

Honorary doctorate for Mariana Mazzucato

Saló de Cent, Plaça Sant Jaume 1, Barcelona City Hall, Barcelona

Mayor Colau,
Vice-President of the Government,
university rectors,
councillors, professors,
ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to begin by talking about Newton's first law, the law of inertia: "a body continues in its state of rest, or in uniform motion in a straight line, unless acted upon by a force".

Although Newton is only talking about physics, metaphorically this first law is also illustrative of the inertia of thought. Indeed, with his laws, Newton boldly challenged the Aristotelian idea that had prevailed for 20 centuries. And nothing impoverishes knowledge more than just taking things for granted.

The professional career of our new honorary doctor has been characterized precisely by her departure from pre-established ideas. Her academic contributions, her research and publications, and her participation in public debate have been characterized by questioning a narrative that has been dominant for decades about the supposed success of the market versus the failure of the state.

«Overcoming the reluctance to think differently means relying on scientific method, critically reviewing our assumptions, seeking alternative genealogies, and proposing new ideas and interpretations that can be challenged or validated by our peers.»

It may seem like this is enough, but in fact we're only halfway there. Because knowledge is only useful when it circulates, when it is interconnected, when it goes beyond the confines of our office, library or lab, and has a real social impact.

What I'm saying is not revolutionary. Francis Bacon, the father of the English scientific revolution, was already advocating for this when he imagined a civilization in which science would be a great collective enterprise aimed at improving the living conditions of humanity.

Leaving aside the differences with 17th-century England – which are many – I think the connections with Dr Mazzucato's ideas are clear. Today, the collective enterprise imagined by Bacon takes shape in the form of public institutions.

Public institutions, if we go back to the initial metaphor, should be, must be, and I'd like to think are a major force in avoiding debilitating inertias: from the perpetuation of gender biases to the privatization of knowledge.

«In the past, these public institutions have demonstrated that they are the best vehicles for innovation and transformation, the ones that best align private efforts and individual interests, the ones that best direct knowledge towards a genuine social impact, and the ones that best motivate and involve citizens. All with the same goal: the common good.»

Or, if that seems too vague, towards the updating of the Declaration of Human Rights that the United Nations' 2030 Agenda represents.

This, however, needs coherency to adapt and evolve the research and innovation model. It needs transformations where the public presence may be initial or only partial, where it may act as a driving force or as a support, as a regulator or as an incentive.

But, whatever the case, the public presence must serve to ensure that knowledge is public, open and sharable. Obviously, universities have a lot to say and do here. We have so much to say and do that it is right and necessary that society should make demands of us.

We are called upon to contribute knowledge and reasoning to public debate, to offer qualifications and skills that boost employability, to foster basic and applied research, to help in the digital transformation of citizens and the economy, and to participate in the definition of sustainable and fair prospects for the future.

But these demands must be accompanied by the necessary means... and that requires resources, but it also requires trust and collaboration. Resources, trust and collaboration in education and research are not an expense, but rather an investment. This is another inertia to be tackled...

Clearly, it is necessary to guarantee efficiency, yet this is not achieved through bureaucracy, distrust or penny-pinching, but through a commitment to projects and, in the end, through accountability and the review of propositions and results.

Dr Mazzucato summed it up brilliantly: "We need a progressive narrative that's not only about spending but investing in smarter ways".

And she also said that: "The real task is to make sure we continue to properly fund a cutting-edge public university system".

Awarding someone an honorary doctorate is eminently academic, but it is also a moment of celebration and reaffirmation of values such as knowledge, dialogue and freedom of thought.

To celebrate it in 2022 in the Saló de Cent, thanks to the generosity of Barcelona City Council and the Mayor, is of special significance for the UOC, in particular, and for the Catalan university system, in general. Just 200 years ago, in this very same Saló de Cent, successful calls were made to recover Barcelona's university tradition – a tradition that had begun in medieval times with the Estudi General, the precursor of our current university system, and that had been interrupted by the Nueva Planta decrees.

A university and research system which, as I said earlier, we hope will play a central role in working for the common good and show its leadership, not only from a technological point of view, but also, in the educational, social and humanistic fields... Because no field should be left out and they should all be included.

As the mathematician and recent winner of the Spanish National Research Award Carme Torras has said the most cutting-edge advances, such as artificial intelligence, are of no use to us if they do not go hand in hand with a human and humanistic approach.

It is no coincidence that if we review the list of people who have been awarded honorary doctorates by the UOC, there is always this combination of academic excellence and humanistic spirit.

«It is in this genealogy that we see ourselves and today we have the honour and privilege of adding Dr Mazzucato to this list. For once, let me make an exception and say that this genealogy is indeed an enriching inertia.»

Thank you very much.

Josep A. Planell