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Research and Innovation: a Necessity

By Josep M. Vilalta

The Government of Mariano Rajoy has accomplished something unprecedented. In 2012 the scientific and academic community of the Spanish state, with a single voice, called for a change to Spain's research and innovation policy in its *Carta abierta por la ciencia* [Open letter for science in Spain]. This community included the *Confederació de Societats Científiques d'Espanya* [Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies], the *Conferència de Rectors de les Universitats Espanyoles* [Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities], the platform *Investigació Digna*, the *Federació de Joves Investigadors* [Federation of Young Investigators], the unions CCOO and UGT, and with the support of 52 scientific societies and more than 130,000 signatures, including those of several Nobel prize winners. At the same time, the prestigious international science journal *Nature*, in an editorial published a few weeks ago, advocated for a complete U-turn in Spain's research and development policy and urged the Spanish government to put an end to cuts in research, innovation and technology development.

Both initiatives show that research and innovation are key factors for economic competitiveness and progress, and are an essential tool for overcoming the crisis and achieving a change in production model. In fact, the Law of Science, Technology and Innovation, approved in May 2011 by an almost unanimous vote of members of Spain's Congress and Senate, states in its preamble that "the Spanish production model (...) has been exhausted, which is why it is necessary to promote a change through a commitment to research and innovation as a means to achieve a knowledge-based economy that would guarantee much more balanced, diversified and sustainable growth". As the journal *Nature* states, scientific research in Spain is in a critical state, due to the budget cuts that began in 2010 (when Rodríguez Zapatero's government was still in power) and have continued until today. The percentage of GDP invested in research dropped for the first time in 2011 to 1.33%, still very far from the 2% target set by the Spanish government itself and the 3% of GDP proposed in the European Strategy 2020, a figure already achieved by countries like Finland (3.87%) and Sweden (3.42%). In that same year (2011), the number of researchers decreased 3.1% compared to 2010, which is a possible sign of a brain drain. We could also mention the funding cuts to research centers, public universities, and Spain's inability to pay its part of the financing of large European projects (CERN, ESA, ESF). At the same time, the management of funds destined to research has become more complex, while calls and their payments have been delayed on various occasions, causing disbelief within the scientific community. The Spanish scientific community is still ranked ninth in the world in terms of numbers of scientific publications but soon it could fall in this and other international rankings.

One of the reasons given by the Spanish Ministry to justified these significant reductions is that they prefer to prioritize excellence and concentrate efforts. Empirical evidence shows us, however, that in order to achieve excellence it is necessary to have a broad and solid scientific base. We only have to look at the investments of the most developed countries and analyze the close correlation between the most competitive economies and public and private investment in research and innovation.

How can all of this be possible? How can it be that, despite the speeches and the laws that declare a commitment to research and innovation, and despite all the evidence that corroborates how helpful public and private investment can be for research and innovation, the Spanish government implements a public policy that is so erratic and has been making constant cuts since 2010? Why not focus our energies on reforming the scientific and university system to make it even stronger and more competitive, rather than simply reducing funding and nothing more? Why not work to have research generate innovation and, thus, wealth and jobs in business? I continue to think, as I wrote back in 2009 when we were beginning to sense the looming cuts, that Spain's social and economic model has not yet internalized the paradigm shift towards a knowledge-based economy. And this is clearly reflected in its immature political culture, defined by isolated and erratic actions and lacking the sufficient social awareness to ensure that education, universities and scientific research be collective priorities as well as free from short-term patisanship and the vagaries of annual budgets.

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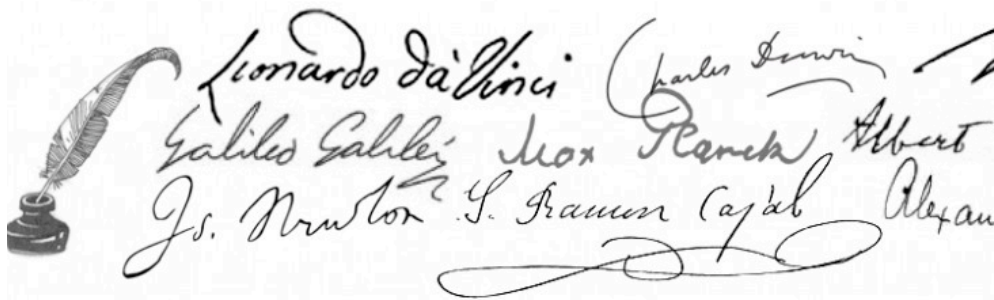
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