Prologue

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Academics and policymakers have long pursued the holy grail of industrial success for regions and countries. Successful regions have been avidly scrutinized in the search for models that could be replicated somewhere else. Developing countries in particular have tried a variety of approaches over the decades from import substitution, to export-oriented growth, common markets and, lately, open markets. The common strand in all cases is the desire to achieve strong industrial and technological capabilities as the key to economic growth and societal development. This goal and dream will remain central as humanity and societies enter the dawn of the third Christian millennium.

Amongst the important schools of thought in the 1990s are those widely known as Industrial Clusters and National Systems of Innovation (NSI) (and its recent derivative Regional Systems of Innovation). These schools have identified the range of structural elements whose strengths or weaknesses seems to account for the successful competitive performance of industries. This has provided a focus for many studies and descriptions of regional conditions, commonly leading to prescriptions regarding industrial policies for regions or countries. Learning has been identified as fundamental to the process of change implied in the development of industrial strengths but, on the whole, the understanding of learning in this context is yet to make substantial advances. Part of the problem resides in the fact that Industrial Clusters/NSI studies tend to remain at the level of structural assessment, without much concern for the detailed process involved in the unfolding and possible formation of competitive industrial clusters. In this latter respect, a critical theoretical and policy question for countries and regions seeking to develop competitive strengths is: How can we conceptualize the detailed ground processes of building clusters/NSI, within the starting conditions revealed by a cluster/NSI assessment? What basic social, cultural and technical factors and relationships are involved and how can their understanding be made operational for strategy and policy purposes?

This is where the theoretical contribution of this book stands. By blending the insights of the Industrial Cluster/NSI approaches with the ‘sociotechnical constituencies’ approach, the first steps are taken into a research path that
should prove useful to integrate long-standing debates such as ‘agency-structure’ and ‘micro–meso–macro’ analysis. It should also prove useful to facilitate the inter-disciplinary integration necessary to deal with a problem that is essentially a ‘life’ process; a process bound to overflow all attempts to constrain it into the narrow confines of single disciplines.

Finally, this book is close to my heart not just because in academic and policy terms it makes use of my own theoretical work on sociotechnical constituencies. It is also close to me in personal terms since I have lived my life roughly half and half in Latin America (Chile) and then in Europe (UK). In this respect, Latin America and Europe do represent the broad continental confluence of my own life. Indeed, people often ask me whether I want to go back to Latin America one day. The answer is yes, even now as I remain in Europe in this kind Scottish land, because there are many ways to go back and this book is one of them.