

Science for the People: The 1970s and Today

A 3-Day Conference (11-13 April 2014) at UMass Amherst
Hosted by the Social Thought & Political Economy Program

This conference on the history of the 1970s-1980s organization Science for the People (SftP) and its implications for science activism today will bring together veteran members of the organization along with other scientists, Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars, science activists, graduate students, and undergraduates. It will include keynote speakers representing SftP and STS perspectives, panels on the historical and sociological significance of SftP, and panels on approaches to issues (e.g., energy policy, agricultural science and food justice, and the scientific construction of race and gender) that SftP addressed and that our society continues to face now. In addition to providing a public forum, it will produce lasting resources for the continued study of science activism.

Science for the People arose out of the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War era. With a Marxist analysis and non-hierarchical governing structure, SftP tackled the militarization of scientific research, the corporate control of research agendas, the political implications of sociobiology theories, environmental consequences of energy policy, inequalities in health care, and many other issues. Its members opposed racism, sexism, and classism in science and above all sought to mobilize people working in scientific fields to become active in agitating for science, technology, and medicine that would serve social needs rather than military and corporate interests. They organized in universities and communities, published a magazine offering sharp political analysis, and sought meaningful scientific exchange internationally in Vietnam, China, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other countries.

Some of the issues we face today have changed in important ways, but fundamental questions of power, ideology, and democracy in science remain. The time is ripe to gather SftP veterans with other scientists, activists, students, and STS scholars in an exploration of what the history of SftP can teach us. Scientists need to develop more effective analyses of the social and political causes of the problems they seek to address. Activists need to obtain a better grasp of the scientific dimensions of their causes and a clearer sense of who their allies are in the scientific world. Students need to learn strategies for putting their science education to work in ways consistent with their social and political goals. And STS scholars need to deepen our understanding of an organization that had an important, though under-acknowledged, early influence on our field (Martin 1993) and to explore how re-establishing engagement with activist scientists might enrich our own research and writing.

We are planning a weekend conference on the UMass Amherst campus to be held during the spring semester of 2014. The conference will provide a public forum to discuss the following questions:

- What were the central premises underlying SftP work, what made it an effective organization, and what were its limitations? Specifically, what consequences did SftP's commitments to non-hierarchical organizing, anti-elitist politics, engagement with radical social movements, and working outside the system have for its ability to effect change compared with such older, liberal organizations as the Union of Concerned Scientists?
- What has changed since that time, both in terms of the issues the world faces and the political principles that activists embrace? How does SftP compare to more recent efforts to transform science in terms of scope, critical approach, and effectiveness?
- How can scientists and activists work together, and what tensions exist between them?
- How can STS scholars contribute to these conversations, and how can an exploration of the history of Science for the People contribute to the development of the growing STS literature on science and activism?

The organizers have created a website to facilitate conference planning by the almost 70 people who have already expressed interest. That website will be made public following the conference and will include a brief history of SftP, scanned materials produced by SftP, a summary of the conference's major themes, panel descriptions, and video recordings of the panels. Another major contribution will be the compilation of written historical narratives by former members of SftP with analysis by STS graduate students.