An exchange: How should socialists approach the issue of stem cell research?

25 August 2001

Many readers have written in about the commentaries posted on the World Socialist Web Site *on the issue of stem cell research and the Bush administration's recent decision to bar funding for research which involves the creation of new lines of stem cells from human embryos. Several of these letters come from readers sympathetic to socialism who raise concerns about stem cell research and other methods of genetic engineering. Below we publish two of these letters with replies by Patrick Martin.*

While Patrick Martin's 8/14/01 ["Bush's stem cell decision: an attack on medical science and democratic rights"] article made many good points, I was surprised that such a good Socialist didn't expose the cunning latent in the presidential decision: if I am not mistaken, the regulation so far applies only to "government funded", i.e., public institutional, stem cell research while it leaves "privately funded" stem cell research unregulated.

This either means that Bush has fewer moral scruples where private entrepreneurial stem cell research is concerned or—more likely—has decided to "enable" the biotech industry to get any "stem cell cures" across the finish line faster and into patent rights before the results of government funded research can reach the public domain.

The overly shrill lamentation about the forthcoming lack of sufficient stem cell research is something of a red herring: there will be plenty of such research—just not under public auspices and in the citizen consumers' best interests.

If those consumers think the drug industrial monopolists already charge too much for pills and panaceas, just wait until the privately patented and monopolized "stem cell cures" hit the market...

Q

14 August 2001

Patrick Martin replies:

At first blush, your letter seems based on a misunderstanding. You suggest that Bush has barred public funding of stem cell research not because he is actually opposed to such research, but in order to clear the way for private capitalists to conduct the research and develop medicines and therapies from stem cells that can become a source of profit. Bush's stem cell decision would then be a sort of back-door privatization.

Bush administration officials, however, have made it clear that the White House opposes any research using stem cells newly obtained from human embryos, whatever the source of funding. There is no federal law banning such research, so the president has no legal power to suppress private efforts to develop new stem cell lines. White House aides indicated that Bush would sign such a law if Congress were to pass it, although that seems unlikely at present, since a majority in both houses appears to favor a more supportive approach to stem cell research than that announced by Bush.

It is, of course, quite correct for you to warn that in the event of a breakthrough in stem cell research and the development of new cures and treatments, private capitalist interests will seek to profit from them in the monopolistic fashion which is typical of the drug industry. But this by itself does not explain the attitude of the Bush administration to the issue.

It would be wrong to believe that a socialist analysis consists of tracing the decisions of a capitalist government to the immediate financial benefits to be conferred on one or another group of capitalists. This is too simplistic. The relation between the political superstructure and economic base in capitalist society is a complex and dialectical one, characterized by reciprocal interaction, in which political ideology and conflicting social forces play a major role. To conceive of this process mechanically or reduce it to dollar signs would be a vulgar caricature of Marxism.

The Bush administration, like any capitalist government, defends the profit system and the class interests of the wealthy. But it does so through the methods of politics, however corrupted and debased these have become in the America of 2001. His stem cell decision actually injured the financial prospects of the American genetic engineering companies, and even of Wall Street as a whole, since European and Asian capitalists will likely gain an edge in this potentially crucial industry. But it was deemed more critical by Bush and his political handlers to maintain the support of the fundamentalist Christian elements who are the only reliable social base of the Republican Party.

Dear Editor,

I am a socialist, but I don't like your article on stem cell research. It appears you are dodging any discussion of the actual research in order to bash Bush. Your religious fanatic : enlightened scientist dichotomy is simplistic and years out of date. I personally consider the use of human embryos in medicine appalling, not because I am a religious fanatic, but because I consider it a further alienation and exploitation of human life by capitalism. Extending the boundaries of human knowledge is, of course, a good thing, but it is sheer naiveté to believe that modern science is at all concerned with the good of the human race.

I no longer have any sympathy for those who would subsume humanitarian goals to the furthering of medical knowledge, because of the grotesque situation we have at present, where the biggest health problems facing the world are poverty related, and the cures have been available for decades. The reason why they are not is that the economic system could not feed all those extra mouths. Stem cell research is directed towards finding cures for diseases of affluence, i.e., prolonging the lives of wealthy Europeans, like the Pope and Ronald Reagan.

Genetically modified food is also directly related, as another piece of disgusting hypocrisy from the scientific community. While claiming to combat world hunger they work to commodify plant and animal species. I blame the scientists because if they are not aware of the lies they are peddling then they are liable for criminal stupidity. Science is a tool, under democratic socialist control it could be directed to improve life for everyone. At present, because of the increasing amount of investment it requires, it is a tool of alienation and commodification.

Yours for the revolution,

AT

14 August 2001

Patrick Martin replies:

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Your letter expresses a justifiable outrage over the perversion of science and medicine under capitalism, but you draw a far too sweeping and one-sided conclusion, essentially declaring that since modern science develops within the framework of capitalism, nothing good can come from it. You may be unaware that in taking this position, you are repudiating the historical legitimacy of socialism itself. As Marx explained, scientific socialism bases itself on the conquests of bourgeois thought and bourgeois science—English political economy (Smith, Ricardo), German classical philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach), French socialist and revolutionary theories (Fourier, St.-Simon, the French Revolution).

