Lakatos, Imre [*formerly* Imré Lipsitz]

(1922–1974)

- John Worrall

Lakatos, Imre [*formerly* Imré Lipsitz] (1922–1974), philosopher of mathematics and of science, was born Imré Lipsitz on 9 November 1922 in Debrecen, Hungary, the only child of Jacob Márton Lipsitz, a wine merchant, and Márgit Herczfeld, both Hungarian Jews. His father left the family home shortly after Imre was born and he was raised by his mother and maternal grandmother. Imre studied at the Jewish Real Gymnasium and later at Debrecen University. An outstanding student, he graduated in 1944 in mathematics, physics, and philosophy.

Lakatos had become an active and influential Marxist while at university. When Germany invaded Hungary in 1944, he fled with Éva Révész (to whom he was married briefly in 1947) to Nagyvarad (now the Romanian town of Oradea). There they were kept in hiding by non-Jewish families. (Meanwhile his mother and grandmother were forced into the Debrecen ghetto and later killed in Auschwitz.) Lakatos lived in Nagyvarad on false papers under the name of Molnár. He organized a communist cell among the group of Jews in hiding and their host families; and he is alleged to have led the group in deciding on the 'forced suicide' of one of its members, Éva Iszák. There are various explanations of his role in this affair—his own seems to have been that Iszák, an anti-fascist activist who had fallen out with her host family and who therefore needed new accommodation and papers, was in some danger of arrest by the Gestapo and hence a threat to the security of the whole group. One of the most striking features of the episode is that she herself seems to have put up no resistance to the decision.

At the end of the war Lakatos returned briefly to his ransacked house in Debrecen where, among little else, he found some of his old shirts monogrammed 'I. L.' (or rather, in the Hungarian convention, 'L. I.'). He took the opportunity to change his name for a second time: to the working-class Imre Lakatos. An influential member of a circle of élite communist intellectuals in Budapest, he obtained a post in the ministry of education and became active in (controversial) educational reform. He received a PhD with highest honours from the Eötvös Collegium in 1947 for a thesis that he later insisted was 'worthless' on the sociology of science. In 1948 he won party agreement to study theoretical physics at Moscow University. He had made influential enemies, however, and in 1950, after a mysterious end to his stay in Moscow, he was—for reasons that remain unclear—called by the central committee to a hearing on the Éva Iszák affair, and expelled from the Communist Party. He was interrogated and held in solitary confinement for six weeks by the state security police (AVO). He was then taken to the labour camp at Recsk, where he was

interned in appalling conditions for three years. On his release he worked at the Mathematical Research Institute at the Hungarian Academy of Science. Although Lakatos's communist faith seems to have survived the Recsk experience, he began to question it shortly afterwards. At the time of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 he followed his second wife, Éva Pap (whom he married in 1955), and her family out of the country and soon obtained a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study at Cambridge for a second PhD. From 1959 onwards he regularly attended Karl Popper's seminar at the London School of Economics (LSE). The LSE appointed him to a lectureship in logic in 1960, and he was promoted to a personal chair (in logic, with special reference to the philosophy of mathematics) in 1970.

Lakatos's second PhD thesis became the basis for his *Proofs and Refutations*. This work, published initially as journal articles in 1963–4 and in book form only posthumously in 1976, constitutes his major contribution to the philosophy of mathematics. A dialogue between a group of frighteningly bright students and their teacher, it reconstructs the process by which Euler's famous conjecture about polyhedra (that they all satisfy the formula: number of vertices *plus* number of faces *minus* the number of edges equals two) was proved and, in the process, heavily modified and transformed. Lakatos's claim was that, although the eventual proof of the theorem in mathematics may be cast as a straightforward deduction, the way in which the proof is found is a more exciting process, involving counterexamples, reformulations, counterexamples to the reformulations, and careful analysis of 'failed' proofs leading to further modifications of 'the' theorem.

Lakatos thought of himself for some years as a 'Popperian', simply extending Popper's fallibilism to the seemingly unlikely field of mathematics. However, he eventually began to discern faults in Popper's philosophy of natural science, and began in 1968 to develop his 'methodology of scientific research programmes' (all the relevant papers are reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, 1978). Lakatos claimed that science was best viewed as consisting, not of single isolated theories, but rather of broader 'research programmes'. Each programme issues in a series of theories, governed not only by empirical refutations of earlier theories, but also by certain specifiable heuristic principles operating on the programme's central assumptions or 'hard core'. Lakatos saw this methodology as giving a more accurate view of the rationality of science than Popper's—in fact, as a synthesis of the best elements of the accounts of Popper and of Thomas Kuhn. It remains influential.

Lakatos was a short, wiry, energetic man—a 'twenty-four hours a day' intellectual. A great advocate of the power of reason, he was a convinced atheist—indeed he held all his views with conviction. In the West he retained strong political interests. Like many who had suffered under a left-wing dictatorship, he swung far to the right in political, if not always in social, terms—being a vigorous opponent of the student movement of the 1960s and an equally vigorous supporter of the domino theory and hence of

American involvement in Vietnam. He made several visits to give lectures in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s. He had a sharp tongue and an exceptional wit. He engendered intense friendships and intense enmities in roughly equal measure. After his divorce from Éva Pap in 1960 he had a series of affairs, some of them with women much younger than himself. He then settled into a close relationship with Gillian Page, with whom he was living at the time of his death. He had no children.

Lakatos survived a heart attack in early 1974 but, after discharging himself against medical advice, suffered a further and fatal heart attack at his home, 5 Turner's Wood, Hampstead, London, on 2 February 1974 and was declared dead on arrival at New End Hospital, Hampstead.

Sources

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