

Where values, politics, science and technology meet

As the School's Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science (CPNSS) celebrates its 10th anniversary, Nancy Cartwright, FBA, looks to the future.



Left to right: Professor John Worrall, Dr Helena Cronin, Professor Nancy Cartwright and Max Steuer discuss CPNSS research projects

Philosophy is not an ivory tower activity at LSE. Staff in the CPNSS work at the heart of issues facing society today. It is an applied discipline, with a critical role in addressing problems as diverse as homelessness, physical and emotional disability, male violence, medical ethics, drug abuse, the funding of science and new reproductive technologies.

The Centre has been celebrating its 10th anniversary this year with a series of public events, including lectures by distinguished practitioners on the future of the sciences – the Director Anthony Giddens on social science, John Maynard Smith on biological science, Malcolm Longair on physics – and a Popper Debate on the *Public Understanding of Science: how to put science in a museum*. The series ends on 26 June with a lecture by the philosopher and Lakatos Award winner Elliott Sober of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, entitled *Demystifying Simplicity*.

But what of the day-to-day work of the Centre? Its principal aim is to study interdisciplinary methodology – bringing together researchers from across London and elsewhere to investigate and develop methods that can link disparate disciplines for a unified attack on contemporary social, political, scientific and engineering problems. This work builds on a long LSE tradition of study in the methodology and philosophy of the natural and social sciences –

that of Karl Popper, FA Hayek, Lionel Robbins, James Durbin, Amartya Sen, Imre Lakatos and many others. The Centre is also well-known both for its intensive specialist seminars and for its lectures for wider audiences, from a wide range of talks on the public understanding of science to the highly successful Darwin Seminars, about which we frequently hear comments like: 'This is quite simply the best seminar series that I have ever attended.'

Promoting the activities of the Centre is a group of distinguished Centre Research Associates. They include three Nobel Prize winners: Amartya Sen (economics), Maurice Wilkins (biology) and Willis Lamb (physics). In addition there are Fellows of the Royal Society, such as John Maynard Smith, and Fellows of the British Academy, including Jeremy Butterfield, Sir Michael Dummett, Michael Redhead, Richard Sorabji, and myself.

This year the Centre is also launching a major appeal. The objective is to provide a secure financial footing for continuing our research, above all for three projects that lie at the heart of our work on social problems. These are:

- **Darwin@LSE.** This programme was established in 1995 to explore recent developments in evolutionary thinking, in particular what Darwin's theory can tell us about human nature – understanding our bodies, brains, minds, consciousness, behaviour and aspects of culture as the result of adaptations evolved by natural selection. We now need to find permanent

funding for both the research and the public information initiatives.

- **Philosophy, Policy and Social Value.** LSE's Department of Philosophy has recently introduced an MSc designed specifically for policy makers and advisers. We aim to establish a chair in Philosophy, Policy and Social Value to ensure a permanent place for teaching and research in the foundations of effective decision making, where values, politics, science and technology meet.

- **MISE (Methods for the Integration of Scientific Enquiry).** Staff at CPNSS have been running a number of highly focused projects on specific problems we face in integrating scientific and technological knowledge. It is now time to aim for a set of general methods for integration, and to tackle questions of how to combine technical knowledge with political and ethical concerns and with practical social policy. Such methods might be applied to a variety of problems, from matters of the environment and health, to education and the conditions for economic growth.

Ten years have passed very quickly, and very successfully. We are hoping for another prosperous decade. ■



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