspire to. As one postmodernist painter explains, his art neither offers nor satisfies any ‘promise’ of any ‘deeper intellectual experience’ (Craig-Martin 2015, 83), a sentiment echoed in another’s remark that the ‘culture of modernism’ was animated by a ‘psychology organised around ideas of depth’ that the postmodern recognises as bogus: ‘there is no profundity, there are no depths, because everything occurs at the surface level’ (Wheale 1995, 53).

What emerges from these remarks, then, is a conception of the postmodern artist as free to dwell on the surfaces of things, untroubled by pretensions to ‘depth’ that stifled earlier traditions. For what is jettisoned, explains a postmodern photographer, is a classical conception of ‘representation’ of ‘a depth’ underlying ‘surface appearances’ – ‘the realm of the essential’ – that it was, once, the aim of the artist to express (quoted in Wheale 1995, 154). If what is ‘essential’ does not lie in ‘depth’, then one is free to remain at the ‘surface’, newly liberated from a ‘depth hermeneutic’ focused on a search for meaning ‘behind, within, or beyond the artwork’ (Best and Kellner 1997, 176). Think of the postmodern architectural enthusiasm for façades that deliberately fail to reveal or to reflect the interior structure of building, or the focus of postmodern painters on surfaces. In neither case do we discern an aspiration to identify or reveal any deep, underlying structure or unity – instead, one finds a ‘triumph of surface over depth’, to be experienced as an ‘escape from necessity’ (Murphet 2004, 118).

This theme of ‘depthlessness’ finds direct analogies in postmodernist philosophy, a regular target of which is the pretension to identify and articulate something ‘deep’, ‘below’ or ‘behind’ our linguistic and epistemic practices. The radical and critical character of postmodern philosophy surely owes much to his rejection of the search for grounds or foundations for our values and practices. ‘There is nothing deep down’, declares Rorty (1982, xlii), ‘except what we have put there’, where that means socially established conventions in terms of which concepts are warranted. He goes on to judge that there is no and could not be any ‘such thing as Philosophical truth … deep down beneath all the texts’ – nothing, that is, ‘against which to test vocabularies and cultures’ (Rorty 1982, xxxvii). If so, the search for Truth ought to be
abandoned, or radically reconceived. Although the theme is perhaps most explicit in Rorty’s writings, it is evident in those of many other postmodernists – especially Roland Barthes and Derrida (see their entries in Sim 2013). The complexes of moral and epistemic commitments upon which our forms of life depend are not grounded in or reflective of some objective or transcendent order. Indeed, what we do find if we look for ‘depth’ is, disturbingly, the stark fact that our ‘dominant patterns of thought … conceal beneath [themselves] their contingency’ (Crome and Williams 2006, 18). Although this need not entail the abandonment of those commitments, it does require a radical reappraisal of their status and authority. To appreciate that science is one among many ‘games’, the rules of which are ‘specific to each particular kind’, one must abandon the conviction that scientific games could have a priority or authority over others (Lyotard 1984, 19). Since affirmation of the prestige and authority of science is a central tenet of modernity, its rejection is especially characteristic of post-modern culture.

The postmodernist philosophical hostility to ‘depth’ devolves into a series of antipathies, of which I will discuss three. The first is an antipathy to universalising ambitions in favour of a plurality of local discourses, micro-narrative, reflective of the conviction, stated by Rorty (1987, 11), that what is ‘wrong with philosophy, ever since Plato [is that] it has aimed at universal ahistorical norms’. For Lyotard (1988, xi), the proper response to the localisation and particularisation of philosophy’s proper ambitions is to assume a ‘respect’ for, if not delight in, countless ‘differends’ – disputes that cannot be settled due to a lack of consensus among the involved parties about the appropriate ‘rules of judgment’ to employ. Such ‘differends’ ought to be accepted and celebrated because there is nothing ‘deep’ underlying our moral or epistemic differences that might serve to reduce or unify or explain them. The upshot is an irreducible plurality of values, beliefs, tastes, and convictions that thwart the hope for what Zygmunt Bauman (1987) called ‘legislative reason’, a set of rational principles or methods by which disputes can be resolved and instructive commands issued.

