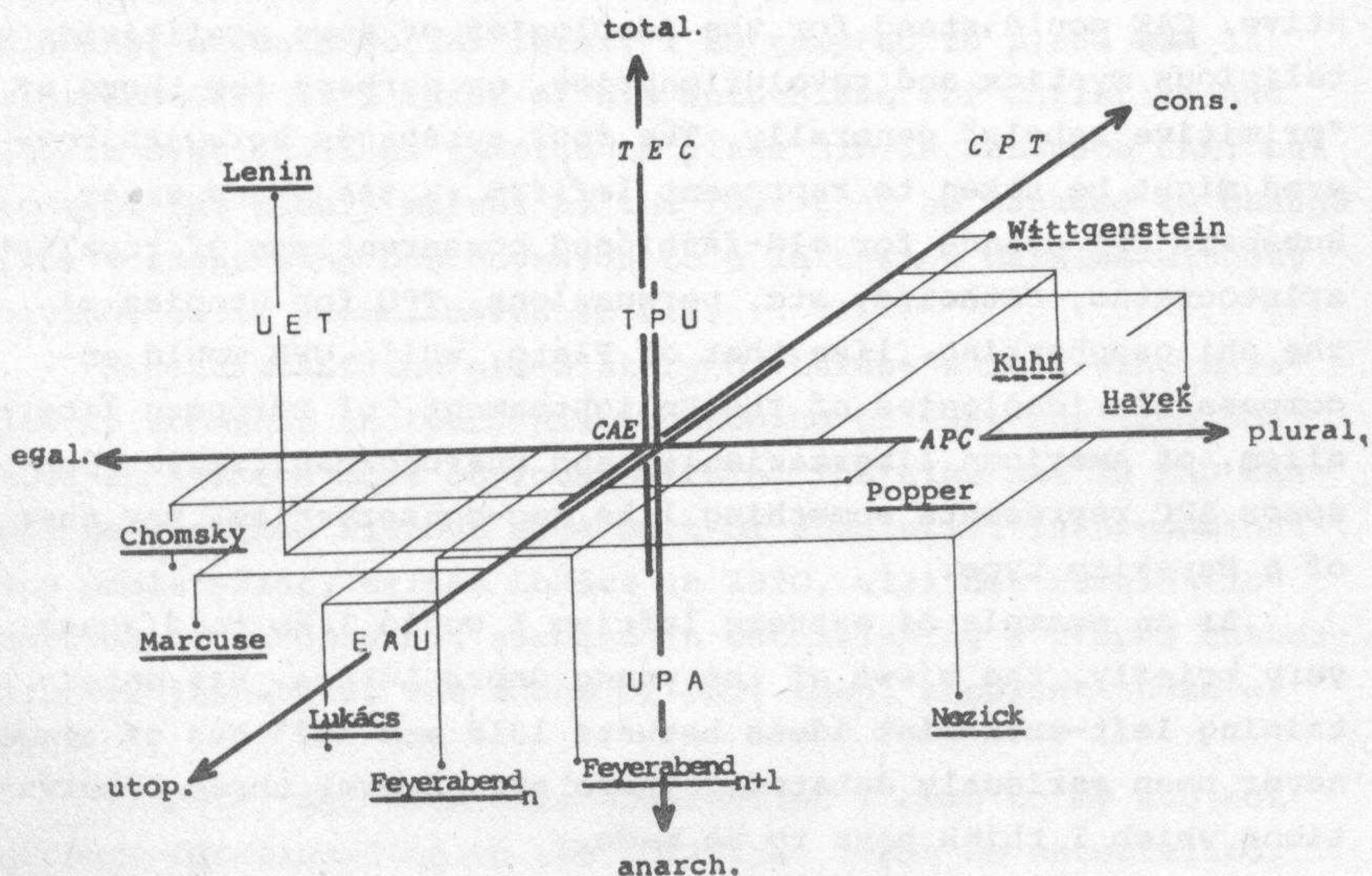


THE PITFALLS OF LEFT-WING EPISTEMOLOGY: ANARCHY VS. SCIENTIFIC METHOD*

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Let us begin by making two assumptions. The first assumption is that the labels "Left" and "Right", as applied to political ideas, are generally useful, or at least make sense more often than not.¹ The second assumption is simply that it is profitable to distinguish between *varieties* of Left and Right. An array of such varieties might conveniently be suggested by something like the following diagram:



