

'A short wiry man, with immense energy, a sharp tongue and an incisive wit, he soon became a major figure in the life of the School'

A 24 hour a day intellectual

This year the School renamed Tymes Court as the Lakatos Building. **John Worrall** explains more about the man behind the name.

Karl Popper's seminars at LSE in the 1950s and 60s retain a worldwide reputation for intellectual rough-and-tumble. Popper scarcely ever allowed a speaker, no matter how eminent, to get more than ten minutes into his or her paper before attempting to demonstrate the benefits of his critical approach to philosophy. They were also known for feisty and angular seminarians, many of whom went on themselves to build major reputations. But this 'School of Hard Knocks' had no more distinguished or charismatic a graduate than Imre Lakatos.

Lakatos became a regular attendee at Popper's seminars in the late 1950s. Although then registered for a (second) PhD at Cambridge (the seminar was very much open to all – interesting – comers), Lakatos was no standard postgraduate student. Born Imre Lipschitz in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1922, he had only narrowly escaped the fate of his mother and grandmother, both of whom were murdered in Auschwitz. During the German occupation, he was the unofficial leader of a group of young Jews aiming to keep one step ahead of the Gestapo. He is alleged to have been the chief force behind a decision that one of the group, Éva Iszák, who was assessed to be especially at risk of capture, must be forced to commit suicide in order to enhance the security of the group. This decision was to become something of a cause célèbre in Budapest after Lakatos's death and was to come back to haunt him during his life.

During this time he was living on false documentation under the name 'Imre Molnar', but returning to his home in a ravaged Debrecen after the defeat of Germany, he found – amongst little else – some shirts monogrammed 'I.L.' (or rather in the Hungarian style 'L.I.') and he promptly changed his name again to the working-class sounding Imre Lakatos. He had become a convinced Marxist (Imre tended to hold all his views with conviction) and a member of an influential group of Marxist intellectuals. He rose to a position of some power in the Hungarian Ministry of Education and instigated some – again highly controversial – educational reform. Having already



Imre Lakatos in 1965

obtained one PhD before the war from the University of Debrecen (for a thesis in the sociology of science that he later insisted was 'worthless'), he now was privileged to be given permission, and means, to study for a second PhD in mathematical physics at the University of Moscow. However, alongside influential friends, he had gained some powerful enemies and, having been recalled from Moscow under mysterious circumstances, he was soon arrested by the Secret Police and interrogated, ostensibly over the Éva Iszák affair. This led to three years' incarceration in Recsk – the most notorious of the Gulag-style camps in Hungary.

After release in 1953 – his Marxist faith apparently still intact – he was employed as a translator at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It was at this time that he first came across Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies*. He left Hungary at the time of the revolution in 1956 and made his way to England, via Vienna, having won a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study at Cambridge. Given this background, you would not expect a shrinking violet.

And, on Lakatos's increasingly regular visits to London, a shrinking violet is not what the Popper seminar got. The impact he made in the seminar soon led to appointment to a lectureship at the School in 1960 and he taught here for the rest of

his – sadly brief – career, rising to a Chair (in logic, with special reference to the philosophy of mathematics) in 1971.

A short wiry man, with immense energy, a real '24 hour a day intellectual', a sharp tongue and an incisive wit, he soon became a major figure in the life of the School. His lectures in particular – full of jokes, (increasingly right wing) political propaganda, and scandalous remarks about his colleagues – became famous, drawing an audience far beyond the confines of his home Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method. His reputation within his field is based on major contributions to the foundations and philosophy of mathematics (his *Proofs and Refutations* is a masterpiece) and to the philosophy of science (his 'methodology of scientific research programmes' remains influential). Lakatos was a major inspiration to a whole group of students who went on to make international reputations for themselves. He died of a heart attack in 1974 while still very much in his intellectual prime. His name is already commemorated in the Lakatos Award – since 1982, the major book prize in the world in the field of philosophy of science.

