

## On Uncertainty and Uncertainty Reduction

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### Abstract

This essay introduces a Debate Section of *Sociologica* discussing Patrik Aspers' book *Uncertainty: Individual Problems and Public Solutions* (Oxford University Press, 2024). It delineates the differences between risk and uncertainty as well as between individual means to reduce uncertainty and public ways of reducing uncertainty.

**Keywords:** uncertainty; uncertainty reduction; public ways of reducing uncertainty; making uncertainty; basic research.

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I am excited to introduce you to this Debate Section of *Sociologica* discussing Patrik Aspers' new book *Uncertainty: Individual Problems and Public Solutions* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

It's always refreshing to find a modern sociologist who can effectively tackle one single general concept and its closely related processes, and then explore how these processes play out in multiple fields,<sup>1</sup> including philosophy, economics, management, and anthropology. Aspers' theory of uncertainty reduction is a timely contribution to many fields of collective decision-making, presented with clarity and theoretical sophistication. He quotes sociologist Talcott Parsons who argues that uncertainty is "a 'built-in feature' (1980, p. 145) of living organisms" (2024a, p. 5). But rather than Parsons's decision-making via an evaluation of alternatives, Aspers grounds his theorizing in economics, notably in the approach of Frank Knight's *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (1921) where he delineates the difference between risk and uncertainty. As Aspers writes: "Risk requires objective probabilities of outcomes", it's "about probabilities" (2024a, p. 6). It can be calculated with varying degrees of confidence. Uncertainty is both a more complex and interesting problem, one that's generally closer to social reality. It's endemic. One cannot completely get away from it, and one may not even want to try to address it, preferring instead, to live with it. It's social. It involves interaction and mutual adjustments. Disagreements. Reformulations. Regulations. Power dynamics. And while much research has addressed private means by which *individual* actors try to mitigate or leverage uncertainty, Aspers instead asks: What are the *publicly* available means to reduce uncertainty? How do institutions reduce uncertainty? The book's core focus is on what Aspers calls "public uncertainty reduction", science being a "paradigmatic example" (2024a, p. 111) among illustrative examples ranging from fields as diverse as fashion, performance art, politics, weather forecasting, and sport.

This basic research is erudite and scholarly as well as pragmatic, even though Aspers is intentionally more interested in identifying processes and formulating and inducing questions, rather than with trying to provide a one-size-fits-all recipe. As Aspers explains, uncertainty is both a problem and an opportunity which individual actors, as well as formal and informal institutions, inadvertently and consciously grapple with — and can also, at times, create and make use of. It rests on an uneasy balance, like the ones each of us, and each of our groups, organizations and societies, must live with.

Sociologists Bruce Carruthers (2024), Tobias Werron (2024), and Andy Alaszewski (2024) do what good scientists do. They closely engage with a handful of Aspers' arguments by noting what could be clarified and improved, but also singling out what they argue should be amended. And Aspers' rebuttal (2024b) addresses their critiques and then places readers at the edge of this exciting research front.

It is a pleasure to welcome you into this conversation.


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1. For similar examples, see Tom DeGloma's *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), or Randall Collins' *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

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