

Mitteleuropa am Aldwych

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- *For and against Method: including Lakatos's Lectures on Scientific Method and the Lakatos-Feyerabend Correspondence* by [Imre Lakatos](#) and [Paul Feyerabend](#), edited by [Matteo Motterlini](#)
Chicago, 451 pp, £24.00, October 1999, ISBN 0 226 46774 0

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English-language philosophy of science is still dominated by ideas brought to it by refugees. In the first wave, England got the Austrians, including Karl Popper and Otto Neurath (not to mention Wittgenstein), and later got Paul Feyerabend from Vienna and Imre Lakatos from Budapest. The United States got the Germans, including Rudolf Carnap and Hans Reichenbach. The famous Vienna Circle, or Wiener Kreis, was established by Moritz Schlick, a German, who brought other Germans to Vienna. Neither of the two most memorable Viennese philosophers, Wittgenstein and Popper, was a member of this discussion club, although there were various kinds of interaction between them all. The Germans who went to the United States were a solemn lot, at least in print, who have cast a sombre shadow of propriety over American philosophy of science to this day. The Austro-Hungarians, in contrast, were a wild bunch, never comfortable anywhere, but finding England the best refuge. Lakatos really was a refugee; he remained stateless and had to travel on a British Travel Document in lieu of a passport. Feyerabend was in no literal sense a refugee, but he never found a geographical home, even when, at the end of his career, he settled in Switzerland. He was adored by a generation of students in California, but he despised the philosophy practised there by his colleagues, and his spiritual home was certainly London, at least until Lakatos's death.

The centrepiece of this book is the correspondence between Lakatos and Feyerabend. Imre Lakatos, born Lipsitz in 1922, died suddenly in 1974 in full vigour as a professor (and successor to Popper) at the London School of Economics. Paul Feyerabend, born in 1924, died in 1994, soon after a brain tumour had been diagnosed. He, too, was still hard at work, halfway through a book that has just been posthumously published as *Conquest of Abundance* ([which I shall review in a future issue of the LRB](#)). *For and against Method*, in contrast, is a contribution to what is now history: namely, notes for a course of lectures given by Lakatos in 1973, and an exchange of letters meticulously preserved on Lakatos's side, written between 1967 and 1974. There are also some rude letters written by Feyerabend to the Berkeley philosophy department where he was employed, and a few other things.

There is no new philosophy here, and little news about the opinions, or even the development of ideas, of either author. It is symptomatic that the editor begins the book with an imaginary dialogue of his own composition, in which the protagonists are named 'Lakatos' and 'Feyerabend'. It is very well done, succinctly setting out Lakatos's *For* and Feyerabend's *Against*. The letters themselves do not add much, but they do convey some of the flavour of those days. The correspondence is conducted mostly between

Berkeley, where Feyerabend is manning his lonely outpost, and the LSE, where Lakatos has moved centre stage. Readers who like gossip will not be disappointed. The staid may be appalled by the ribald tone of this little bit of Mitteleuropa am Aldwych.

Two items in the book will be new to almost everyone. Both concern Lakatos. The first, which is already being talked about (I heard several corrupt versions before reading the book), comes in a discreet biography tucked away at the end. Most of the material here is well known. Lakatos had been active in the Communist resistance towards the end of the war. On the lam, he abandoned his Jewish name, but kept the 'L' so as not to waste his monogrammed handkerchiefs (Lakatos, which means 'locksmith', is a common enough lower-class Hungarian surname). He then joined the Eötvös Collegium, the country's most prestigious academic institution. He was an active Communist after the war, engaged in the administration and reform of university education. But he fell from grace, spent six weeks in solitary confinement, and three more years in jail. After release, he worked as an assistant to distinguished mathematicians. He escaped in the mass exodus of 1956, and was picked up by the Rockefeller Foundation, which supported him as a PhD student at Cambridge. His dissertation was a first version of his brilliant and wholly original dialogue on the philosophy of mathematics, *Proofs and Refutations*. He moved to the LSE, and there developed a new philosophy of scientific method, much influenced by his work on mathematics. He saw this as part of a larger sequence of thesis/ antithesis/synthesis to which the names of Popper/Kuhn/Lakatos could be attached, and which could also be parsed as rationality/ irrationality/historicised rationality. Popper hated the upshot, accusing Lakatos of having plagiarised the few sound bits of the new philosophy – selections from a truly acrimonious exchange between the two are printed here. During the student revolts of the late Sixties, which were especially dramatic at the LSE, Lakatos became a notorious opponent of the Vietnam-inspired rebellion, praised the US Strategic Air Command as the saviour of civilisation, and was much preferred by the students to any of the bureaucrats, who, they thought, opposed them without even showing their faces.