At the time that an anonymous donor made Tymes Court available to the School in order to house the Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, he indicated a wish that the building be named in Lakatos's honour. Since the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method moved into the upper floors of the building in September of this year, it is now very much the hub of philosophical research and teaching within the School. At a ceremony on 14 November, Tymes Court was fittingly renamed the Lakatos Building. ■ **Lakatos's thinking ►**



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Lakatos's thinking



Among other concepts, Lakatos's idea of scientific research programmes (SRPs) retains its relevance today – and not only for philosophers.

Take, as an example, organisational culture, something much beloved of management theorists and consultants. As Danny Miller argued in *The Icarus Paradox*, many organisations follow a trajectory in which success leads directly to failure. Marks and Spencer has been a recent example. They keep doing what seems to work well, long after it needs rethinking. An important part of this is a strong culture. It helps bind organisations, and gives their members a sense of joint purpose,

but it also blinds them to new ideas as they sink into 'groupthink'.

What was Lakatos's contribution to this debate? He saw a scientific research programme as an overall framework within which scientists can operate, including a core of theory which is central to the programme, plus other theories and hypotheses which are less important. To develop this programme Lakatos proposed that we adopt two types of methodological rules. The first he calls the 'negative heuristic'. This tells us what paths of research to avoid. In particular, it forbids us to reject the core of our programme when counter-evidence arises. Instead, we should use our ingenuity to develop other explanations which protect the core, re-examining the evidence, or rejecting or modifying one of the less important hypotheses. The 'positive heuristic' tells us what paths to pursue, setting out a course of action to develop and enrich our programme.

Organisations can think of their culture in the same way – protecting it through the use of positive and negative heuristic. But there is an

additional crucial requirement which Lakatos lays down. This is that each step of an SRP must be consistently content-increasing: the changes and developments should enrich the programme. For organisations this means that the culture should never be taken for granted. It needs constant review to see whether it is content-increasing (value adding), or instead becoming an anachronistic burden which needs to be jettisoned in favour of a new approach – a new culture.



Dr John Darwin (BSc Econ 1969) is subject leader in strategy and head of the Change Management Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University.

The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes, Volume 1 by I Lakatos (Cambridge University Press, 1978); *The Icarus Paradox* by D Miller (Harper Business, 1990).

Passfield Hall memories



Following the death of Morris Perlman (*LSE Magazine*, summer 2001), alumni sent letters of condolence with their memories of him at Passfield. In addition, Richard Blow (BSc Econ International History 1960) wrote about his time at Passfield.

While attempting to sort out the 'archives' in the attic, I came across this photograph of myself (sixth from the right, third row) and Passfield Hall residents from June 1959. I tried to put names to the familiar faces from over 40 years ago and was ashamed how few I could pin down. Having lived in Holland and Belgium since 1969, I have lost touch with so many

people. Enlisting the help of my old friend Stewart Paterson (seventh from the right, back row), we identified just over half, and I wondered where all these bright young men are these days. Doubtless most of them have retired, as I have, and are living all over the world. The photo also brought back a few memories of an era which seems very remote now: when butter was 1s/9d a pint and Passfield board cost £44/-s/-d a term. One other thing I still find interesting is the cosmopolitan mix of students, which gave us a few insights into the rest of the world. Many students had been through National Service too, so we really were a mixed bunch. One person who could not be forgotten is the warden, Professor Raymond Chapman, firmly in the centre of the first row, flanked by students and staff. Raymond had a knack of getting close to the 'inmates', particularly on

Saturday nights, when he could be persuaded to regale us with epic poems of the Yukon after a few Newcastle Brown ales, but still managing to maintain reasonable order when it was needed.

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Richard adds: A group of (ex) members of the Economics football and cricket clubs calling themselves the MOFFS (for obscure reasons!) continue to meet three times a year in London. The next lunch is on 14 February. Anyone interested in going along should contact Derek Jakes on +44 (0)20 8674 1195 or email: derek.jakes@virgin.net

For more on the Economics, see page 44.