



Retrospective with the former ERC Secretary General

The process of creating the ERC seems to have been very long (at least from 2002 until 2007), despite the real need for such an institution at the European level: why?

Andreu Mas-Colell. For a massive and innovative program five years is not a lot. When the National Science Foundation (NSF) was launched in the USA it also took 5 years of political maneuvering. It should not be underestimated how unlikely the ERC was. For example, two of its key features (to my mind the key features): evaluation panels totally appointed by a (distinguished) Scientific Council and individual grants (no networks and no theme or geographical prerequisites), were quite at odds with the practice of European research funding. Why did it happen? It was a deal, that has turned out to be very successful, between two collectivities that did not quite trust each other: the European scientific

community and the European Union. The first recognized that only the EU had the capacity (administrative and financial) to develop a powerful European wide program and adopted an

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attitude of vigilant flexibility in the early negotiations, and the second recognized that its own credibility required building up as a key stakeholder, to complement the weight of the large research-intensive corporations, the elite of European academic science. The result has been a spectacular success.

Nowadays, it is usual to connect “research” to “industry” or “economic development”, but was it the case at the beginning of the ERC?

AMC. The connection has always been made. But there are two variations, one wrong and the other correct. The wrong one sees research and innovation as alternatives. Money for research is money potentially detracted from innovation. The correct one, with which I feel comfortable and is now more prevalent (although not yet completely hegemonic), thanks in part to the ERC, views «innovation» as the overall economic drive and (frontier) research as one of the pillars of innovation. Not the only one (availability of capital or good intellectual property frameworks would be others) but an indispensable one: you are not going to have an innovative Europe if you do not have first-class research in Europe. A related point: I believe it is understood, and the

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ERC has contributed to solidify that, that the fostering of frontier research requires the kind of curiosity driven academic environments that tradition has developed and fine-tuned (even if the funding of science has always had an ultimate practical ambition, be it defense, industrial might or public health,...).

After 7 years, do you think ERC Grants have been able to make new fields of excellence emerge in Europe?

AMC. What is sure is that they have contributed decisively to fix, consolidate and expand the research excellence we have in Europe. Without it we would have regressed.

TSE and other European institutions are trying to establish a “reverse brain drain” to attract future “stars” to Europe: how can the ERC help them to succeed?

AMC. This is part of the remit of the ERC. I would not say, however, that as yet the performance in this respect has been exceptional. The ERC can help providing certification and a solid financial landing pad. But the leadership of universities, research institutions and member state research policies in this front is indispensable. Certainly the ERC has stirred the institutional research landscape in the right direction but my impression is that there is still ground to cover.

The EU is launching its new “Horizon 2020” programme: what are the new research challenges for Europe?

AMC. Horizon 2020 (the continuation, under a different name, of the Framework Programs) represents a substantial opportunity for European science, not the least because in times of austerity in many member states budgets the EU research and innovation budget (Horizon 2020) increases considerably (and so does the ERC budget). Hence the increased competitiveness has a chance of being met in an orderly fashion, especially if the program rises to the challenge of operating through first-rate evaluation.

Here the ERC procedures can offer benchmarking and good practices. Another interesting development, beyond the Horizon 2020 program, that hopefully will bear fruits, is the establishment of a new linkage between innovation and structural funds policies (the so-called RIS3 agenda).

Today the Catalan minister of economy, you were previously Catalan minister of higher education and research, general secretary of the ERC and researcher at Berkeley and Harvard before launching one of the best research centres in economics in Europe (Barcelona Graduate School of Economics): in the field of research and higher education in economics, what are the assets of Europe vs. emerging zones such as Asia or vs. leading countries such as the USA?

AMC. For research in general I have to believe in a good future - bright future perspective for Europe. Science (with democracy) is one of the great contributions of Europe to civilization and I do not want to believe that we will let ourselves slide dramatically in this dimension. Economics is a bit special here. The same logic applies but the initial condition is, in some contrast to many of the natural and biological sciences, very lopsided in favor of the USA. Still, the effort is wor-

thwhile and there is progress. Something we must strive for (another good lesson from the USA) is stability. Europe should do better at guaranteeing that the positions acquired (often under the initiative of an enthusiastic group of scholars) are not undone by time. The key is understanding that achieving and maintaining quality is primarily the responsibility of the institutions, not of the individual researchers in them, however good and prominent they are at a given time.

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Andreu Mas-Colell is the Catalanian Minister of Economy and Knowledge and Professor of Economics at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona (currently on leave). Formerly he was Professor of Economics and Mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley (1972-80), Professor of Economics at Harvard University (1981-95), and Chairman of the Barcelona Graduate School of Economics (2006-2010). He has served as main Editor of the Journal of Mathematical Economics (1985-88), and of Econometrica (1988-92). He was ERC Secretary General from 2009 to 2010.

