

An Hungarian Tragedy*

Jerome R. Ravetz

Research Methods Consultancy, Ltd

In spite of being a very public intellectual, the philosopher Imre Lakatos (who died in 1974) was little understood. His Hungarian background seemed irrelevant to his career at the London School of Economics as the colleague and then successor to Sir Karl Popper. In *Imre Lakatos and The Guises of Reason*, John Kadvany demonstrates the overwhelming importance of Lakatos's Hungarian background, and thereby also explains and illuminates Lakatos's philosophy. His study also demonstrates the power of Hegel's thought as the background to any genuinely historical approach to philosophy, even of science and mathematics. He also provides a glimpse of the nightmare world of Stalinist Hungary, as a contribution to an explanation of Lakatos's personal and intellectual style. Kadvany's exposition does much to clarify and explain Lakatos's philosophy, thereby enhancing his reputation and also making his work, much of it still of vital significance, more accessible to a new public.

Creators and expositors have complementary roles. The originators of ideas reflect the problems of their generation; the critic makes them accessible to the future. Socrates and Plato are the pair that gives the genre immortality; in literature we have Dr Johnson and Boswell; and in science, Hutton and Playfair for the foundations of modern geology, and Dalton and Thompson for modern chemistry. And now we have Lakatos and Kadvany, for twentieth-century philosophy of mathematics and science.

Imre Lakatos was among the most important philosophers in those fields of the postwar generation. His contribution to the philosophy of mathematics was decades ahead of its time, and should yet come to be recognized as a truly seminal work. But in spite of his being a very public (and combative) intellectual, he was an enigmatic figure. He was very little understood and quite insufficiently appreciated. In part this failure was due to his being one of those quintessential 'aliens' in England, almost modeling himself on the classic little pre-war book *How to Be an Alien* by fellow-Hungarian George Mikes. But there were also layers of mystery surrounding him, not least of which was his previous career in Hungary before the revolution of 1956. Details of his political life were published after his death. But the influence of his intellectual life there on his subsequent work in England was, until Kadvany's book, totally obscure.

*John Kadvany, *Imre Lakatos and the Guises of Reason*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001, xx + 378 pp., ISBN 0-8223-2649-3, \$23.95.

In this reconstruction of a philosophical quest, Kadvany does more than solve an important historical puzzle. He succeeds in bringing to life a whole host of issues, ranging from philosophical debates through more general intellectual history, and finally to the nightmare of Stalinist Hungary. He addresses the question in the form that is still popular in Hungary, “Who was Imre Lakatos?”. But eschewing a standard intellectual biography, he instead shows how the philosopher’s lifetime endeavour can be traced to, and explained in terms of, the great currents of philosophy, ideology and politics of Lakatos’s time. By this means he has not only rescued Lakatos as a philosopher; he has also explained his problems and his doctrines in a way that would otherwise have been impossible. In that sense, we now understand Lakatos much better, as well as being more appreciative of his significance, thanks to Kadvany’s work.

During his brief career at the LSE, Lakatos was a sort of *stupor mundi*, attracting a cautious respect among many, fear and hatred among some, admiration and affection among a few, and comprehension among very few indeed. After his death in 1974 he was ‘recuperated’ by his former colleagues and students, and (quite plausibly, it must be admitted) converted into a somewhat rebellious follower of the master Popper. In that role, his significance was further diminished. The great debates of the 1960s, ostensibly on the philosophy of science but actually on the general crisis in the Enlightenment project, could be understood in retrospect as involving Lakatos as only a minor player. Whatever were the issues at stake in the battle of the titans, Popper and Kuhn, it was all washed away by Feyerabend’s anarchism. Lakatos made an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile Popper’s naive idealism about scientific adventure with Kuhn’s disenchanted realism about the researcher’s job. His synthesis was unwieldy, and gave too many hostages both to historical narrative and to philosophical analysis. Posthumously, he was cast as Simplicio to Feyerabend’s Galileo in *Against Method* (1975), representing the pathetic faith that somewhere, somehow, science still has its Santa Claus.

