

Imre Lakatos was one of the most innovative and outstanding philosophers of the 20th century.



Born in Hungary in 1922, Lakatos was a talented young mathematician and student of philosophy, writing a first PhD dissertation on the sociology of science and Georg Lukacs in 1947 at Debrecen University. Following World War II, Lakatos was an ambitious education administrator under the new communist regime. Falling out of favor, he was sent to prison camp for over three years where he almost died. Upon his release in 1953 he earned a living by translating mathematical works and had access to Karl Popper's critical books as well as writings by George Orwell. Lakatos participated in the failed 1956 Hungarian Revolution, after which he escaped to England.

Lakatos was 35 when he enrolled as a philosophy graduate student at Cambridge University. His thesis was published as a series of papers, now collected in the posthumously edited volume Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery. The book is one of the greatest philosophical works of the 20th century, integrating 19th century philosophy, history of mathematics, and pedagogical philosophy, layered with immense wit, verve and erudition. Presented as the history of a single mathematical theorem, Proofs and Refutations is an analysis of modern concepts of mathematical proof and their emergence during the 19th century.

Initially an ardent student of Popper's, Lakatos positioned himself as Popper's successor at the London School of Economics. During the great philosophy of science debates of the 1960s and 1970s, involving Thomas Kuhn (author of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions) and Paul Feyerabend (author of Against Method and also a former protege of Popper's), Lakatos became an acute critic of Popper, developing a creative and wholly unusual approach to the historiography of science. For Lakatos, philosophy of science was about options for writing the history of science and means for critically evaluating its current status. Lakatos' historical apparatus has since been applied to many historical topics ranging from the wave theory of light to the special theory of relativity. Lakatos' approach was wholly interventionist and years ahead of its time through its focus on choices and evidence used in historical narrative.

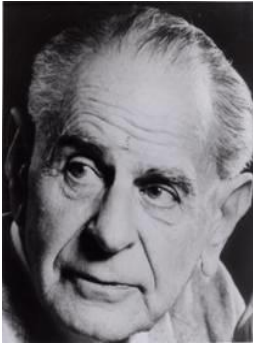
On the face of it, Lakatos was Popper's best student who did him a bit better, promoting his historicist interpretations of important events in the modern history of science.

A closer look reveals that Lakatos' unusual ideas about history and historiography are all found in Hegel, and the work of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs. Lakatos knew Lukacs in Hungary and is successor and Popper's both. Lakatos' greatness lay in how he integrated and contributed to two separate philosophical traditions, far surpassing many ideas and techniques found in either.

Lakatos was one of the great "extraterritorials" of Central Europe, displaced politically, intellectually and linguistically by the cataclysms of the 20th century. He was brilliant, cunning and wicked like no one before in the history of philosophy.

Imre Lakatos died in England in February 1974.

The two sides of Lakatos' head:



The English-language philosophical world of Karl Popper and the Hegelian-Marxist world of Hungary and Georg Lukacs.