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The diagram shows a space of possible political views - norms and convictions -, tentatively divided into eight, partly overlapping, subspaces, along the dimensions of *equality*, *freedom*, and *social change*, or along the vectors *egalitarian*, *totalitarian*, *pluralist*, *anarchist*, *conservative*, and *utopian*. Now this diagram is, mathematically speaking, a joke, since it allows for no *numerical* values (except for the value zero, of which it has no less than five), and is made up by vectors presumably not independent of each other. Still, it does convey a picture. Using this diagram, I suggest that the notion "Left-Wing", in its usual sense of *extreme leftism* - this is the sense Lenin attached to the term² - is captured by the vectors egalitarian, anarchist, and utopian, or represented by the subspace EAU. Bolshevik type communism seems to constitute a move in the direction of subspace UET, with Stalin perhaps even a move towards TEC, although of course in the latter case it is political practice, not ideology, that strikes one as being conservative. CAE could stand for the ideologies of some egalitarian religious mystics and revolutionaries, or perhaps for those of "primitive rebels" generally. The four subspaces herewith covered might be taken to represent *leftism in the broad sense*. Subspace CPT stands for old-fashioned conservatisms of royalist, aristocratic, catholic, etc. persuasions, TPU for utopias of the philosopherking, like that of Plato, while UPA would encompass the ideologies of the Enlightenment, of European liberalism, of American libertarianism and anarcho-capitalism. Subspace APC represents something like neo-conservatism, say that of a Hayekian type.

As an example of extreme leftism I would like to discuss, very briefly, the views of the young Georg Lukács. His entertaining left-extremist ideas between 1919 and 1923 has of course never been seriously debated.³ There are however three observations which I think have to be made.

First, that already *before* 1919 - by 1914, or even earlier - all the essentials of the EUA position have indeed been present in Lukács's thinking. The stress on the merely apparent objectivity of the socially given - on the "formations", *Gebil-*

de, as he called them, the bourgeois state being his most notable example - this stress is fully there in Lukács's Dostoevski notes, written in 1914-15⁴; the critique of alienation, with its identification of *Entfremdung* and *Vergegenständlichung*, is fully anticipated in the notion of *Seelenwirklichkeit*, i.e. the notion of an individual soul unfettered by social forms, institutions; the ideal of a morality uncontaminated by existing norms is implied by his early distinction between "1st" and "2nd" ethics, i.e. between "Pflichten den Gebilden gegenüber" and "Imperative der Seele"⁵, and indeed by his endorsement of *terrorism* as an ethical possibility - in the sense of 2nd ethics of course. If we add the notion (put forward in the Dostoevski notes) of an "ethical democracy", which of course doesn't mean democracy in the political sense, it becomes quite difficult to say *wherein* the transition of Lukács from his pre-Marxist to the Marxist stage consisted. If I think of the introductory passages in *Die Theorie des Romans*, of Lukács's yearning for binding, organic social forms, I am tempted to place him in subspace CPT; if I think of his enthusiasm for Christian and Jewish mystics, I am tempted to place him in subspace CAE; but most of the time I marvel at the fact that he managed to change from a right-wing Dostoevskian to a left-wing Marxist without having, so it seems, moved at all.

