



The Cunning of Uncertainty

Helga Nowotny

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Uncertainty is interwoven into human existence. It is a powerful incentive in the search for knowledge and an inherent component of scientific research. We have developed many ways of coping with uncertainty. We make promises, manage risks and make predictions to try to clear the mists and predict ahead. But the future is inherently uncertain - and the mist that shrouds our path an inherent part of our journey. The burning question is whether our societies can face up to uncertainty, learn to embrace it and whether we can open up to a constantly evolving future.

In this new book, Helga Nowotny shows how research can thrive at the cusp of uncertainty. Science, she argues, can eventually transform uncertainty into certainty, but into certainty which remains always provisional.

Uncertainty is never completely static. It is constantly evolving. It encompasses geological time scales and, at the level of human experience, split-second changes as cells divide. Life and death decisions are taken in the blink of the eye, while human interactions with the natural environment may reveal their impact over millennia.

Uncertainty is cunning. It appears at unexpected moments, it shuns the straight line, takes the oblique route and sometimes the unexpected short-cut. As we acknowledge the cunning of uncertainty, its threats retreat. We accept that any scientific inquiry must produce results that are provisional and uncertain. This message is vital for politicians and policy-makers: do not be tempted by small, short-term, controllable gains to the exclusion of uncertain, high-gain opportunities.

Wide-ranging in its use of examples and enriched by the author's experience as President of the European Research Council, one of the world's leading funding organisations for fundamental research. The Cunning of Uncertainty is a must-read for students and scholars of all disciplines, politicians, policy-makers and anyone concerned with the fundamental role of knowledge and science in our societies today.

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