So what's new? The answer is the first widely circulated statement, in English, of what had been known in Hungary but was seldom spoken of by his English admirers. In 1998 a long article called 'Lakatos in Hungary' was published in *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, a small academic journal. It revealed a reason for Lakatos's fall from grace and his ending up in jail. It was widely rumoured that during his time in a resistance cell, he had taken the lead in the decision to ask a fellow cell-member to commit suicide, which she did. The pretext was that she was Jewish and known to be so, and that when apprehended she would, under torture, give the members of the cell away; thus she had a duty to kill herself. Much later, in 1950, the Central Control Committee of the Party held a hearing on the affair; Lakatos's expulsion and arrest followed. Or so we read here.

There is another possible reason for Lakatos's arrest, one that is stated in 'Lakatos in Hungary', but not here. He may have been in charge of preparing the show trial of a senior member of the Party. When that project was abandoned on orders from on high, Lakatos was an embarrassment, and he was put away. Another item from this sorry story, missing from the biographical note, and which helps explain why Lakatos is not an esteemed figure in his homeland today: when he was released and rehabilitated in 1953, with the small pension given to most of those who had managed to survive the beatings and degradation, he

is thought to have filed regular secret political reports on his friends and colleagues, a fact that he told them about in notes posted as he was leaving the country in '56.

I prefer a happier image from later that year. A strange figure in a shiny Eastern European suit enters the dark and mouldy Moral Sciences Library in Cambridge (long since upgraded to better premises). No one is in the room except a shy freshman. The funny man climbs a rickety ladder to the top of the north-east corner of the room. The books are shelved alphabetically by author; the As begin in that corner. He picks up the first book, reads a few pages, slams it shut, picks up the second ...

The other novelty contained in this book is the translation of a talk that Lakatos gave early in 1956 to a Budapest discussion group that brought together intellectuals concerned with education. In it, he argues that the Party should be governed by science, not the other way about; that censorship must be abolished; that criticism and dissent should be encouraged. That was what was being said in Budapest in those days, and eventually the Soviet tanks moved in. It's a powerful statement, full of revolutionary vigour.

So much for tidbits. Lakatos's contribution to the philosophy of mathematics was, to put it simply, definitive: the subject will never be the same again. For decades the philosophy of mathematics was about foundations, set theory, paradoxes, axioms, formal logic and infinity – an agenda set by Bertrand Russell, among others, beefed up by the truly wonderful discoveries of Kurt Gödel. Lakatos made us think instead about what most research mathematicians do. He wrote an amazing philosophical dialogue around the proof of a seemingly elementary but astonishingly deep geometrical idea pioneered by Euler. It is a work of art – I rank it right up there with the dialogues composed by Hume or Berkeley or Plato. He made us see a theorem, a mathematical fact, coming into being before our eyes. In the text, several students and their teacher gradually evolve conjectures, counter-examples and lemmas. The footnotes chime in with the historical incidents that underlie the discussion. Traditional views about mathematics get played out, but also Lakatos's own ideas of mathematics as evolutionary and concrete, engaged in the creation of new concepts and the fixing of old ones so that, in the end, permanent necessary mathematical truth is created by a process of which the dialogue itself is both example and illustration. The work of his Hungarian teachers, such as Georg Pólya, a man who devised nifty theorems and wrote a charming and useful book, *How to Solve It*, is writ large in all this. *Proofs and Refutations* became a bestseller in the USSR, which much pleased Lakatos, even though, as he liked to tell people, he was paid not by the number of copies sold, as in the West, but by the number of words in the text, in proper Soviet fashion. The book is now standard reading anywhere people concern themselves with the nature of mathematical knowledge.