Secondly: If the pre-history of Lukács's left-wing Marxism is somewhat unclear, his abandoning of that position follows an all the more obvious pattern. The aims set in EAU cannot be realized without some sort of absolutist intervention: the proletariat, writes Lukács in 1920, will not remain victorious if it does not succeed in establishing a proper authority for its state. The ideas of UET, then, supplant those of EAU.

Thirdly, and with this observation I come to my subject proper: Corresponding to the political ideas he entertained, the young Lukács held some specific epistemological views. I am not suggesting that the latter did in fact underlie the former, rather I believe, without trying to prove it, that the former were the source of the latter. I *do* maintain however

that there *was* a loose logical connection between the two sets of ideas, in the sense that it would have been *implausible* for Lukács to uphold his political views without at the same time endorsing something like the epistemological ones in question. This is *not* how Lukács, in retrospect, viewed the matter. In the 1962 Foreword to *Die Theorie des Romans* he chides himself for combining, in the period in question, left-wing ethics with a "right-wing" epistemology, his message obviously being that the combination was a theoretically unsound one. Comparing the relevant, rather unclear, passage with the 1967 Foreword to *History and Class Consciousness*, it emerges that what according to Lukács was *missing* here is *realism*: left-wing epistemology would, then, consist in the view that cognition is guided by, indeed is a mirroring of, some objective reality. Now it is certainly the case that the young Lukács did not hold a realist epistemology: but I do not think that realism is particularly left-wing. *Lenin* was an epistemological realist, and he criticized Bogdanov for not being one. Bogdanov, he thought, was left-wing, and his epistemology was a Machian anarchism. Similarly, I would say, Lukács's notion of the proletariat as the identical subject-object - the subject which by coming to know itself in the course of its revolutionary practice comes also to know, indeed to penetrate and *form*, its object, namely society⁶ - is an anarchist notion and is left-wing: while Lukács's earlier idea that only the individual soul, untouched by social forms, possesses a "metaphysical reality"⁷, is an anarchist idea without being specifically left-wing or right-wing.

I believe by now I have set the stage for saying that it does indeed often make sense to attach political labels to epistemological positions. Such labeling has of course always been widespread. I am citing some current examples. Thus Wittgenstein's philosophy of language had been called "conservative" by Ernest Gellner⁸, and both Wittgenstein and the historian of science T.S. Kuhn have been labeled "undemocratic", "authoritarian", and "elitist" by Imre Lakatos. His *own* philosophy of science, maintains Lakatos, and that of Karl Popper is "democratic", whereas that of Feyerabend is "anarchist".⁹ The

label Feyerabend himself had chosen is "epistemological anarchism", but his attempts to differentiate between "epistemological" and "political" anarchism are half-hearted, to say the least.¹⁰ I contend that Feyerabend's epistemology does indeed harmonize with political anarchism, and that, for instance, his yearning for a non-alienated science¹¹ is markedly left-wing. In like manner, both Wittgenstein's and Kuhn's views, even if the above-quoted labels are unhappily chosen, do in fact have implications for political philosophy, just as Popper's "critical rationalism" is both a social philosophy and a philosophy of science, Hayek's liberalism both an economic theory and a theory of knowledge, and Chomsky's rationalism both a science and an ideology. Thus I do not think I have committed a methodological blunder by placing epistemologies and political philosophies in one and the same space. And I am in a position now to put forward my thesis, or rather to *convey an impression*: the impression being that in the light of present-day theoretical discussions anarchist epistemology - and, by implication, left-wing epistemology - does just not seem to be tenable.