In the absence of Kadvany’s book, one could imagine a really competent intellectual history of Lakatos being done, perhaps as a PhD, by an Anglo-phone scholar. All the writings could be chronicled, the controversies analyzed, and the Hungarian personal background sketched in. It might even include a mention of Georg Lukács, an intellectual of commanding stature, now remembered only by the ringing Marxist title of his classic *History and Class Consciousness*. Such a biography would most probably produce a totally legitimate portrait of Lakatos as a youthful Communist, who had discovered mathematical dialectics through Poly, and who then in his mature years, like other former Marxists, turned to Popper for inspiration and guidance.

In his characteristic way, Lakatos once provided a hint of the secret that

Kadvany eventually uncovered. Quite late in his career, he offered to share a platform with me for a debate on the politics of science. At the beginning, he introduced himself by saying, 'When I was young I wanted to be the successor of Lukács, but now I am the successor of Popper'. To the extent that the audience understood this at all, they must have interpreted it as a record of satisfaction with having grown to maturity in his career. Having some inkling of what Lakatos had been through before 1956, I sensed some sort of irony there. But I interpreted the reference to Lukács as a standard ambition for a young Marxist intellectual of Lakatos's generation. Kadvany has shown me that that little remark was a clue to Lakatos's great secret, along with the tragedy of a great mind frustrated and distorted by tyranny and exile. In the move from Lukács to Popper, Lakatos's career became a symbol of the final destruction of classical Central European intellectual culture. It is Kadvany's achievement to have recreated that world, like an inspired archaeologist of ideas. And, thanks to his excellence as an expositor, his subject has grown enormously in stature and significance.

Kadvany has added a crucial dimension to any future discussion of Lakatos's philosophy. He has shown that Lukács is the key to the real Lakatos, in two interrelated senses. First, he was there in person, as a troubled and conflicted symbol of rationality, during the insane years of the Stalinist rape of reason. Also, as Kadvany shows, he is the key to Lakatos's deepest secret: the enormous debt that his historical method owes to Hegel. Now, the mere mention of that name is enough to give Anglophone intellectuals a severe case of the shudders. Hegel is the symbol of the impenetrable obscurity that afflicts German philosophy, and anyway Popper lists him among the worst antidemocratic precursors of Marx. But Hegel's dialectic is powerful in itself, and it also relates modern European thought back to deep currents in philosophy, from antiquity onwards. Ironically, Lakatos was never close to Lukács as friend or student, being too Stalinist during his years of liberty in the early period of Communist rule.

By finding the key that unlocked Lakatos's philosophical secrets, Kadvany has given us much more than an outstanding work of scholarship in intellectual history. He shows how the methodology of Lakatos echoes Hegel's most important theses, including the transformation of classical skepticism into critical and philosophical history, the use of pedagogy and 'Bildung' as the basis for historicizing all the products of intellect, and then the anti-elitist, anti-romantic commitment at the foundation of it all. Through Lakatos and his roots in Lukács and Hegel, Kadvany has provided us with a precious, unrepeatable glimpse of that rich and tragic vanished world of Central European culture. Mainly German-language in its intellectual roots, strongly secularized-Jewish in its most significant thinkers, it had its great flourishing in the later years of the benign but doomed reign of the Emperor Franz Josef, and then declined and decayed under the battering of war, social

strife, Fascism, more war and Holocaust, and finally Stalinism. Throughout the twentieth century, it sent its influence out worldwide, in successive waves. Lakatos's generation was the last of the exiles, and by then the experience was too traumatic to be advertised. So Lakatos adopted guises for his reason, which Kadvany has penetrated, so that the soul-searing complexities and contradictions of his formation are there to be seen by all.

