

# RESEARCH

---

# FOR THE WORLD

---

## LSE then and now: philosophy and society

Published 18 January 2021



**Dr Johanna Thoma** is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE. She works on practical rationality and decision theory, economic methodology, as well as ethics and public policy evaluation. Much of her work falls at the intersection of economics and philosophy.

For 125 years, research has been at the heart of LSE's teaching and engagement with the world. In this series, we've paired up four of our historical figures with four early career academics, reflecting continuity and change across the years. Here, **Johanna Thoma** discusses Karl Popper's contribution to philosophy, and her own research and teaching interests.

Karl Popper shaped 20th century philosophy of science in many ways, and also produced one of the most powerful critiques of totalitarianism ever written, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

What stands out for me is how his social and political philosophy and his philosophy of science are intricately connected. He found the roots of totalitarianism partly in bad (social) science. And he proposed that critical public scrutiny is key in a democracy just as critical scrutiny of theories is crucial in science. This marriage of philosophy of science and social, moral and political philosophy is something that still characterises the work of many of us in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method that Popper founded, and something that makes the department unique.

Given that social sciences, in particular, shape public decision-making, philosophical scrutiny of the science and philosophical analysis of the decision-making and resulting social conditions should go hand in hand. That's also the spirit in which I teach the Philosophy of Economics, and Philosophy for Public Policy at LSE.

My own research, too, bridges philosophy of science, practical rationality, and moral and political philosophy. In particular, I am interested in both methodological and normative questions at the intersection of philosophy and economics. For instance, in my recent work I have been interested in attitudes to risk. On a methodology level, I consider to what extent and in what way different economic theories under their different interpretations can accommodate aversion to taking risk. I am further interested in whether aversion to taking risks is rationally and morally permissible. And lastly, I study how risk ought to be managed in public policy.

In the future, I look forward to seeing the new BSc in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at LSE, of which I am programme director, further flourish. As senior co-chair of the Women's Caucus of the European Philosophy of Science Association, I also care deeply about making philosophy and academia more generally more welcoming to women.

## **Karl Popper (1902-1994): influential philosopher of science and society**

Karl Popper was born in Vienna in 1902. He was first invited to speak at LSE by Friedrich Hayek in 1936, the year in which he moved to New Zealand to become sole lecturer in philosophy at Canterbury University, Christchurch, New Zealand.

It was in New Zealand that Popper wrote his most famous work of popular philosophy *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in mid-March 1944 with the support of Hayek. On reading a draft of the book, LSE Director Alexander Carr-Saunders offered Popper a full-time readership in philosophy in December 1943 on a five year contract. He arrived in London in January 1946 and in 1949 he was given the permanent appointment of Professor of Logic and Scientific Method in the University of London.



Karl Popper had the most influence outside his own field of any philosopher of the 20th Century – both in science and, through his famous work *The Open Society*, in politics. ”

**John Worrall, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Science**

Initially, he was the only philosopher at LSE. Popper's influence ranges across both the sciences and social sciences. He established the importance of the philosophy of science with his influential falsification theory arguing that in the empirical sciences a theory cannot be proven but should be tested and ultimately falsified if possible. His defence of an open society supported by liberal democracy and effective social criticism influenced many in their opposition to both communism and fascism.

Popper was knighted in 1965 and received the distinction of being elected as a fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society. ■

This introduction to Karl Popper is by Sue Donnelly, formerly LSE Archivist.

---

**Subscribe to receive articles from LSE's online social science magazine.**

**[lse.ac.uk/rftw](https://lse.ac.uk/rftw)**