In contrast, I would say that his philosophy of science is merely suggestive. He proposed what he called a methodology of scientific research programmes, which was intended to explain the idea of rationality. It was a fascinating if often exasperating theory of scientific dialectic, a theory not exactly of science in action, but a reconstruction of what the action would have looked like, had some sort of Hegelian Absolute Reasoner been running the show. Lakatos's rough idea was that whereas everyone thought it was rational to accept, subscribe to, spend one's career on (or whatever) a theory on the basis of its relation to current evidence, experimental results, explanatory power, simplicity (or whatever), in fact such foundationalism – or even Popper's anti-foundationalism – got you nowhere. Instead, we need to consider a historical

sequence of theories, each one arising from the revision made to its predecessors; this he called a research programme. Progressive programmes (the ones that rationalists admire) were those extended in the light of counter-examples, so generating new concepts and anticipating new experimental and theoretical results. Degenerating programmes (the bad ones) were those that became increasingly narrow and at best produced ad hoc explanations of disagreeable results. Rational scientists should favour progressive programmes.

Put that way, the proposal sounds pretty modest. Yet long before the so-called 'science wars' *Nature* published an article with a rogues' gallery of four photographs: of Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. The article blamed Mrs Thatcher's decision to abolish fundamental science in Britain – and public acquiescence in this outrage – on the vicious philosophy of science propagated by these four. Popper preached refutation, Kuhn urged the necessity of scientific revolutions, Lakatos taught that all science wallows in a sea of anomalies, and Feyerabend favoured anarchy, all of which was bad for the masses, who should, the *Nature* article implied, admire science and abjure critical thinking.

Feyerabend was taken to be the worst of these four evil influences. His most famous book, *Against Method* (1975), was a powerful critique of Lakatos's theory, and of all other, more modest, forms of rationalism. He rightly observed that Lakatos's methodology of research programmes was backward-looking, and gave no hint as to what it was rational to believe or work on now – which is the core problem of rationality. The book was written to put one side of a debate with Lakatos, but Lakatos did not live to write the other side. So it seemed like a good idea to publish the extensive correspondence between the two of them for the years 1967 to 1974. But as I've already implied, the argument is not much furthered here. The most important point perhaps is that Lakatos tries to impale Feyerabend on a charge of inconsistency. If he really claims that there is no rational scientific method, or anything that serves as a surrogate for such a thing, then he should confess to absolute scepticism, denying the possibility of knowledge. Feyerabend expostulates, and may to some extent win Lakatos over; but there the correspondence ends. In fact, the most sustained piece of real argument in the letters comes right at the end, when Lakatos realises he may be about to die, and with splitting head writes paragraph after paragraph of line-by-line criticism.

Lakatos and Feyerabend were fast friends, and reflection on their ebullient and cantankerous friendship should enrich our understanding of Aristotle's dictum that a friend is an alter ego. I found their letters flatter than I expected, however. Here we have two schoolboys joshing each other, and egging each other on with talk of girls, girlfriends and pretty secretaries. The banter is so routine that it reveals nothing intimate. The fact that both men remained adolescents to the end must be a clue to their intellectual liveliness and their contempt for bland academic professionalism. The letters were written as both wrestled with philosophy, and took public positions on politics. The student revolt was under way, with Feyerabend nervously cheering in Berkeley, and Lakatos defiantly counter-revolutionary at LSE. The one thing new is that on 10 October 1970, as things are quietening down, Feyerabend – no fan of his Berkeley colleague John Searle – describes the draft of Searle's book on the crisis in the universities as 'marvellous'. And that he considered saying in the preface to *Against Method*: 'I am for anarchism in *thinking*, in one's *private life*, BUT NOT in *public life*.'

