PART III

Sociology and Reflections

It is in the nature of things that dissident intellectual traditions, such as postmodernism, benefit from failings in the status quo as much as from any inadequacies mounted by defenders. In this final part to this book, therefore, we explore both the economic and sociological circumstances that prevail within modernity and the weaknesses of prevailing empiricist (positivist) traditions of thought, most particularly those associated with Karl Popper.

In examining the sociology of both postmodernism and modernity in Chap. 8, this study emphasises three key developments. The first is a positive news story, namely that on a per capita basis, the world has never been richer. Globally, despite the marked slowdown following the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–08, per capita GDP (measured in terms of purchasing power parity, that is, what a local currency buys in the domestic economy) was 61.2 per cent higher in 2016 than what it was in 1991, with the fastest growth occurring in the developing world. Among the world’s developed regions, the rate of growth varied between 28.1 per cent (the Euro zone) and 46.6 per cent (the United States).¹ The second noteworthy trend is the sharp economic and social divide provided by the Global Financial Crisis. Before the crisis, per capita increases in GDP typically averaged 4–5 per cent per annum. Since the Global Financial Crisis they have been half that, or less. Even China, despite a massive increase in corporate debt since 2008, has not been immune. In 2016 the increase in per

capita Chinese wealth was less than half that achieved in 2007. Such problems, Chaps. 8 and 9 argue, exacerbated problems that were already apparent before the Global Financial Crisis; problems associated with declining investment, falling productivity, and decreased labour force participation. In part, it is suggested, such problems stemmed from a reliance on monetary policy and credit expansion as the major public policy economic tool; a policy that has seen a misdirection of investment into non-productive areas of the economy. In part, it also reflected the growing willingness of firms in the advanced economies to outsource manufacturing to developing nations. The scale of this is indicated in Fig. 8.2 (Chap. 9), which reveals that US imports are increasingly associated with “intra-firm” transfers rather than with traditional “open” trade. The only hope of redressing such outcomes, it is argued, is not to be found in a return to tariff protection, but rather in a reinvigoration of innovation, participation, and representation within private-sector businesses. The third sociological trend that Part 3 highlights is one that runs contrary to the adverse trends we have just noted, but which arguably provides a special benefit to postmodernism: the emergence of a large class of university-educated professionals, many of whom are employed in sectors of the economy that are at least partially sheltered by market forces (the public sector, education, health etc.). Whereas in 1970 the percentage of the adult population boasting a university degree in the world’s advanced economies (the United States, France, Britain etc.) was in the 5–10 per cent range, by 2015, it exceeded a quarter of the total. Reflective of this, by October 2017, those areas of the US economy predominately associated with professional employment—education and health, professional and business services, financial services, government work, information services—amounted to 52.8 per cent of the total. For this professional group, as Michael Lamont remarked in relation to the initial French constituency for postmodernism, the consumption of postmodernist theories repre-

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2 World Bank Group, *Global Economic Prospects, June 2017: A Fragile Recovery*, (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2017), 29, Figure 1.18; 8, Figure 1.5.C.

3 *Ibid.*, 61, Figure SF2.1.

resents a “cultural produit de luxe” [luxury product] that highlights one’s university training.\textsuperscript{5}

If postmodernism has arguably benefited from both the positive and negative shifts in employment—gaining more recruits from the university educated while mounting critiques of modernity’s failures—we also suggest it has benefited from the fact that those unsympathetic to postmodernism have largely remained wedded to various forms of empiricist or positivist thought. This plays into postmodernism’s hand given that the intellectual strengths of this school of thought are inward looking, directed towards epistemology and the nature of knowledge, rather than being outward focused on the problems of the material world. Accordingly, postmodernists have little difficulty in demonstrating that many empiricist assumptions, based as they are on “common sense”, are inherently flawed. Not only do the senses often deceive, but it is also the case that the knowledge directed from observation is seldom complete or replicable in its entirety. As with most things, this final part suggests that there is a “middle way” between empiricism and philosophic idealism; a half-way house associated with Immanuel Kant’s embrace of inductive logic, which holds that although we understand the world through mental images or representations, there is nevertheless a “Reality” that exists independent of us and which we can understand and interpret through the use of reason.\textsuperscript{6}
