Preface

My alma mater, the London School of Economics and Political Science, displays on its crest the dictum rerum cognoscere causas, which literally translated means ‘to know the causes of things’. I have trained at points in my career and worked professionally as an economist, a political scientist, a policy analyst, a teacher, a scholar and a consultant and have become increasingly concerned at the narrow research approach many of my colleagues and peers have adopted in their study of technological change. They generally begin from a disciplinary perspective, which limits their ability to follow the problems they are examining and impedes their capacity to identify true, causal relationships. I have deliberately adopted an interdisciplinary approach in this volume in an effort to find where there are strong, causal explanations for events and where there are competing or contested explanations or, at times, where there is a paucity of explanation.

Ultimately, one question underlies much of the angst in this post-industrial era dominated by globalization: who’s in control? We have begun to realize that the state is not the sole or even dominant governor in many fields. Similarly, although the market is in the ascendency, it quite explicitly does not aspire to govern large parts of our system. Recently, we have begun to look to a new set of civil authorities, sometimes dubbed the third sector or not-for-profit sector of civil society. Although some groups have power and authority, they frequently do not mesh well with the delimited competence and capacity of the other two, more traditional governors. This book is seeking to understand, in the context of transformative innovation, where these three governors work well separately, or together, and where they don’t.

Aristotle in De Poetica asserted that ‘the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor . . . since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilar’. Each of the chapters of this book starts with a metaphor of the problem to be investigated. Many of the practical examples and problems are drawn from my experiences related to transformations in, around and beyond the food and natural environment. Although many commentators and analysts think that the food and farm system is antiquated and unimportant, agri-food activities continue to represent the single largest identifiable economic effort in the world. About half the world’s population, roughly three billion people, rely on agriculture for their main income, with about one billion mainly subsistence farmers. Similarly 40 per cent of the
world’s population use renewable fuels (wood, charcoal, straw and biomass) for at least some of their energy needs and about one billion depend directly on fishing for a large portion of their protein.¹ Even in advanced industrial economies, the complex supply chains spanning from Petri dish to dining table are one of the most significant economic contributors to the economy and society.

This book is the product of a dedicated sabbatical leave that allowed me the luxury of time to read widely, to meet key individuals to discuss my thoughts and to ponder, synthesize and focus my ideas from 25 years of scholarship and professional practice.

Many people helped me test my ideas. My graduate students – including Jeremy Karwandy, Lisa Jategaonkar, Tara Procyshyn, Camille Ryan and Stuart Smyth – have both acted as sounding boards and provided me with insights into the literature and the issues. I would like to thank all of my colleagues, both at the University of Saskatchewan and around the world for listening to my thoughts and challenging me to justify my ideas more clearly and succinctly. Finally, I must acknowledge my friends and family who have put up with my obsession to undertake this work.

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