Epistemology is of course a hazy enterprise. But at two levels at least it becomes quite hard-boiled, the two levels being the philosophy of science and educational theory. The former possesses a solid empirical basis in the body and history of scientific knowledge; the latter is liable to solid empirical refutation, since the errors it produces are much too tangible to be overlooked. In the philosophy of science, as we all know, *inductivism* is a thing of the past: as Karl Popper has shown, observations by themselves will never yield a theory. But Popper's *deductivism* is a thing of the past, too: as both Feyerabend and Kuhn have shown, theories, in the history of science, are practically never abandoned, conceived as being falsified, merely because some empirical implications deduced from them have been proved wrong. Scientific revolutions cannot be explained by the logic of refutation alone. Now in suggesting alternative explanations, Feyerabend stresses individual irrationality, indeed personal whim¹², whereas Kuhn, in developing the truly revolutionary notion of *normal science*, under-

scores the need for *rigid traditions* within particular scientific groups. In the absence of such traditions, Kuhn very convincingly shows, scientific innovation is neither structurally nor psychologically possible.¹³

This view has immediate consequences for educational theory. As Kuhn points out, scientific progress is, at least in the basic sciences, *not* achieved by "liberal" education, by encouraging "divergent" thinking.¹⁴ And we can add that, at the elementary level, *all* learning seems to require a measure of external rigidity. It was Wittgenstein who, in his so-called later philosophy, has explored the reasons for this, and it is significant that an elementary spelling book, his *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen* (1926) was the prelude to that philosophy.¹⁵ In spelling, as in elementary mathematics, Wittgenstein believed in authoritarian teaching methods. That these beliefs, rooted in sentiment but based on analysis, were far from being erroneous, to-day clearly emerges from a number of educational surveys and reports.¹⁶

Current West-German perceptions are especially instructive. There, in the early 1970's, it has been declared that "broadening of linguistic competence" should supplant "training in the norms of 'standard German'" in general and the "learning of orthography" in particular. The results, as the progressive weekly SPIEGEL tells us¹⁷, are by now catastrophic. The ability of young Germans to write correctly, to read, and indeed to express themselves, has deteriorated drastically. And what sort of democracy is this, asks the SPIEGEL, where citizens are not capable of articulating their views? That *progress* has not been served well by the epistemology of extreme leftism, seems, in this case, to have been proved beyond all reasonable doubt.

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Notes

1. Although not at all natural, this assumption is, as far as the present-day scene goes, substantiated by empirical surveys, such as public opinion polls, and by conceptual investigations based on them. Cf. e.g. D. Murphy et al., "Haben 'links' und 'rechts' noch Zukunft?", *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 1984/4. Note however that my own present analysis of the concepts Left and Right sharply diverges from that of Murphy et al.
2. In his well-known pamphlet "'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder". Petty-bourgeois revolutionarism, says here Lenin, smacks of anarchism, is incapable of discipline, flees into fantasy, is unable to understand the need for a strictly objective estimate of the class forces and their interrelations. "The ... 'Lefts' in general ... argue like doctrinaire revolutionaries ... who have naively mistaken the subjective 'rejection' of a certain reactionary institution for its actual destruction by the combination of a number of objective factors." (V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947, vol.II, p. 603.) In particular, Lenin refers to "the pompous, very learned, and frightfully revolutionary disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions (*ibid.*, p. 593), contrasting this attitude with the Bolshevik adherence to iron discipline, unity of will, and absolute centralisation. Only by such adherence, maintains Lenin, will the successful transformation of the whole society become possible. "The dictatorship of the proletariat", he writes, "is a persistent struggle - bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative - against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit of millions and tens of millions is a most terrible force." (*Ibid.*, p. 589.)
3. Looking back on his one-time self, Lukács speaks of his adherence to an "abstrakt-utopische Richtung", of "messianisch-utopische Zielsetzungen" and "schroff antibürokratische Tendenzen" (cf. his Introduction to the 1968 edition of *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, Neuwied: Luchterhand, pp. 14f.). Referring to the journal *Kommunismus*, whose policies, in the early 1920's, he actively influenced, he remarks: "Unsere Zeitschrift wollte dem messianistischen Sektierertum damit dienen daß sie in allen Fragen die allerradikalsten Methoden ausarbeitete, daß sie auf jedem Gebiet einen totalen Bruch mit allen aus der bürgerlichen Welt stammenden Institutionen, Lebensformen etc. verkündete." (*Ibid.*, pp. 15f.) And occasional disclaimers notwithstanding (e.g.: "Es handelt sich hier keineswegs um anarchistische Illusionen oder Utopien", *ibid.* p. 437 [1920], the retrospective evaluation is fully borne out by the relevant texts.

