Preface

This book is a tribute to Enzo Mingione and his contribution to the fields of sociology and urban studies on the occasion of his retirement. During his more than forty-year-long career, Enzo has taught and done research on several topics: from the processes of transformation of cities to the informal economy, from the Fordist crisis to the rediscovery of poverty, from the welfare state and welfare policies to migration and the transformation of work. These themes constitute the analytical building blocks of this book on the transitions that Western capitalist societies are undergoing.

The importance of Enzo’s contribution lies in his ability to combine a passionate and original theoretical way of framing changing societies with a strong commitment to empirical research, a passion that he has transmitted to many of his students. His intellectual journey was influenced by the specificities of Italian society in the late 1960s, with its transformations and conflicts. At that time, the Italian academic community was increasingly interested in understanding and explaining the social and local determinants of economic development. This interest was motivated by the extraordinary success of small and family-owned firms in the central and north-eastern part of the country. This success was based on traditions of entrepreneurship, on dense networks of relationships among local actors and forms of self-exploitation within the family. Such phenomena challenged mainstream economics and theories of economic development. Questions about the role of non-economic factors emerged as relevant for understanding both the social and territorial roots of economic processes. Why was economic development taking place in some areas and not in others? Why were apparently pre-modern factors like small family firms so incredibly successful?

The academic contribution of Italian scholars to the understanding of local development received great attention in international academia. Enzo was able to connect these developments with what was going on outside Italy. His residencies abroad and the comparative approach he always
insisted upon shaped his interest in the explanation of social change and the understanding of the social foundations of economic processes, with a special interest in the transformations of capitalism. His use and application of Polanyi’s institutional approach to current changes raised tremendous interest internationally, and is the *fil rouge* that links the chapters of this book.