I take exception to the claim that the "religious fanatic : enlightened scientist dichotomy is years out of date." No one should disparage the struggle for scientific knowledge against religious superstition, in America of all countries. We live in a society where the teaching of evolution continues to be a quasi-legal activity in many states, where there are periodic campaigns to purge "immoral" books from school and public libraries, where it has been illegal for government-funded pregnancy counselors to discuss abortion, where the majority of people profess belief in UFOs and angels.

Such a comment reveals an adaptation to the prevailing backwardness of official public opinion. There is also, perhaps, a guilty conscience at work. An earlier comment in the *WSWS* noted that the "socialist" Vermont congressman Bernard Sanders had joined with ultra-right Republican leader Tom DeLay in opposing stem cell research. You may find such an alliance uncomfortable, and so you deny in advance the significance of an accommodation with "religious fanatics."

You add that it is naive to believe that "modern science is at all concerned with the good of the human race." Let us look at this question concretely.

The commercial laboratories of the big corporations are directed to the pursuit of profit, to be sure, although they have nonetheless produced some of the more important technical breakthroughs of the modern era—Edison himself became a successful capitalist. Among scientists as a whole, there is no doubt as wide a range of outlooks as in any other sizeable community. Many are genuinely devoted to the development of knowledge and the advancement of the human condition—and these, while not identical, are closely interrelated. Some have entered the field for largely self-seeking reasons, although such individuals seldom excel. Others fall somewhere in between. To suggest, on the contrary, that all scientists are uniformly motivated by anti-human sentiments bespeaks an extreme and unwarranted pessimism.

The heart of your argument on stem cells is the claim: "I personally consider the use of human embryos in medicine appalling, not because I am a religious fanatic, but because I consider it a further alienation and exploitation of human life by capitalism." Despite the disavowal of a religious motive, this language suggests an agreement with the position of the Catholic Church and the Protestant fundamentalists, who maintain that embryos are "human life," in the full sense of the term, and thus equate the destruction of a frozen embryo with infanticide and murder.

Would you oppose the use of human embryos in medicine if it were to take place under a different socioeconomic system? Have you considered this question? Would you object to production of stem cell lines by destroying embryos, leading to the development of cures for cancer, diabetes or Parkinson's, if carried out by a socialist society with no extraneous monetary rewards for those engaged in the research? If the answer is yes, then you must be counted among the religious opponents of stem cell research, despite protestations to the contrary.

Let us assume that you reject the peculiar religious conception that the embryo, a tiny aggregation of a few dozen cells, is a fully human person equipped with a God-given soul, entitled to as much consideration as a child afflicted with diabetes or an elderly victim of Alzheimer's. In that case how does stem cell research constitute "further alienation and exploitation of human life by capitalism"? Only in the sense that all human activity within the framework of capitalism is exploited for profit. Today agriculture, manufacture, science and culture are all exploited commercially. But under socialism, all these activities will continue. Indeed, they will flourish as never before, precisely because they will be liberated from the constraints of the profit system—constraints that include the pernicious impact of religious superstition.

Here we come to the fundamental problem with your perspective: a vulgar and superficial radicalism which rejects capitalism in much the same way that the Catholic convert renounces "the devil and all his works." You identify science with capitalism, reject capitalism in favor of socialism—or at least, your notion of it—and accordingly damn science as well.

You declare that science under capitalism is "a tool of alienation and commodification." One might as well say, and with equal justice, that the English language under capitalism is a tool of alienation and commodification—to say nothing of its role as a means of imposing the cultural/political domination of American imperialism over the globe. Should we then refuse to make use of English, turn our backs on Shakespeare, Byron and Dreiser, and confine ourselves in the future to Esperanto?

It is quite legitimate to point out that the biggest health problems facing mankind today are related to poverty and social injustice, not inadequate scientific knowledge. But again, the conclusion you draw from this premise is preposterous: "Stem cell research is directed towards finding cures for diseases of affluence, i.e. prolonging the lives of wealthy Europeans, like the Pope and Ronald Reagan."

Aside from the empirical fact that diseases such as diabetes and Parkinson's disproportionately affect the poor and certain minority populations, this whole method of argument is reactionary in the extreme. One could reject, on this basis, every scientific and technical advance of the twentieth, and even the nineteenth century. Electrical power, the telephone, the airplane, the automobile, the computer—all were initially utilized only by a privileged few. Even today, 50 percent of the human race has never used a telephone. Should we regard this invention as a means of communication devised for "wealthy Europeans"? This kind of argument is, to put it bluntly, sophomoric. It reveals either extreme impatience or a tinge of cynicism.

You end your letter, "Yours for the revolution." In my view, the only revolution worth fighting for is one that makes available to all humanity the enormous achievements of science and technology. Socialism is not a youthful affectation, or a handful of radical slogans. It is a historical perspective, the only one that can provide a progressive future for humanity. It means the genuine liberation of mankind from the shackles of a social system that subordinates human welfare to the profit interests of a tiny privileged minority. Accordingly, it can only be established through an independent, self-conscious movement of the working class majority of the human race. This requires the political education of workers, youth and intellectuals in the entire heritage of human culture, including the greatest achievements of bourgeois culture and bourgeois science.

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