Among all the varieties of academic publications, the dissertation is a curious one: Standing at the beginning of an academic career, it might appear a minor contribution to scientific knowledge – certainly in view of what is promised to follow. Yet, all too often it also is the one precious occasion when a scientist enjoys the liberty of pursuing one question, and nothing but this question, over many years. Dissertations are criticized for being relatively inaccessible, both physically and intellectually, and in consequence their impact factors and citation frequencies are low. Yet, unlike the many papers and chapters which are ripped out of them (to improve impact), dissertations are privileged venues where one can explore things beyond their immediate isolated context, and bridge the gaping abyss between itemized, specialized scientific knowledge and the real, messy, contextualized world of societal relevance. Also, unlike other academic monographies, dissertations underlie a scrutinous process of repeated review and incremental refinement. Dissertations, in short, are a curious chimera somewhere between a new author’s debut and an unusually resource-rich and well-scrutinized contribution to academic theorizing.

The most curious property of a dissertation, however, lies in its function to demonstrate the academic maturation of an individual scientist. Dissertations represent the culmination point of a years’ long process of learning and specialization, of theory building and empirical research. They are treated as the outcome of an individual’s ripening process, and their quality and ingenuity are taken as a measure of a candidate’s readiness to be admitted to the world of trusted academics. Yet, research is never, can never be, an individual process: Standing on the shoulders of not giants, but a whole population of women and men whose ideas inspire, enhance and advance the scientific work, crediting a dissertation to the abilities of an individual researcher does gross injustice to a great many people. I have had, throughout my dissertation, the privilege to enjoy the support of many inspired and inspiring people – a privilege that, I am painfully aware, many of my colleagues and friends do not share. If I present to you this dissertation as the result of many years of my studies, beginning long before I formally entered my PhD candidacy, I am proud and honored to present to you also the collaborative work of many people without whom this book could never exist:

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