The second antipathy is to the postulation of anything ‘underlying’ our various discourses or ‘language games’. These are doubly depthless. For one thing, there is no logical structure or ‘essence of language’ of which our discourses are or may be common manifestations, so no common measure of their adequacy. Science, for instance, is not privileged in the sense that it best able to identify and describe the ‘logic’ or ‘essence’ presumed to underlie our discursive activities. In a postmodernist society, explains Rorty (1982, xxxviii), no ‘particular portion of culture’ would be ‘singled out as exemplifying … the condition to which the rest aspired’. The ‘neo-pragmatist’ society of his vision is one in which ‘neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets [would be] thought of as more “rational” or more “scientific” or “deeper” than another’ (Rorty 1982: xxxviii). Instead, different groups employ different discourses to serve their various needs – spiritual, scientific, poetic – each of which has a role, but with a capacity to rule over others. Deleuze (1998, 129) is blunter: the idea of a ‘foundation … according to which different pretenders can be judged’ is a ‘myth’, one with which the postmodernist dispenses. But the most dramatic expression of this antipathy is surely Derrida’s (1976, 158) much quoted, much-misunderstood remark that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, for we have ‘access to … “real” existence only through language’. What this means, on one reading at least, is that there is no possibility of comparing language and world since our conception of the latter is inevitably shaped by the former – there being no neutral or ‘given’ to which to appeal.
A final antipathy is to the notion of a self or subject that underlies and unifies discourses and practice, a claim dramatized by Barthes’ talk of the ‘death of the author’. The self is a ‘function’ and not the ‘agent and master’ of discourses and practices, says Derrida (1981, 28) and the ‘postmodern subject’ is one who has ‘moved [away] from … ‘depth’ models’ to the more ‘communal’ view of selves as dispersed and diffuse, constituted by and embedded in discourses and practices (Wheale 1995, 54). The image of an autonomous self that acts through, but remains independent of, creative and linguistic agency is illusory, as manifested as much in Cartesian metaphysics as the Modern and Romantic conceptions of the Artist or Author inscribing meaning into their works for their audiences to strive to correctly identify. Since the possibility of creative agency and achievement is contingent on the responses of other agents and the wider structures and contexts that make them possible, an Author or Artist is, no more and no less than any other self, less a ‘agent’ than a ‘function’.

Underlying these antipathies is the denial of any depth to language, the world, or the self. The rejection by postmodernist artists of the ‘psychology of depth’ and ‘realm of the essential’ gives a reason to reject the search for depth in artworks, just as postmodern philosophers reject the zeal for foundationalism and universalism that run through the history of the Western tradition. Indeed, those ideals require a confidence in those individual rational agents with a capacity to ‘get down’ to the foundations, and, of course, of there actually being foundations to get down to. But both those ideals and that vision of agents collapse upon recognition of the ‘absolute absence of any foundation’ (Derrida 1998, 550).

Granted, a postmodern can continue to pursue science, but not if construed as the search for truths about the world. Instead, science ought to be conceived in Lyotard’s sense as ‘games’ that are useful for ‘strategic purposes’, or in Rorty’s (1991, 39) vision of science as an exemplary ‘model of human solidarity’, to take just two. The historic, legitimating vision of science as a privileged source of truths about the world is incompatible with an embrace of depthlessness: that is why postmodernity is taken to be ‘totally unacceptable for any philosophy of science which respects science’ (Parusníková 1992:35). For any serious respect for science must, on a ‘modern’ view, rest upon its privileged epistemic status, not its social or ‘strategic’ utility in the senses urged by Rorty and Lyotard.

Postmodernism can therefore be characterised as a complex structure of antipathies that reflect a deep motif of ‘depthlessness’, in a way that honours its original use in the arts and captures general themes in postmodernist philosophy. But how well does it fit Feyerabend?

4. ‘Depthlessness’
My strategy is to ask whether Feyerabend shares the three antipathies that are characteristic of the ‘depthlessness’ theme in postmodernist art and philosophy. It is worth adding that Feyerabend was an informed enthusiast for the arts and often incorporated its history and practice into his work – an aspect of his philosophy too often neglected by commentators (an recent, honourable exception is Ambrosio 2015).