Lakatos's brilliance extended into a variety of related fields. In following him wherever he led, Kadvany has made a book that is not easy to read cover-to-cover. Indeed, it would take a quite considerable breadth of philosophical erudition to be able to read through all the chapters, let alone to write them! Fortunately, he has provided his readers with no less than three expository accounts, presented at the beginning of the book. There is an analytic table of contents, briefly summarizing the main theses of each chapter. Then comes a Preface, in which the book itself is discussed and explained. Finally is the Introduction, where the main problem of the book, 'Who was Imre Lakatos?', is dealt with at length. For a reader who is not familiar with the philosophical and scientific topics with which Lakatos was engaged, these three sections are quite adequate as an introduction to Lakatos and his significance. Afterwards readers may browse through the chapters that are less forbidding in their content, and finally engage with the hair-raising story of intellectual life in Hungary under Stalinism. Through it all, Kadvany shows an extraordinary fine scholarly sensitivity; he is consistently clear on what he is analyzing and what he is not. He uses 'history of ideas' to establish verifiable affinities between Lakatos and his likely sources, rather than to speculate on unverifiable 'influences' from his biography.

Through the critical and contextual interpretations given by Kadvany, it is possible as never before to see how Lakatos's life's endeavour related to the perennial problems of philosophy and intellectual culture. The title announces that the book is about 'reason', and the strange things that can happen to it. Can the need for 'guises' really be imagined by anyone who has never had the occasion to fear the thought-police? But such extreme circumstances are in some ways like an experiment, producing stresses that are never found in the natural state, and thereby providing novel information about the system. Of course, the system under study might be permanently damaged or destroyed by those stresses. In the case of a scientific experiment, that doesn't matter much, but in the case of reason as the life's struggle of a committed intellectual, the need for guises may reflect a problem that cannot be solved.

Reason and rationality are the themes that run through all of Lakatos's work. The struggle between absolute and historical rationality appears with total clarity in his first essay to be published in England, on the philosophy of mathematics. His *Proofs and Refutations* is explicitly designed as a polemic in that debate. The 'received view' is taken to be that (once discovered) a mathematical proof is fixed and eternal. The dialogue that comprises the

essay, with the classroom fully of terrifyingly bright boys (doubtless Hungarian) with Greek-letter names, is one long demolition of that faith. Instead, there is a dialectic of refutations, indeed of refutations of a variety of sorts, each one producing a defensive reaction. Out of that dialogue, always intense and sometimes hostile, there emerge new proofs, each with its new version of the theorem, and also a new understanding of the dialectics of mathematical growth. Reading just the first few pages of *Proofs and Refutations* can be an enlightening experience for anyone. No prior mathematical training is required, as the theorem in question ('Euler's Polyhedron Theorem') can be confirmed and then also proved with no more equipment than Socrates needed in the *Meno*. And then to see a classic proof flayed and dissected does wonders for being awakened from one's dogmatic slumbers.

I should say that Kadvany's exposition of this essay is one of those moments when 'criticism' justifies itself as a form of knowledge. Let the reader who has sampled the original text, with all its dynamic and paradox, turn to Kadvany's account. There they will see where it all comes from: Hegel! The structure, the implicit themes, the lessons, are all Hegelian. That quintessentially obscure German philosopher is here revealed as the consummate master of the dialectic of discourse and discovery, and of learning through error. Although this interpretation comes through Lukács, we do not know just how Lakatos learned his Hegel and how deeply he had studied the original sources. But after Kadvany's exposition, there is little doubt that Lakatos's method is Hegelian through and through. As Kadvany explicates Lakatos, the history of mathematical analysis through the nineteenth century becomes a unity, from the major changes in reasoning in the first half, through to the origins of modern logic at the end.

It is understood that the targets of Lakatos's criticism are the leading mathematicians of his time who, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, had made abstract, logical methods the dominant, indeed obligatory style for mathematics. But it is easy to read between the lines that any sort of authoritarianism and dogmatism in philosophy and in teaching should be destroyed by similar methods. In that sense the essay is an anti-Fascist tract, rather in the tradition of Popper's *Open Society* of a generation earlier. Kadvany scores again here, showing the deep affinity between Lakatos's attack on the unnamed mathematical dogmatists and that of Hegel himself against an elitist, mystical philosophy of knowledge, whose advocate was known to be Schelling. This interpretation also comes from Lukács, whose book *The Destruction of Reason* was said by Feyerabend to one of Lakatos's favorites.

