

Lecture organized in cooperation with Maison des Sciences  
de l'Homme Ange Guépin.

Nantes Institute for Advanced Study is supported by:

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Réseau Français des Instituts d'Etudes Avancées – RFIEA  
Région Pays de la Loire  
Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche  
Université de Nantes  
Secrétariat d'Etat à la formation, à la recherche et à l'innovation de la Confédération suisse  
Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Formation Professionnelle  
Investissement d'avenir (Labex RFIEA+)  
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Lecture in english

# A social scientist in the land of scientific promise

**Tuesday 10th March 2015**

at 6.00pm

Simone WEIL amphitheater  
5, allée Jacques Berque, Nantes

by

**Helga NOWOTNY**

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**Helga Nowotny** is Professor emerita of Social Studies of Science, ETH Zurich, and a founding member of the European Research Council. In 2007 she was elected ERC Vice President and from March 2010 until December 2013 President of the ERC. Recently, she has been appointed Chair of the ERA Council Forum Austria.

She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Columbia University, NY, and a doctorate in jurisprudence from the University of Vienna. She has held teaching and research positions at the Institute for Advanced Study, Vienna; King's College, Cambridge; University of Bielefeld; Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin; Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris; Science Center for Social Sciences, Berlin; Collegium Budapest; Budapest. Before joining ETH Zurich, Professor Nowotny was Professor for Social Studies of Science at the University of Vienna. Among other, Helga Nowotny is Foreign Member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and continues to serve on many international advisory boards throughout Europe. She received doctorates honoris causa from several European universities and the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. Helga Nowotny has published widely in social studies of science and technology and on social time.

## Theme

Promises are a means of bringing the future into the present. Nowhere is this insight by Hannah Arendt more applicable than in the sciences. Research is a process which is inherently uncertain, as the outcome is not known in advance. It is, however, full of promises, although it is not known which of the imagined possible, probable or preferred futures will be realized.

Expectations on the part of society and promises on the part of science are sometimes brought together in the form of a metaphorical 'contract' between them. At present, there is a trend to formalize scientific promises through impact assessment, performance indicators and similar measurements. Another trend goes in the opposite direction of opening up science towards citizens.

Against this background, I will briefly present three case studies from the life sciences: assisted reproductive technologies, stem cell research and personalized, precision medicine. I will explore the uncertainty of promises and the cunning of uncertainty at work.