

# **The PLACE of SCIENCE in the EUROPEAN SOCIETY**

## ***Daily scoops, or policy imperative?***

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If any one could have any doubt on the place held by science in society, European history and, even more so, Spanish history would provide ample justifications to make it an issue. The Renaissance and the age of Enlightenment indeed provided ample demonstrations of the arts and sciences put to the service of emerging nations. Spain has always had a deep appreciation for the importance that science has in improving the economic and social welfare of its citizens. Even before Spain existed as a proper nation state, the familiarity with all possible forms of knowledge developed by the Umayyad dynasty in Al-Andalus shaped a surprising society capable of attracting over 5 centuries some of the most renown artists and scholars of the whole Mediterranean basin. Today more than ever Spain has become keenly aware of the need to improve in R&D to preserve the competitive of its economic base. The 2005 budget already shows a very significant increase in R&D expenditures that represent now over 1% of its GDP, and there is a strong commitment by all political parties that Spain should continue this effort in the next years and even double its share of GDP dedicated to research endeavours. More than ever there is recognition of the importance of the role of Research, Development and Innovation activities in shaping the future economic tissue of the country. This realization is very obvious at all levels i.e. national, autonomic and local as shown by the myriad of initiatives taking place. Science is definitely an important part of the common heritage and engagement of all Europeans, but how is it perceived today?

Last year, we conducted a “Eurobarometer Survey” across the 25 nations of the European Union on public perceptions of science and technology. It showed, in general, a high level of awareness and a critical sense in the population as a whole. The good news come from a prevalent trust in long term S&T potentials and in the contributions made by university-based scientists. However...

## A science-society relationship filled with ambiguity

The proportion of Europeans confessing loss of interest in public affairs (politics, news, sports, culture, science and technology) is growing when compared to previous years. Whereas scientific literacy remains either stable or even on a slow growth, many do associate scientific progress with negative consequences – such as job losses, or the breaching of ethical and moral limits. And, there remains an underlying mistrust of institutions regulating scientific research and technology development, which possess excessive power due to prerogatives associated with their specialised knowledge and a putative remoteness from the democratic debate. Above all, European citizens seem to be caught into intriguing contradictions when it comes to valuing scientific progress. For example, this last survey reveals a reasonable optimism with regard to the role played by scientific knowledge, however clashing with a great deal of pessimism when it comes to predicting a future to the coming generations. Likewise, questions will arise from the fact that parents do care for the future of their children very much, but fail to recognise that imagination, or hard work play any decisive role in bringing up their kids. Such questions do point at all sectors of society simultaneously: at politicians, at the educational system, but certainly also at organisations of the civil society. Hence the following 3 challenges:

- How can decision makers develop **robust public policies** – for example on energy, the environment, or consumer safety – if an increasingly sceptical population mistrusts governments' scientific advisers?
- What is the point of pumping public money into technological development if the fruits of that development are rejected by a concerned public? The story of GMOs and plant breeding illustrates how the economic return on R&D investments cannot be realised without **public confidence**.
- And how can citizens make choices over new technologies, or understand risks, if **scientific literacy** is falling in the population as a whole?

## **Some promising tracks based on inclusiveness**

To tackle these questions in a coherent way we need to engage with a web of other actors, including politicians, consumers, civil society groups, industrialists and the public at large. The Aho report “Creating an innovative Europe” (January 2006, pursuant to the Hampton Court Summit) alleges: *“All the drivers of Europe’s innovation ecology are willing to work together to achieve European prosperity, competitiveness and quality of life [...] One needs to foster a cultural shift which celebrates innovation”*.

The Commission made an important step in this direction at the start of the Sixth Framework Programme where, with a relatively modest budget of €80 million, it launched the programme theme “Science and Society”. This funding strand has supported a range of catalytic actions, each designed in different ways to bring science and society just a little bit closer. For example, through the participation of patient groups and other concerned individuals in deliberations alongside scientists, policy makers, civil society representatives - such as on genetic testing and on brain science. Or, via networks of national officials and specialists for the exchange of information and good practices, towards common guidelines and objectives. In the area of “women and science” for example, common statistical frameworks which allow increased comparability have been established, and targets for women in decision-making positions related to research have been developed.

## **Society in the heart of our strategy for competitiveness and sustainability**

EU policy leaders never miss an opportunity to set the objectives of competitiveness, growth and employment (Lisbon, 2000) in the context of a more engaged society based on education, knowledge-production and innovation. A growing scientific culture, more investment in research, the release of entrepreneurial forces through a regulatory environment more conducive to innovation, may well be the main ingredients of a recipe for Europe to wake up again, but will our society find it to its taste? As important as an input strategy for the attainment of Lisbon’s goals is a participatory strategy, adhered to by large numbers among European citizens. *“Special attention should be paid to young people, the role of women in science and to science awareness in society at large”*, stressed the Competitiveness Council in its review of the Lisbon strategy of 28 February 2005. Well in tune with such a widely shared feeling, and in best position to voice societal concerns, the European Parliament issued

on 10 March 2005 a resolution based on the Locatelli's report which adds: "*the need for the European Union to take specific actions to bring science closer to the citizen, which should be reflected in European research policy and in the forthcoming Framework Programme*", while "*adapting research agendas to take account of social issues and the need for technological innovation*".

Reinforced by such a policy drive, the European Commission considered itself well supported to raise the profile of science studies and of participatory processes in its proposal for a future research programme (2007-2013), addressing research capacities and the science-society interface.

## **May a community research programme give room to collective dreams?**

Here I would like to outline some of the new features we intend to introduce:

- In certain cases we will help civil society groups (not-for profit NGOs) to "outsource" research to universities and other research performers.
- For the first time we will support multi-disciplinary 'Science in Society' research on the relationships between science, democracy and law, on ethics in science and technology, on the reciprocal influence of science and culture, on gender aspects or on science education methods.
- We also intend to step-up quite dramatically our efforts in communicating science to the broader public. This will mean forging closer links with both the audio-visual media and the press.
- Finally, we want to encourage Member States to cooperate at both practical and policy levels in the area of Science in Society. Countries which are somehow more 'advanced' can inspire others.

Looking now to the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme, we have proposed a further expansion of 'Science in Society' and an increased budget to match. This will add to the leverage effect of the whole Framework Programme: Why is this?

1) A better informed and more engaged public can be more at ease with science and technology. There will still be controversies, of course, but we should aim for real debate rather than ‘dialogues of the deaf’! A transparent culture of explanation, consultation and dialogue is a simple matter of democratic accountability.

2) ‘Science in society’ will also lead to better EU policies in general, by promoting more efficient use of scientific advice and by encouraging open and structured interaction between experts, civil society, policy-makers and other stakeholders.

3) Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, societal debate can also lead to better science. Concerned stakeholders can raise new questions and open up unexpected research avenues.

If we get it right, it is a strategy for a winning Europe !