

WSWS correspondence on the human genome project

27 July 2000

The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter about the article “Human Genome Project: First scientific milestone of the twenty-first century” [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jul2000/gen-j11.shtml] published July 11. A reply by Chris Talbot follows.

Congratulations on a sober article. Your points about Mr. Clinton's embracing divine obscurantism in preference to following the science he gushes about, and his sensitivity to the value of biotech stocks, are very well taken. Likewise, the patenting of genes is indeed reprehensible. I would disagree, however, with your evaluation of Craig Venter's technical ideas and Celera's role in deciphering the human genome (among others). The Human Genome Project, directed first by the brilliant (but less than admirable) Nobel laureate, James Watson, and subsequently by Francis Collins, is dominated in the US by a clique of “insiders” who refused to fund Venter's grant applications on the grounds that his approaches were not feasible, only to find that he was beating them to the prize at a much lower cost than their own projections.

Yours sincerely,

Philip Bromberg, MD

Dear Dr. Bromberg:

Thank you for commending the human genome article. The point I was making about Venter concerns the unprecedented degree to which the drive for profit has entered every area of scientific research. It is this that is behind the patenting of genes and more generally the treatment of scientific knowledge as a commodity governed by “intellectual property rights” which is so inimical to the free flow of information and the ethos of scientific inquiry. It is also the investment for profit at every stage of scientific and technical development in medicine which is a major factor in creating the huge inequalities, globally as well as in each country, in health care provision.

I can well believe that the scientific establishment blocked Venter's technically innovative approach—it would hardly be an unusual occurrence! However, the points by John Sulston that I quoted were relevant: Venter was relying on using their material, which was being continuously updated on the Internet, and the competition had only speeded up the project by one year.

This is not to agree with the argument that the capitalist market encourages competition and innovation whilst “socialism” and the state sector stifles it, which was at one time the line of the political right but is now often treated as a truism. Genuine competition between differing scientific approaches and theories does not thrive under market conditions. There are many, many cases where fundamental research has been blocked because it is of a long-term nature and has no immediate likelihood of making a profit. For example, particle physics has suffered from severe cutbacks, and the development of drugs for diseases like malaria, which mainly affect the third world, have been shelved.

What is more, the tendency of the market system to produce monopolies means that innovations can often be a threat to profits and existing products—as in the Microsoft case. Nor would I make an absolute distinction between the private sector and publicly funded research in universities, which is routinely vetted to make sure it is of “relevance” for corporate profits.

Socialism would bring the truly democratic control of production and resources by the whole of society as opposed to a tiny minority of millionaires and billionaires. This would actively encourage the competition of ideas and research programmes, which are so vital to the development of science. Equally, education in a scientific outlook and the rejection of all

mystical ideas about the place of mankind in the world—typified by Clinton's speech on the human genome—are an essential component of a revival of a socialist culture and working class politics.

Sincerely,
Chris Talbot



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