

A letter and reply on Mars landing

26 August 2008

On “Mars Phoenix Lander provides conclusive proof of ice water on Mars”

I was surprised at the enthusiastic tone of this article. I was waiting for the conclusion that spending billions of dollars to search for water on Mars might have been better spent cleaning up or creating water supplies for the billions of people here on Earth without a safe and adequate supply.

TJ

Bentonville, Arkansas, USA

11 August 2008

Reply to TJ letter of August 9, 2008

Dear TJ,

Thank you for your letter dated August 9, 2008. I would like to take up some of the points you make in your letter, as they raise important questions regarding the attitude of the socialist movement to science, its future and to the future of society itself.

You write, “I was surprised at the enthusiastic tone of this article. I was waiting for the conclusion that spending billions of dollars to search for water on Mars might have been better spent cleaning up or creating water supplies for the billions of people here on Earth without a safe and adequate supply”.

Firstly, the enthusiastic tone is in part due to both my own sense of wonderment at what has been achieved by the Mars Phoenix Lander and a personal interest in the subject of planetary science in general. More fundamentally, I hoped with my article to help develop an appreciation and understanding of the fundamental importance of such advances.

It cannot be stressed enough that the socialist movement positively advocates and encourages scientific development, discovery, research and thought. We regard this as integral to the process of humanity uncovering the basic laws of nature.

The momentous scientific achievements and discoveries that have been accomplished in the past decade in the different missions to Venus, Mars, Saturn, various moons and other celestial objects in the solar system, have served

to greatly enhance and revolutionise our understanding of the universe, and of the place of our planet within it.

Secondly, you write that you were “waiting for the conclusion that spending billions of dollars to search for water on Mars might have been better spent cleaning up or creating water supplies for the billions of people here on Earth without a safe and adequate supply.”

Essentially your argument, as I see it, is that such missions are a drain on already limited resources, and as such are a diversion from resolving the more pressing problems facing humanity—such as supplying clean water on Earth to billions of people who do not have access to it.

But these pressing social problems are the product of the capitalist system and they cannot be overcome within its framework. The technology and resources already exist to resolve all of the present social ills, whilst at the same time vastly expanding mankind’s scientific endeavours. But such a socially-progressive utilisation of the world’s resources on a harmonious basis is impossible under capitalism. Under the profit system, these resources are in private hands and are used for the accumulation of vast riches by a corporate elite, whilst poverty, disease and hunger continue to afflict the majority of mankind.

Even if one were to accept your argument at face value, the scrapping of space projects such as the Mars Phoenix Lander, would not make a jot of difference to solving the myriad social problems facing mankind.

Indeed, far from it being the case that “billions of dollars” are being lavished on space research today, over the last decade there have been enormous cuts made in science budgets internationally. Space projects in particular have been slashed.

These cuts include the scaling back and withdrawing of funding for some of the most prestigious scientific projects and institutions, such as those cuts that have occurred at NASA itself. In March 2006, NASA’s science spending was cut by \$3.1 billion for the five-year period from 2007 to 2011.

This has resulted in significant delays to projects, with

others being deferred indefinitely or scrapped altogether.

Under the terms of the budget cuts, the five-year annual average for the Mars program is \$350 million. This is significantly less than the \$620 million per year planned for 2009-2012 in the previous year's budget proposal.

In a March edition of *Space News*, Robert Braun, who is an aerospace engineering professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology in the US, commented on the disastrous impact of such cuts. Braun has worked on Mars exploration projects for 20 years. "By removing any semblance of a continuous exploration sequence, this week's announcement puts the future Mars program on a path toward irrelevance. The budget requested is simply inadequate to complete the next steps in this remarkable exploration program."

Please refer to our article on this below, which reveals the impact of such cuts on space science both in the US and internationally.

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/nasa-m20.shtml>

Given this scale of cutbacks, which can properly be termed scientific and cultural vandalism; it is to the great credit of scientists and researchers internationally that they have even achieved what they have.

In today's mass and increasingly complex society—the product of an unprecedented development of industry and technological development—there is more than ever the necessity for a very high level of international co-ordination and social planning.

Unhindered scientific research, free from corporate dominance and control and based on a free flow of information, is critical to such an international struggle.

The WSWs publishes articles on questions of science and encourages a lively interest in such questions because we consider them to be a critical part of the development of a socialist culture.

Robert Stevens



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