Kadvany's discussion of Lakatos's philosophy of science, in Part 2 of the book, will be more easily comprehended and hence of more general interest. Here too we find an exposition that is frequently more clear and accessible than the original. At the technical level, Lakatos went beyond Popper and the

whole positivist tradition, in moving the focus of analysis from an individual 'theory' to an evolving 'research programme'. The analogy with *Proofs and Refutations*, where he exhibited a whole series of 'Euler's Theorems' each with its own 'polyhedron', is clear. With this enriched perspective on science, he can develop an enriched theory of its development. He is able to untie the logical knots that Popper had made for himself, by showing that theory rejection is not at all a simple process. One of his better aphorisms is 'All theories are born refuted', and he provides examples, as in the early quantum theories of Niels Bohr. He develops the idea of 'contradiction', which of course resonates with the hidden teaching of Hegel. Finally, as Kadvanly shows, he develops a theory of historical inquiry, in which its dialectical interactions with methodology are displayed.

Through all this, we gain a picture of Lakatos, first in the *Proofs...* and then elsewhere, as a great expositor of historical rationality, extended to, indeed invading, the areas where absolute knowledge had previously held sway. But there is a price to be paid. If we think of 'foundationism' as a research programme, it is inherently brittle. So long as the not-yet-complete intellectual structures are unchallenged, there is a great sense of achievement in the gradual approach to the distant goal of a complete system of whatever it is. But it only takes one punch landed by an anti-foundationist, and the whole programme is in deep crisis. This is what happened to the foundationist programme for mathematics a couple of decades into its development, when the famous Gödel's Theorem (or Theorems) hit it. (Incidentally, Kadvanly provides a brilliant exposition of that work and its sequel, explained in terms of the Lakatosian dialectic of formal and informal methods. He also validates Lakatos's claim that for one important theorem, mathematical logic is just more informal mathematics).

By contrast, an historical rationality is exposed to challenges and pitfalls at every turn. Invoking an acute awareness of both uncertainty and context in the creation of knowledge, it is immediately both reflexive (self-referential) and recursive (as in the question, what is the 'history-of-the-philosophy-of....'?). And this relates not only to the epistemic status of knowledge, but also to any judgment of quality, which in the absence of Truth is all that we have for demarcation of the real from the not-real. It requires an intellect of more than average subtlety, even among philosophers, to recognize such problems and deal with them. Kadvanly the expositor handles them with consummate skill. Lakatos, the creator, nearly did but not quite. There were crucial points where he recognized that he was in deep water, as in his discussion of the 'warrant' for evaluations made by philosophers about scientific practice, past or present. (This was not an abstract issue, as he had declared that much of contemporary high-energy physics was a waste of money and should not be funded). But instead of recognizing that this problem was on a recursive escalator, to be handled with great care, he barged in and proposed solutions

that became increasingly counterintuitive. Thus his proposal for the ultimate 'warrant' was the practice of the great scientists, but in view of the unreliability of their accounts, it should be as reconstructed by the philosopher-historians. A sense of circularity cannot be dispelled.

It could be that Lakatos's technique of paradox, and his repeated mention of 'caricature' in his historical writing, were an attempt to bar those particular logical monsters of reflexivity and recursion that threatened his historicist epistemology. As Kadvany shows, he was indeed aware of them, and he did attempt a self-referential explanation of 'the methodology of research programmes'. Had this been accepted, Lakatos would have been acclaimed as a very powerful philosopher, bringing a new generation of philosophers to an historical sensibility. But by his very clarity in seeing and stating the issues, together with his love of shock and paradox, he laid a trap for himself, which his opponents were not slow in exploiting. His own efforts at confirmatory or exemplary history were derided as caricatures, that is, bogus history. Given Lakatos's personal experience with the Orwellian re-writes of history under Stalinism, his identification with the problem of 'rational reconstruction' was deep and perhaps conflicted. Finally, Kadvany shows that the detailed case studies of his 'Methodology of Research Programmes' carried out by his students, while of high quality, were generally not as illuminating as he would have hoped.