It is also good to have a printed record of anecdotes known previously only to friends: that Feyerabend would fly to Los Angeles for his weekly singing lesson – opera was a passion; that he liked to go to wrestling matches with his chums, mostly ‘girls’, though if you read carefully you’ll see that he lived a very solitary life, up there in the Berkeley hills. Dada-freak though he was, Feyerabend could also bring order when we need it: he wrote wonderful indexes to his books; indeed there are completely different indexes to the first and third editions of *Against Method*, each reflecting what he wanted the reader to know. Unfortunately you won’t find ‘wrestling’ or ‘opera’ in the index to the present book, nor the last names of the people, often ‘girls’, who are regularly referred to by their first names.

The first publication entitled ‘Against Method’ came out in 1970, as a long article in an annual volume directed at philosophers of science. It was not yet the attack on Lakatos, but Lakatos was anxious to see it. A postcard postmarked 19 July 1970 happily conveys some of the spirit of these exchanges. I quote it in full since it does not occur in the volume of correspondence. At present the card is on display at the newly opened Feyerabend archive in Konstanz which also has four other unpublished postcards. It is from the Tower of London, and shows the executioner’s block and axe. On the back Lakatos wrote in blood-red ink: ‘I STILL HAVE NOT RECEIVED AM. Be quick. If you are quick, I execute AM; if you are slow, I execute you. With last blessings, Imre de Torquemada.’

The soon-to-be-famous *Against Method* came out the year after Lakatos died, and begins with a lament for the loss of a friend. For lack of a retort by Lakatos in favour of method, the editor of the correspondence has reproduced what seem to be extraordinarily faithful notes taken by Gregory Currie of lectures given by Lakatos in 1973. Once again, I found no new philosophy here but people who did not know Lakatos may be fascinated by the way in which he baited all and sundry, and marvel at his arrogant jokes. His contempt for fashion, for instance: has Hilary Putnam led the American Philosophical Association in a public condemnation of organs such as the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic Monthly* for publishing the ‘unfounded’, ‘racist, sexist and anti-working-class theories of Richard Hernstein, William Shockley and Arthur Jensen’? That, Lakatos said, is the sort of talk used by the Church against Copernicanism: ‘unfounded theories’. And so on, with other targets less well able to look after themselves than Putnam.

The editor has valiantly tried to track down the allusions in the correspondence, and the lectures, so that readers a quarter of a century later can make out what was going on at the time. Quite a few people who are named are not identified. He has had only partial success in tracking down texts, but I can’t blame him on that score. On 23 June 1972, Feyerabend wrote: ‘Reading Hacking I get gratified – it is *nice* to see one’s name in print – and nervous, for should I not now write the Definitive Summary of My Thought?’ Well, from time to time I’ve written this or that about Feyerabend, but I can find nothing in print before 1975, so what on earth was he referring to? I am gratified that a totally obscure piece I wrote about Michel Foucault, correctly identified by the editor, prompted Feyerabend to say that the proposition that ‘individuals matter less to knowledge than the discourse in which they participate’ is ‘*entirely against my grain, absolutely and for ever*. The individual comes first, *even if this means the breakdown of understanding*. So I really must review Foucault – keep him for me [to review in the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*]. And I shall review him together with Sir Karl because both these bastards seem to go against the sanctity of the folly of the individual.’ In the end, Feyerabend reviewed only Popper, and I suspect he never read

Foucault, who is also something of an icon for the sanctity of the folly of individuals, indeed for the sanctity even of the madness of individuals such as Antonin Artaud. Lakatos and Feyerabend were fascinating, irritating individuals. Thank goodness for the Britain and America that gave them succour, but we should also thank our lucky stars for the folly, excesses and genuine insights of these escapees from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.