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## Special Issue

### Paul Feyerabend and the History and Philosophy of Science

#### The Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation: In Line with Paul's Work?

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#### Abstract:

The document identifies two central themes in Paul K. Feyerabend's work and discusses their alignment with the humanitarian activities of the Feyerabend Foundation. The first theme emphasises the abundance of life and pluralism – the proliferation of worldviews, cultures and methods that make life meaningful for different people, as opposed to unique, dogmatic views of “truth” and “reality”. This is in line with the Foundation's support for cultural and biological diversity and community self-determination. The second element (“Every culture is potentially all cultures”) highlights the shared human nature and capacity for compassion that unite us beyond our cultural differences. This is consistent with the Foundation promoting community solidarity and addressing the root causes of social injustice. Interrupting this virtuous convergence, an unexpected postscript reveals how both Paul Feyerabend's ideas and the genuine humanitarianism of the Feyerabend Foundation remain politically sensitive today and may, more than ever, be the subject of shameless attacks.

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I don't usually participate in discussions about Paul's work. I didn't even do so during his centenary year because I have little to say on the subject from a professional point of view... and I am also very *biased* towards him. But I am happy to offer some thoughts on the link between Paul's work and the objectives of the Foundation established in his name.

The Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation is not concerned with the history or philosophy of science, but supports concrete initiatives to improve the lives of some very disadvantaged communities. Each year, it also awards a prize to individuals or communities that have worked in an exemplary manner towards the same goal. Would Paul be happy with this work?

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Considering this question today, thirty years after his departure from the planet, I remember how he emphasised that ideas and abstract thinking can diminish and even suffocate the abundance of life that surrounds us, how he recommended staying close to the experience, knowledge and concrete needs of people. Rather than dispensing arrogant descriptions of “truth” or “reality”, he preferred to tell stories, describe complexities, ask questions, and reveal the unexpected *humour* hidden in the details. Paul was reclusive and sometimes brusque, but also genuinely kind. He was no saint, but when asked, he would help people he knew to make their lives more pleasant or less difficult. He couldn't stand clingy people and name-droppers, but he didn't dispense solutions to anyone... Would he have disliked the idea of a humanitarian Foundation?

On the centenary of his birth, reflecting on this question led me to think that **two themes in Paul's work** are particularly relevant to the Foundation dedicated to his name. The **first theme** is that of **the abundance of life** that surrounds us, which many tend to reduce to a more or less drab sense of “reality”. To counter this “reduction of abundance”, Paul embraced **pluralism and diversity**. He promoted a **proliferation of methods, ideas, theories, viewpoints and traditions**, and favoured relationships of **mutual curiosity, respect and dialogue**. In fact, whatever we believe to be *real* and important in life – whether it be the laws of physics, being a member of god's chosen people, accumulating personal wealth, or relating to others in a peaceful and mutually enriching way – this is not the only possible understanding. If we accept that there are **many different beliefs about what is real and relevant in the world**, that these support **many different ways of living**, and that these **make sense and make life satisfying for many different people...** it is easy, at first, to feel distressed, perhaps even disoriented... but we can then also perceive a sense of liberation. All right, our view of what exists is not the only *valid* one. And, most likely, it is not even the only one that can be said to be *true*. So: should we close ourselves off or try to understand, perhaps even appreciate, perspectives other than the one we hold dear and which helps us to live?

It is true that everything that exists – what Paul called “Being” – is not equally compatible with *all* beliefs, interpretations, narratives and ways of living... but “Being” **supports and responds to many approaches, rather than just one**. We all know people who have *strange* ideas (i.e. very different from our own), behave *strangely* and live in a world of *their own*. Yet they manage to get on reasonably well. I know people who believe in a pantheon of gods with trunks, tails and often six or eight arms, are very effective at what they do, and deeply kind and respectful of others. I know others, at the top of university careers in the highly industrialised countries that believe to be a model for everyone else... who are unable to hold calm conversations and do support criminal political positions. I am inclined to think that these people live in different worlds... but who could say that one is more *real* than the other, or more important, or more humane? By reading some of Paul's work but, most of all, by being close to him during years, I began to understand that **different approaches to “Being” – for example, different approaches to scientific research or different narratives and worldviews – influence “Being” itself** (what we perceive as “the world” or “reality”), **and certainly influence our lives**. Different approaches may be more or less useful in achieving the goals set by those who practise them or articulate their narratives. But the results of research and the narratives imposed on us – through school, military service, catechism or daily news – contribute to influencing us all in many ways... they make us unhappy or satisfied, benevolent or criminal.

