In this book, I have tried to elaborate several concepts that can make up the basic theoretical building bricks for a sociological analysis of the labor market, particularly in advanced capitalist societies. First and foremost, the concept of labor market has been defined as a ‘hiring fair’ for labor power, the human capacity for work. It is an arena that involves two major types of actors: those who offer and those who hire labor power; the latter actors have a need to get some work done and the resources to pay for it, while the former join in above all to earn a living. With regard to the human laboring faculties, we can distinguish three main dimensions: biological capabilities, qualifications, and motivation. If an individual offers his/her capacities for work in the market and finds someone willing to hire it, an employment contract can be established between the two parties. The job to be done consists of a number of work tasks, commonly assembled into what we call occupations. If the individual, however, does not find an employer willing to use his/her capacity for work, he/she must be classified as unemployed.

The hiring of labor power is connected not only with the capitalist but also with other sectors in modern societies; thus the role of public sector as well as other kinds of non-capitalist employment must be taken into account. In the discussion of these issues, I have suggested that we utilize some version of the traditional Marxist concept of mode of production. Moreover, in overhauling the arsenal of analytical tools, I have found that we can make use of Fred Block’s concept of marketness. In my interpretation, this notion is taken to stand for – to put it very simply – dependence on mechanisms of prices, supply and demand, including the integration with other markets.

Commodification and decommodification are two other concepts that I have attempted to elaborate. With regard to the labor market, these twin concepts are basically applied to refer to processes by which labor power becomes or ceases to be a commodity or, to include also gradual changes, get a larger or smaller commodity role. They are relevant to put into prac-
tice, for example when we want to assess the consequences of welfare state benefits for people’s readiness to find and accept employment. I have also aimed at showing that commodification and decommodification can be helpful concepts in the study of other labor market-related social phenomena and processes such as the role of the family and the transitions between self-employment and wage-work.

In approaching concrete matters, we must move beyond the most abstract concept of the labor market and look for subcategories. Geographic and occupational divisions endow the labor market with specific structural features and the same can be said with respect to sector, class, gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Rather sturdy and durable structures have been developed, but they are of course possible to alter and, across time, actually also undergo change. The relevant actors – such as jobseekers/workers, employers, employees’ organizations, employers’ organizations, and the state – must adjust to or try to transgress or transform the ways in which the labor market is structured. Once submarkets are identified, we also have a basis for analyzing individuals’ mobility between them.

As has been conveyed in several of the previous chapters, there are many authors who suggest that the labor markets of advanced capitalism are subjected to rather great transformations. It has become almost a fashion to paint a picture according to which existing socioeconomic conditions and structures are breaking down and being replaced quicker than ever before. In this conception, everything is in a constant state of flux and very little will stay the way it used to be. Since we live in the midst of these processes, however, our understanding of what is really happening is assumed to be limited. Only particularly sharp-eyed viewers are able to describe the width and depth of the transformations that are now taking place.

The picture of rapid, comprehensive, and irreversible change is strongly underpinned by the development of new information and communication technologies that has no doubt been overwhelming and will certainly continue to have an immense impact on social and economic activities. It has meant a spectacular acceleration of numerous processes within the spheres of production, distribution, and life in general, and it has made things possible that many of us could not even think of just a few decades ago. Increasing possibilities for mobility of capital, products, and people are other significant components in the scenario of far-reaching change. We should still not forget the need for cautiousness and critical reflection, because we must avoid the unwarranted conclusion that social relations and structures are transformed at the same speed and to the same extent.

Social forecasting has generally not been a very successful business, but apparently many observers of present-day labor markets think that they know not only what is going on but also what will happen in the future and they feel obliged to tell us. As noted in several of the previous chapters, some of them are – to put it mildly – carried away in their predictions.