

Marxist standpoint on "Science and Society" debated at British university

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party was invited to present a guest lecture on 'Science and Society' to a postgraduate course entitled Biotechnology and Public Affairs. Organised by biochemistry lecturer Dr. David James at the University of Canterbury, Kent, the course is attended by students taking their Masters degree in biochemistry.

Dr. James had first met members of the SEP campaigning on the campus with the book *Human BSE: Anatomy of a Health Disaster* [<http://www.socialequality.org.uk/bse-o23.htm>], earlier this year. Most outside speakers invited to address the course are from the pharmaceuticals industry, including representatives of major corporations such as Unilever, SmithKline Beecham and Glaxo Wellcome. Although not a socialist, Dr. James thought it important that his students have an opportunity to hear an alternative perspective to that of the multinational companies.

The students listened attentively to the talk, entitled 'Science and Society, a Socialist Perspective', given by Chris Talbot, a member of the SEP who is a lecturer in mathematics.

A wide variety of questions were raised by the students at the end of the lecture and Dr. James was pleased at the interest they showed, which he remarked was in contrast to the poor response the industry speakers usually received. He invited the SEP to present a lecture to the course next year, but allowing two hours instead of one, so that there would be more time for questions and discussion.

Following the talk, Dr. James asked Chris Talbot to clarify what was meant by 'objective truth'. Talbot explained that this was obviously a vast issue, but he could use the example of Newtonian mechanics to illuminate the matter. 'Nobody would doubt the accuracy with which the motion of rockets and

satellites could be predicted on the basis of Newton's laws. Whilst tiny discrepancies might arise, which would need Einstein's Theory of General Relativity to explain, Newton's theory was adequate and provided scientists with objective truth. Many, many other scientific theories had been tested out and applied in practice, like Newtonian mechanics, and provide us with truth about the material world. The postmodernists have seized upon the disputes and controversies which arise in the course of the development of science and use this to give a false picture of science as a whole--implying that it is entirely relative.'

One student asked, 'Aren't these huge companies shooting themselves in the foot? If they take all the wealth, they won't be able to sell their products any longer.' Talbot replied, 'It is true that in their pursuit of profits the big corporations are entirely at the mercy of the market. The prices they charge and the huge profits they make are determined ultimately by the laws of capitalist economics. In the sense that there is growing instability and collapse in the world market, even whilst they are raking in billions they are 'shooting themselves in the foot'. Even those like George Soros, who recognise this instability, can do nothing about it. In the event of a downturn, or a fall in profits, these companies downsize and thousands are thrown out of a job. Capitalism cannot provide a secure future for the vast majority of the population.'

Dr. James asked, 'How are you going to organise the very costly research which is necessary in the development of drugs, etc.? How can it be done otherwise than by large companies?' A student answered this by saying, 'You can't look at it in that way--of how to make a profit.' Public funding of science was recognised as an alternative.

Another student raised the difference between present-

day science and science in the past. 'The equipment is really expensive today, compared to that used in the time of Einstein. At that time, it was more about ideas, but now it's about using those ideas, which is more expensive.' Talbot stressed that the international collaboration that is needed for current science is actually being held back by competition between private companies and between nation states. 'The resources should be publicly owned and democratically organised on a world scale.'

Dr. James questioned whether there really were cuts taking place in science. His department had recently received a government grant for hundreds of millions of pounds, and he thought there was still plenty of money available. Talbot accepted that the Labour government in Britain had increased funding for research in biochemistry 'because they believe it is a key area to attract investment. But overall there has been only a tiny increase in the amount given to scientific research by the Labour government, after many years of cutbacks. On a world scale evidence in the UNESCO report and other material cited in the lecture demonstrated clearly a downward trend in public funding for science.'

See Also:

Science and Society, a Socialist Perspective

A lecture by Chris Talbot

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