To start with, there is a clear hostility to moral and epistemic universalism running through Feyerabend’s writings. During the 1980s especially, one finds him warning that it is ‘impossible to reduce our ways of being in the world to a few … “objective” notions’ (1987b, 704) and that universalism ‘contains a totalitarian element’ (1999, 243). The attempt to inflate local values and predilections into universal norms is
both intellectually suspect and practically ruinous: imposition of ‘a collection of uniform views and practices’ means that ‘differences disappear’, in a way that ought to inspire anger and distress (1987a, 2). But at the same time, such anti-universalism is not confined to postmodernism: moral particularists and feminist theorists are likewise hostile to universalism, too. If Feyerabend’s antipathy to universalism is to be classified as postmodernist, then it must be related to the second antipathy, to the notion of something ‘underlying’ discourse.

It is not easy to determine whether Feyerabend does share this antipathy, given the changes in and complexity of his views of language (see Oberheim (2006, ch.2). But one can certainly find remarks that seem to support claims that he rejected the relevant sort of ‘depth’—for instance, that scientific ‘formulae … must be melted down’ and ‘reconnected’, not with an objective order of reality, but rather with the ‘stream of history’ (1987a, 14). Or the ambiguous warning, given in *Conquest of Abundance*, that it is ‘simply a mistake’ to judge a ‘particular manifest reality’ with ‘Ultimate Reality’ (Feyerabend 1999, 215). This could mean that no existing discourse *does* describe reality or that none ever *could*. Finally, consider the remark that a search for an articulable reality underlying our discourses necessarily terminates in ‘darkness, silence, nothingness’ (Feyerabend 1999, 233).

Certainly some commentators have interpreted Feyerabend to be espousing something like this antipathy to a depth to our discourses and practices. Robert Nola (2012, 68), for one, imputes to him the claim that our epistemic practices have ‘nothing behind them that could act as a justification of them’ – a claim that, he adds, places Feyerabend in close proximity to postmodernism. Certainly it fits the remark that scientific discourses and ‘formulae’ are limited only by the contingent ‘stream of history’ and so can be ‘melted down’ at will, constrained only by our creativity. However, a close reading of Feyerabend contradicts this interpretation.

First, despite such occasional remarks, it is clear that the idea of there being ‘grounds’ for our epistemic practices runs through all of Feyerabend’s early writings. It is there in the calls, in the 1960s, for the principles of tenacity and proliferation, and in the 1970s calls for methodological and theoretical pluralism: such normative claims were justified by a desire to maximise our cognitive contact with an objective reality, and not just to exercise our creativity and foster an attractively tolerant intellectual climate. Next, there Feyerabend’s explicit testimonies to his commitment to the idea of an objective reality—for instance, to a confidence that ‘the human mind does reach reality’, as proven by ‘the success of science’ (1987a, 14). The reality in question is in the later writings dubbed ‘Being’, the deep underlying nature of reality, with which our epistemic practices ‘interact’, with varying degrees of success (1999:196 and 238). So there is, even into the very last writings, a sense of there being an ‘abundant’ objective reality that underlies our practices and discourses.

Concerning the third antipathy, the question is, in effect, whether Feyerabend subscribed to Barthes’ obituary for the idea of an autonomous self, able to stands apart from its sundry discourses. It is, once again, easy to find passages that might seem to support an affirmative answer, including a neglected 1987 paper, ‘Creativity—A Dangerous Myth’. Its target is the ‘absurd and dangerous’ conception of artistic and scientific creativity in terms of the activities of ‘conscious and intentional’ agents. Feyerabend’s (1987b, 13) main complaint is that it obscures the fact that human agents are not autonomous but are, rather, ‘carried along’ by and ‘embedded’ in their material and social ‘surroundings’ – ones they did not create and cannot operate in isolation from. The autonomous self that is lionised by that historiographical style is an invidious myth, liable to distort our appreciation of the
essentially collective, socially situated character of human activity and achievement. A further set of potential supporting remarks are the long discussions of the classicist Bruno Snell’s ‘paratactic’ account of the nature of the self in the Homeric epics: roughly, the thesis that in those texts there is no conception of the self as an independent, autonomous agent. A character, like Achilles, is ‘decentralised’, ‘an aggregate not a whole’, composed of an unstable confluence of ‘events and abilities’, but without any underlying ‘substratum’ (Feyerabend 1999, 24-25). In these two sets of remarks, one might seek evidence that Feyerabend shared the antipathy to the self.

