Preface

Some books present fresh evidence; others make arguments that urge the reader to see old problems in a new light. This work is decidedly of the latter sort.

Theda Skocpol

A friend of mine, having listened to my complaints about the complexity and apparent unfairness of finding post-doctoral research opportunities pointed out that I should not forget where I came from. This homily aroused my deep curiosity, and implied cliché, namely the suffocating difficulties which confront émigrés coming from a backward environment, in my case Southern Italy, with its limited social mobility and academic aridity. I was reminded that I have been armed with a unique geographical DNA to undertake a comparative assessment on the nature of different macro-systems, implicit in my friend’s comment, and to form an outlook on the nature of social relation.

Two important studies, *Tracce di Comunità* (Bagnasco 1999) and *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam 1993), and Professor Nicola Negri’s lectures on economic sociology at University of Turin, were inspirational sources, the building blocks needed to construct a general review of social networks and trust in society. But it was only after leaving my homeland that, with a different perspective, I have been able to elaborate my interest for these issues, and to distil my focus to a few key variables.

I have turned my interest in social ties into the measurement of social capital, have fashioned quantitative models supported by general theory, and have analysed the nature of social relations with a comparative historical analysis. Refining my research questions has allowed me to reach a provisional synthesis between my theoretical understanding of social capital and the application of a comparative method geared on empirical analysis.