Such disappointments may be a strong reason why Lakatos has not had more influence among English-language philosophers of science in the years since his death. With all their sophistication, his schemata were no more capable of encompassing what actually happens in the ordinary practice of science than those of either Popper or Kuhn. But perhaps that was not what Lakatos was about, in spite of all his heroic forays into history and historiography. I have argued elsewhere that the whole philosophical movement, starting with the Vienna Circle, used science more as the uncontested symbol of rationality, rather than as a form of practice to be analyzed. Popper shared in this unspoken primal commitment. Kuhn was the first of the disenchanting generation of 'big science', and that was the profound issue that animated the great debate of the 1960s. Lakatos was quite clear (more than the others, as usual) that the debate was not about explanatory power but about ideology. But, given the aversion of the Anglophone intellectual style to history, the debate was easily sidetracked into linguistic issues, away from the deeper cultural problems where Lakatos was at home.

The big question behind the debate was how, and to what extent, are the Good and the True of science to be defended and preserved? In his own epiphany of 1919, Popper had experienced that The Scientist selflessly surrenders to the possibility of being proved wrong. In that way he saved the Good of science, but at the expense of the True. Coming many years later, Kuhn, a member of the first generation of 'big science' students, could not see

the problem at all. But his book had caught the imagination of a generation of students, and so he was (as the Popper school believed) a threat to science and indeed to the civilized values that (in their minds) it represented. For his own rescue job, Lakatos tried to finesse Popper and went ultra-historicist and eventually counter-intuitive. Finally, for Feyerabend the whole debate was anachronistic in the age of the military-industrial-scientific complex, as well as fundamentally naïve in philosophy. After Feyerabend came the deluge of the debunking sociologists.

That largely external history is all very well, for explaining the career of Lakatos in England. But that later story does not explain the philosopher's lifetime quest. There was a Lakatos before Popper, the Lakatos of *Proofs and Refutations* and of the Lukács he had read. That other Lakatos was always there, although progressively less clearly expressed as he became integrated into the Popper apparatus, and still later when he was the successor to Popper, with further personal struggles and a steadily weakening body. For understanding the original Lakatos we need Kadvany's guide to the guises of his reason. One of Kadvany's greatest achievements, coming out of all that impressive scholarship, is to indicate which historical questions may have no answers. In normal conditions for a disciplined inquiry, we can pose questions as either-or, and decide which alternative is correct. But Lakatos was not a normal person; and Stalinist Hungary was not a normal situation. As an example, we can debate whether Lakatos, like Marx (in the words of Lukács), merely flirted with an occasional Hegelian mode of expression, or whether this was a serious exercise in the subversion and communication of ideas. Kadvany chooses the latter, but the guises of Lakatos's reason are really too deep for us to know.

What was going on in Hungary could best be described as the torture of reason. The connection between the politics and the philosophy is summed up in Kadvany's insight:

Lakatos's philosophical work provides, along with much else, a window into that world, and the perverse relations of reason and terror that helped it function. In caricature, Lakatos's Stalinist Hungary was itself predicated on patterns of skeptical undecidability created through dissemblance, surveillance, informing, and betrayal. In broad epistemological terms, the depravity of Stalinism was an evil, inverted twin of skeptical, even scientific, criticism. In this way, the fascinating contradictions of Lakatos's many-layered ideas and life are those of the dangerous world he fled. (p. xix)

This analysis enables the following verdict: 'Imre Lakatos was a survivor whose philosophy is a testament to the cunning survival of reason in several of its guises' (p. xx).