A closer reading of both sets of remarks shows, however, that they are not evidence for this third antipathy. In the first case, what Feyerabend judges as ‘absurd’ or ‘dangerous’ about the ‘myth’ of creativity is the operative mode of individualist historiography—for instance, of histories of art or science focused on the great leaps forward of a Lone Genius or Heroic Scientist, that undermine our appreciation of the complexity of actual practice. In the second case, it is clear that Feyerabend does not endorse Snell’s thesis. Instead, he offers it to illustrate an early and major shift in our conceptions of the nature of reality that focus on ontologies of the self.

The absence of the third antipathy from Feyerabend’s writings can be explained by the presence of a strong humanitarian theme that runs all the way through his work. Central to so much of Feyerabend’s writing is the primary importance of respecting and facilitating the freedom and development of individuals. Although this theme is not always remarked upon, it is obvious in many areas of his thought: the radiant admiration for John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty, the ardent defences of subordinated aboriginal peoples, the fulminations against dogmatism and imperialism, and his calls for educational systems that offer ‘possibilities of human existence’ (Feyerabend 1993, 264; see also Lloyd 1996 and Kidd 2013). Think of the constant talk, throughout Against Method, of the importance of ‘the free development of the individual’ and a ‘concern for individual happiness’ (Feyerabend 1993, Introduction). Indeed, at the core of the case for epistemic pluralism is a humanitarian conviction: pluralistic, ‘anarchistic’ science is better able not only to ‘discover the secrets of nature’, but also ‘increase liberty’ in the pursuit of ‘a full and rewarding life’ (Feyerabend 1993, 12).

Appreciation of the fundamentally humanitarian aims of Feyerabend’s philosophy offers the best reason for judging that it is not postmodernist. At its core is the deep conviction that science is justified – indeed, legitimated – by its capacity to contribute to the amelioration of human life. This conviction is inherited from the Enlightenment—that science can afford deep truths about the world whose pursuit and attainment contribute to a life that is ‘full and rewarding’. Recall, in fact, that the reason Feyerabend criticised deconstructionism and postmodernism was that each had gone too far, eroding the authority of science and reason and so jeopardising their humanitarian roles. Since these humanitarian concerns are central to Feyerabend’s philosophy and fundamentally modern in origins, they give our best reason for denying that he is, except in superficial respects, postmodern.

5. Conclusions
The question of Feyerabend’s relationship to postmodernism matters because answers to it affect how we understand his aims and concerns. I considered three characterisations of postmodernism and concluded that none of them justify classifying him within its ranks. Indeed, what did emerge is a deeply modern
conviction: that science is legitimated by its distinctive capacity to advance humanitarian aims. It is a conclusion likely to disappoint those eager to classify Feyerabend as a postmodernism, whether by way of praise or by scorn. But it should come as a comfort to those who correctly perceive him as a defender of science, construed as a powerful resource for the amelioration of human life.

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References


Notes

1 Norris (1997) is a good example of someone who places Feyerabend in proximity to postmodernism, but does not classify him as postmodernist.
2 This point is made by John Preston (1998:245-256), when commenting on a description of John Dupré’s work as postmodernist by virtue, in part, of its epistemic and ontological pluralism.
3 See, especially the ‘Postscript on Relativism’ in the third edition of Against Method.
4 Nola and Irzik (2003) offer a more sustained critique of Lyotard’s remarks on science in The Postmodern Condition.
5 This theme is particular clear in Feyerabend (1993, chs. 11 and 14).
6 The characterization of postmodernism in terms of ‘depthlessness’ is developed by Cooper (1993) and (2008), on whose account I draw liberally.
7 This third antipathy was proposed by Solomon (1988) as a major theme of Continental philosophy, with roots going back at least to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.
8 The nature of ‘Being’ and its relationship to our epistemic and linguistic activities is explored by Brown (2015), Kidd (2016b), and Tambolo (2014).
9 Compare Rouse’s (1996) view that the subject is as much a part of the system as anything else.
10 Many classicists are sceptical about Snell’s thesis, something that Feyerabend was either unaware of, or failed to mention. See Clark (2000, 251f).