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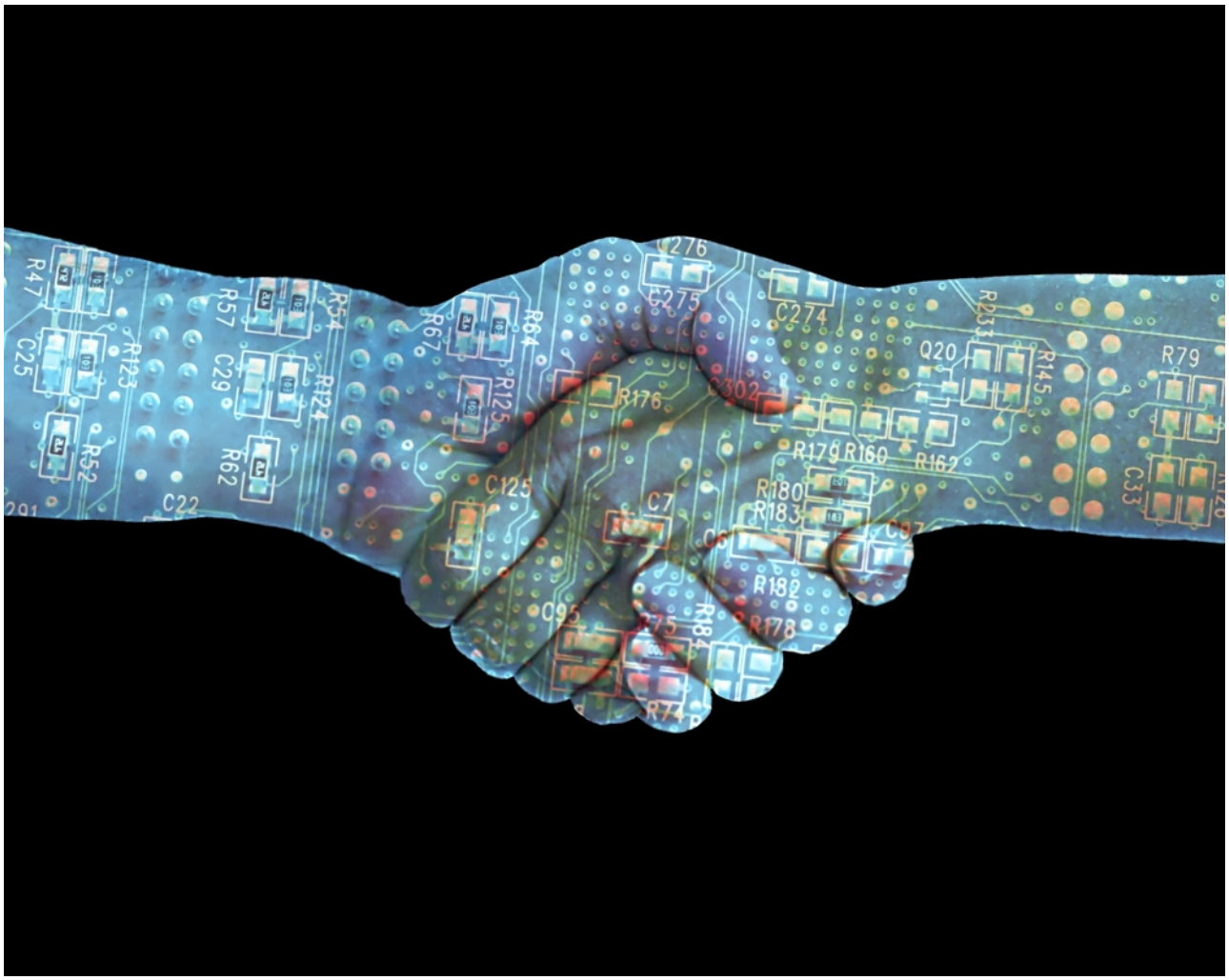
The huge public funds made available for scientific research after the second World War, were expected to lead to industrial development, economic growth and a general improvement of living standards. Yet, this model has been questioned for a few year. Everywhere in the world, revisiting the social contract between science and society is becoming urgent; it is time to adapt such contract to the realities of the 21st century.

Reinventing science's social contract in the 21st century



Stakes are high in the social and solidarity economy to help foster common good solutions

After the second world war, Western countries promoted a social contract between science and society. Then, huge public funds made available for scientific research were expected, in the long run, to lead to industrial development, economic growth and a general improvement of living standards. At the time, there was a clear and unique goal. This contract appears to have proven effective. No better proof is the omnipresence in our daily lives of technological applications stemming from research, such as computers, high speed trains or advanced medical analysis equipment.

Yet, this model has been questioned for a few years.

We have reached an era where the notion of Common Good is no longer the main focus. Granted, research is increasingly complex and expensive. Granted, the scandal of contaminated blood in the 80s' in France and the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in Japan in 2011 have led to a loss of faith in science. Granted, public funding often does not make research a priority, as decision-makers fail to see its importance in the overall competition for budgets.

Until now, our society had accepted the rise to power of an economic model, which does not aim at serving society as a whole. Rather, power was exercised to fulfil to the short term vision of a minority combined with a lowest costs pursuit. What we now need is to reinvent a social contract for science fit for the 21st century!

We have little choice in the matter if we hope to tackle today's major social challenges. Indeed, we need to find solutions to wide-ranging issues including climate change and food security as well as migrations and energy. But these problems cannot be solved without the help of all the sciences, including the fields of natural, social and human sciences.

At the dawn of the open science era, the internet revolution and the explosion of social media have already helped in levelling the playing field. More than ever, these technologies make it possible for everybody to access, understand and share the data generated by scientists. This, in turn, can help restore the trust between citizens and science. In parallel, greater expectations from citizens concerning the level of communication and accountability from scientists, will affect aspects of research such as ethics, integrity and transparency.

But we need to go further than that.

Everywhere in the world, revisiting the social contract between science and society is becoming urgent; it is time to adapt such contract to the realities of the 21st century. One attempt to progress the issue is the introduction of the concept of RRI, Responsible Research and Innovation, by the European Commission in the Horizon 2020 funding program. It aims to facilitate the participation of stakeholders--including that of society--in research and innovation choices. The idea is to help them appropriate, influence and contribute to the process.

This approach is not about controlling or repressing the inspiration and creativity that drives research. Science can only suffer from being shackled in bureaucratic chains, justified by the need to meet short term objectives and fulfil mandatory evaluations. Nevertheless, this new contract is about providing scientists the means of sustaining the necessary intellectual effort to meet the challenge that they choose to tackle.

To ease this transition towards greater integration with society's needs, all involved in the scientific process have the possibility to self-organise via networks. This, in turn, would render the protagonists involved in the scientific process less dependent on a “top-down” hierarchy. Instead, they would be able to establish research priorities based on a “bottom-up” decision-making scenario. This is precisely where opportunities open up for an increased involvement of stakeholders--and, among those, citizens in particular.

There is little doubt that science will only be able to meet the expectations of society by rebuilding ties with the spirit of the Common Good. With this in mind, we are calling to members of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) sphere. We hope that the possibilities afforded by science will become a central element in their reflections. This engagement would also help scientists apply their knowledge in a more sustainable manner, with the aim of reaching equally sustainable solution to the hurdles they aim to overcome.

The future of scientific research--and *ipso facto* of mankind--more than ever requires a long term vision at the service of society, set in a context that will benefit society in a solidary manner and demonstrating a deep *respect for the environment*.

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