4. See Georg Lukács, *Dostojewski: Motizen und Entwürfe*, ed. by J.C. Nyiri, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985.
5. Cf. K.A. Kutzbach, ed., *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács: Dokumente einer Freundschaft*, Emsdetten: 1974, p. 74.
6. See in particular the essay "Die Verdinglichung und das Bewußtsein des Proletariats" in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* [1923].
7. *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács*, p. 73.
8. See his *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology*, London: 1959, esp. pp. 196ff. and 214f. - For a more sympathetic discussion of Wittgenstein in terms of conservatism, see my papers "Wittgenstein's New Traditionalism", *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, vol.28, nos.1-3 [1976], and "Wittgenstein 1929-1931: Die Rückkehr", *KODIKAS/CODE - Ars Semeiotica* 4-5/2 [1982], pp. 115-136.
9. See his "Understanding Toulmin", in Imre Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, vol.2, pp. 225ff.
10. See esp. his *Against Method: Outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge* [1975], London: Verso, 1982, pp. 187ff.
11. See Paul Feyerabend, "Consolations for the Specialist", in I. Lakatos - A. Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge, 1970, p. 228.
12. The true hero of the history of science *as it really happened* is, according to Feyerabend, the epistemological anarchist, he whose "aims remain stable, or change as a result of argument, or of boredom, or of a conversion experience, or to impress a mistress, and so on. ... There is no view, however 'absurd' or 'immoral', he refuses to consider or to act upon, and no method is regarded as indispensable. The one thing he opposes positively and absolutely are universal standards, universal laws, universal ideas such as 'Truth', 'Reason', 'Justice', 'Love' and the behaviour they bring along... ... Underneath all this outrage lies his conviction that man will cease to be a slave and gain a dignity that is more than an exercise in cautious conformism only when he becomes capable of stepping outside the most fundamental categories and convictions, including those which allegedly make him human". *Against Method*, pp. 189 and 191.
13. See ch. III of his classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and esp. the paper "The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research" [1959], in his *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977.

14. "The Essential Tension", pp. 226ff.
15. "Only a dictionary", wrote Wittgenstein in his Preface, "makes it possible to hold the student completely responsible for the spelling of what he has written because it furnishes him with reliable measures for finding and correcting his mistakes, provided he has a mind to do so." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*, ed. by A. Hübner et al., Wien: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1977, p. XXXI.
16. Cf. e.g. Neville Bennett, *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress*, London: Open Books, 1976.
17. "Den Reformern ging es nicht nur darum, die unterschiedlichen Ausgangspositionen auszugleichen zwischen Schülern, die aus einfachem Hause kamen, und anderen, die einem sprachlich besser ausgestatteten Milieu entstammten - ein erstrebenswertes Ziel. Nicht nur der manchmal aberwitzige Drill sollte abgeschafft werden, der Stumpfsinn, der oft die Deutschstunde beherrschte. - Dem Entwurf war auch zu entnehmen, daß diese "Hochsprache" bisland stets eine Gruppensprache gewesen ist, die als verbindliche Sprache durchgesetzt und bei der Schichtung der Gesellschaft als Mittel zur Stabilisierung dieser Schichtung benutzt worden ist'. ... Zum höheren Bildungsgut", runs the SPIEGEL's mocking quote, "zählt seit jenen Tagen die 'Erweiterung der Fähigkeit, sich in umgangssprachlicher Kommunikation als realer Sprecher-Hörer mit anderen zu verständigen'." *Der Spiegel*, July 9, 1984.