I believe that two consequences arise from these considerations. First, if a diversity of approaches to “Being” is possible and effective in sustaining the livelihoods and lives of each of us, we should ask ourselves why we should accept the opinions of those who emphatically tell us that they know the *truth* (e.g., scientists, priests, politicians, or development experts...). It is certainly wise and appropriate to take their opinions into account, but it is also important to live in a world that is appropriate, relevant and important to us or, in Paul's

words, “**a world that makes sense to us**”. And this should not only apply to ourselves and our worldview. It seems to me that Paul encourages **appreciation** and **respect for all ways of living** that make life possible and sustainable for different human communities in different circumstances. This is a sincere and non-condescending appreciation of the variety of cultures and traditions that offer different ways of understanding “reality”, “truth”, “nature”, “the meaning of existence”, “well-being”, “progress”, “development”, and so on... As stated by Aimé Césaire (1950), the violent erasure of cultures that have suffered colonialism has greatly *impoverished* the world. And this ongoing erasure, this ongoing impoverishment, is at the heart of our societies – disenchanted (à la Weber), globalised (à la Thatcher) and ostensibly unipolar (à la Trump). They even find themselves in paradoxical situations, such as culturally imposing identity politics, militarily imposing democratic systems, or imposing censorship in intimate and ruthless ways... while, of course, boasting free speech.

Not all opinions and points of view carry the same weight or have the same consequences. Some thrive on weapons and wars, misery and divisions, racism and theft, the destruction of nature and the misery of others. Paul loved the Dada movement, which openly rebelled against the stupidity and insensitivity of the powers that had fuelled and provoked the First World War, causing millions of deaths and endless misery. In line with the Dada movement, **Paul could not stand those who pontificate** from the height of their own presumption and ignorance, nor those who seek to convince and herd others in **dogmatic, inflexible and humourless** ways. Yet... if not all points of view and ways of life are equally valuable, how can we distinguish between beliefs and actions that should be kept in check and those that deserve support and prosperity?

This question offers a point of access to the **second theme** I would like to highlight in Paul's work, which is only apparently in opposition to the first. It is the understanding, in Paul's words (1999), that “**every culture is potentially all cultures**”... which leads me to think that different cultural manifestations are based on a shared human nature, that which unites and binds us all. Paul discusses this concept in the context of his latest analysis on relativism, to overcome the idea that “cultures” are incommensurable systems, closed in on themselves and virtually incapable of interacting and communicating. For me, the idea resonates most with the *empathy* I sometimes feel towards suffering human beings, what some call compassion. I remember once finding myself suddenly crying simply from seeing on television a mother whose helpless son was being dragged away by a group of soldiers. There was no sound... but just seeing her suffering made me feel **with** her, made me understand and immediately share her anguish.

If we eliminate the myriad preferences, mental patterns and interpretations of the world that each of us has, I believe that what inevitably remains is our shared human nature. We may have different hierarchies of values and interpretations of personal behaviour and political events, but we all know what it means to be hungry, sick and cold, or to feel relaxed breathing fresh air in a peaceful natural environment. Of course, we have no way of comparing these feelings and saying that they are exactly the same for all of us, but we can assume that they are at least *similar*. In other words, we can assume a certain closeness between all of us human beings, since we all have bodies, we are all born, we all grow up, we all grow old, we all suffer, we all feel pleasure and affection, we all feel pain, we all heal, and we will all die. Within the vast boundaries of our personal freedom and differences, we can recognise a **fundamental unity between us all**, and also a feeling – not a rational thought, but a feeling – that it is good to lighten the lives of others, to be compassionate towards them, to be *with* them and not against them. For the luckiest among us, I believe this sense of unity can extend to the world of animals, plants, life in general, the entire universe.

This unity with other human beings, and perhaps also with nature in general, can be the **cornerstone of a sense of morality**. In my view, it encourages us all to empathise with others and, in essence, to respect life – in ourselves, in other human beings, in the rest of

nature. This is certainly not a new discovery. The principle is common to some religions and also to people who do not identify with any religion or belief but find comfort and a certain peace of mind in feeling connected to life in a broad sense. The idea also paves the way for political behaviour that is tolerant and pluralistic, but which does not allow the interests and worldview of a specific group or culture to hinder, violate or destroy the livelihoods of others, nor the worldviews that make sense to them. The concept of “self-determination” most concisely summarises this understanding. Self-determination is fully enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the International Court of Justice... even if in practice it is regularly ignored and disregarded.

The two themes I mentioned – the abundance of life and the understanding that “every culture is potentially all cultures” – are dealt with by Paul in *Conquest of Abundance* (1999) and *Farewell to Reason* (1987). But the easiest way to approach these themes is through his *Autobiography* (1995), which recounts how they emerged in his life relatively late, as a secondary result of his relationships with others, and not as a result of abstract reasoning, rational arguments, or attempts to articulate principles and ideas. For Paul, the development of something akin to a **moral character and ethos** was a **by-product of feeling close to other human beings** through personal relationships... acceptance, friendship, love.