With that background, which is as much in the way of biographical interpretation that Kadvany permits himself, we come away with a picture of someone who was formed in a world whose features we can only dimly

imagine; and we are indeed grateful for our ignorance. Lakatos cannot be explained in terms of the ordinary dichotomies or categories, because his formative experience was so extra-ordinary. That experience gave him his characteristic style, so powerful and yet also so self-destructive. It also isolated him from his Anglo-American colleagues who, during his lifetime and beyond, could have very little comprehension of what he was about.

One of the great merits of Kadvany's book is the way it opens a window into that vanished age, giving us a flavour of the intellectual debates and the big issues that motivated them. If any study could provide us with materials for relating ourselves to that world, this is it. Otherwise we are left with the post-Feyerabendian reaction to the militant positivism that the refugees brought with them and then passed on, in an inevitably ossified version, to their Anglo-American students. But now that the Middle European empires are fading memories, and both Fascism and Stalinism are long dead, does anything speak to us across that divide? And what do we lose if there is nothing to be learned?

We cannot expect too much in the way of doctrines. Up to Lakatos, the great living philosophical issues were refracted through epistemology. This was likely to have been a reflection of the historic 'war between science and theology', which was quite explicit even as late as the manifesto of the Vienna Circle. Now it is all different; the leading problems for the understanding of science are social and ethical. We no longer care whether science delivers the True; the big worry is whether in pursuit of the Good it is delivering too much in the way of evil. Feyerabend had something to say about all that; indeed it was part of his conversion experience in the California of the 1960s. But this came when the big debate was already winding down; *Against Method* of 1975 was really an epitaph for the whole period.

But there is one thing that links that age to ours, something that was rarely discussed explicitly but that lay behind all the debates. Because of the reification of Science, there was no distinction in that discourse between the integrity of the scientist and the integrity of science. The idea that a genuine scientist might need to fight against corruptions in science was still a novelty when the great debate took place. Typically, Lakatos showed his awareness of it through an anecdote about an (imaginary) vacuous but ever-expanding research programme. Popper was aware of the problem of integrity; indeed it was crucial for his (retrospectively narrated) conversion. Even if he framed it in a typically fantasized fashion, counterposing the (real-science) physicist Einstein against the (pseudo-science) psychologists, Marxists and astrologers, he put his finger firmly on the issue of (in Lakatos's phrase) intellectual honesty. We now know that life is not so simple, even in science; and for Lakatos, the contradictions of intellectual work under a tyranny gave him a heightened awareness of the perils of irony and intellectual subversion.

The present corrupting influences on science arising from the commercial

pressures of globalization are, of course, nothing compared to those imposed by a totalitarian state of the sort that moulded Lakatos. But now that science is so intimately linked to profit and power, the rules appropriate to those necessarily rougher games are imported into the scientific enterprise. Whistleblowing is admitted to be as much a part of the scientific scene as of any other. Some cases are notorious, as that of the scientists victimized by the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for speaking the truth about BSE. There are doubtless very many others. But in our system the punishment for integrity is usually no more than the loss of contracts or tenure, and the scientist can at least have a hope of going off and rebuilding his life elsewhere.

Looking at Lakatos's career in this light, it makes better sense and it also has something to tell us. Few are those who can simply stand out against evil, with no dialogue or compromise. And even they pay a price, in failing to comprehend how everyone else is being merely human. Lakatos had no alternative but to try to do his life's work, and then to survive, in a system where every sort of corruption was honed to perfection. Of course he shared in the corruption, and his career was inevitably deformed. But his own integrity, with all its imperfections and failings, also survived, thanks to the many guises that his talents enabled him to adopt. We, whose trials are insignificant in comparison, can take that lesson away from this book. Kadavy has shown us an epoch of intellectual history with great triumphs and incomparable tragedies. It was the formative background for an intellectual whose personal flaws do not detract from his philosophical brilliance and his deep, sometimes disguised integrity.

Received 17 December 2003

Jerome R. Ravetz, 106 Defoe House, Barbican, London EC2Y 8ND, UK. E-mail: jerry_ravetz@lineone.net