Acknowledgements

This book began life as a draft journal article, which, like Topsy, 'just grow'd'. It eventually attained a length far beyond what any journal would find acceptable, and so I faced a decision on whether to cut back the draft severely or to extend it further with a book in mind. Another option that sometimes seemed, in dark moments, attractive was simply to put what I had written into a drawer and forget about it. That the present work did eventually emerge is due in large part to the support I received from colleagues, three of whom have to be given particular mention.

At a critical moment, Francesco Billari read my initial draft, made a series of very helpful comments and came out strongly in favour of my developing it into a book. He also, although unknowingly, provided me with further encouragement to do so by creating a context in which this appeared a worthwhile endeavour: that is, through his revitalisation of sociology in Oxford since his arrival in 2012.

Over a much longer period, I have benefited greatly from the knowledge and wise counsel of David Cox. He too read my initial draft, and also the first version of the present text, and made many valuable suggestions, especially, although not only, in regard to statistical issues. Such insight into these issues as I possess I have very largely gained through conversations with David – although, I hasten to add, he is in no way responsible for any deficiencies in my understanding that remain and that may well become apparent in the pages that follow. More indirectly, but no less importantly, David has been a source of further support from the time he became Warden of Nuffield College in 1988, in virtue of the model he provides of the scientific attitude and indeed of the scientific life.

Throughout the years in which this book has been in gestation, I have collaborated with Erzsébet Bukodi in a series of research projects, and our many discussions – often of a 'lively' nature – on the direction and strategy of our research and on the interpretation of our findings have influenced the content of the book in many ways. Still more valuable, though, has been the unfailing encouragement and help that Erzsébet has given me in persisting with the task in hand and in urging on me a spirit of optimism when this was most needed. It is indeed difficult for me to envisage how the book could ever have been written if she had not been there.

I am indebted to several other colleagues who read and commented on the first version of the book in whole or in part. These include – with remorseful apologies to anyone I may have overlooked – Michael Biggs, Ferdinand Eibl, Robert Erikson, Duncan Gallie, Michelle Jackson and Jouni Kuha. Others who have given me helpful advice and information are Tak Wing Chan, John Darwin, Nan Dirk De Graaf, Geoff Evans, David Hand, Colin Mills, Christiaan Monden, Reinhard Pollak, David Rose, Antonio Schizzerotto, Jan Vandenbroucke and Yu Xie.

I am grateful to the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield for the generosity they show towards emeriti in providing them with a full range of facilities in the College, not least of which are the admirable services of the library staff and of secretarial and IT support personnel.

Finally, I should acknowledge the continuing tolerance of my wife and family of my non-retirement from academic work and of the absences, mental if not corporeal, that this often entails.