Based on the two themes and attitudes just mentioned, I sincerely hope that the **Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation** is **in line with** Paul's **ethos**. The Foundation was formally established under Swiss law in 2006. The co-founders were a group of friends and colleagues who, twenty years on, have remained good friends and colleagues (no small feat!) and are still members of the Board of Directors. The Foundation was born after a long gestation period, during which we were involved in other ways in helping people who were less fortunate than us in material terms, but certainly no less capable of managing their own lives in particularly difficult circumstances. One of our most inspiring co-founders is sadly no longer with us, but some younger colleagues have joined us since then. From the outset, we chose to **focus on communities rather than individuals**, because we believed that communities were **stronger in confronting** the power structures that perpetuate **injustice** in the world. And we **rejected the idea of charity**, which can provide “aid” without any commitment to fundamental change on the part of either the giver or the receiver. Instead, we sought to **embrace solidarity**, involving the Foundation with its “beneficiaries” to understand together and seek to eliminate the causes of the problems.

For twenty years, the Feyerabend Foundation has done its utmost to **help disadvantaged communities** understand for themselves what they need and what they want and can do – through **internal solidarity** and **solidarity with others** – to combat injustice, promote their own well-being and respect the diversity of life. The Foundation's guiding principles are therefore **community, solidarity, justice and diversity** (e.g., cultural and biological diversity). All these concepts are in line with the two themes of Paul's work that I mentioned above. On the one hand, the foundation therefore supports **the diversity and abundance that make life worth living**. For example, it promotes self-determination in the territories where communities of different cultures live, who wish to continue to express themselves in different languages and behave according to their own worldviews. On the other hand, it fosters solidarity and justice, seeking to elevate the **sense of “one human nature” that unites and connects us all**. It therefore facilitates thinking together, working together and benefiting together from the results achieved.

Going against the mainstream – on the existence of a single scientific method or on the normalised attitudes of selfishness, political conformism and acceptance of prevailing militarism – is another way in which the Foundation's **ethos** connects with Paul's work. Personally, I like to remember his deep disgust for arrogance, racism and violence, from gratuitous self-aggrandisement to state apartheid and genocidal behaviour, which we unfortunately encounter daily on social media today. I remember his desire to be close to people's experiences and needs, contributing something positive, however small, but in line



with what people themselves want and consider valuable. I remember his sincere appreciation for what everyone has to offer, each from a different perspective and life experience. He often conveyed the feeling, more through his behaviour than his words, that being free is essential to well-being, but that there is absolutely no need to proselytise or try to “liberate” others. On the other hand, he also admired the Paul Robesons of this world, people dedicated to political and human solidarity, ready to play and create art and beauty, but also to work hard for justice and the well-being of all.

In line with the above, I believe it is right for me to commit time, energy and resources to keeping the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation alive, and I know that other members of the Foundation's Board feel similarly. At the time of writing, nothing is more urgent than **exposing the racism, corruption and militarism that deeply permeate our societies**. We can only do this by realising that racism, corruption and militarism are supported by those politicians and media that, in flagrant “human ignorance”, continue to lie, cajole everyone and pursue their own interests while despising and destroying the nature, culture, well-being and lives of so many others. Paul's appreciation for history and the abundance of life, his ability to think outside the box and his gentle invitation to perceive our common humanity seem to me more necessary today than ever before.

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In September 2024, an early English version of my article ended as above and was sent to a few colleagues who had requested it. Today, in September 2025, I am forced to add a different conclusion. The Feyerabend Foundation is being forced to dissolve. At the end of 2024, the Swiss bank we had been working with for years announced that it was to close all our accounts within a few weeks. The letter did not give any reason for this and did not even mention that we had been under the meticulous control of the Swiss Foundation Auditing Authority for twenty years. Even more astonishingly, when we tried to open accounts at other banks, we were refused – clear evidence of the existence of lists of “undesirable” customers shared among all Swiss banks. The only reason we can imagine for ending up on such a list is the fact that we have always worked with difficult countries (Palestine, Guatemala, Myanmar, Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Colombia...) and have never hidden the political violence faced by some of the communities that received our very modest aid. I invite each of you reading this article to visit the Foundation's website ([www.pkfeyerabend.org](http://www.pkfeyerabend.org)) and read the articles (available in English, French and Spanish) describing all the initiatives and awards decided by the Foundation's Board over the years, and in the fateful 2024 in particular. These have never been trivial initiatives and awards, but are all more than valid according to goals confirmed as being of public utility in Switzerland, and do respond to the values of pluralism and humanity which, we continue to believe, are the hallmark of Paul's work.

The Foundation's Board has not given up. With the help of another Swiss humanitarian Foundation much larger than ours, we have completed the support to the projects that were underway. We have also established an Association under Swiss law that will continue the work of the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation and maintain its website and network of Nominators. Like many others who rebel against the rampant stupidity and crime and try to channel some funds to respond to it (see: Salt Cube Analytics 2025), we are deeply affected. But we are not defeated, and we do not feel alone. If you would like to know more, if you would like to help, and if you think that you as well may need to protect yourself and your initiatives, I am adding a couple of interesting websites to the list of references.

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