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.