PART I
THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS
The following is an exploration of the relevance of sociological theory to an acute modern societal problem, the problem of participation in democratic societies. Extended forms of political participation are called for on a wide variety of fronts as a possible contribution to the solution of highly complex and often partisan issues of collective decision-making and coordination. Today, there is a re-estimation of the importance of participation in institutional contexts. As an example, transnational governance regimes and organizations such as the European Union and the OECD support enhanced participation, albeit chiefly in the form of expanded consultative arrangements with a relatively limited remit (European Union 2001; OECD 2001). In addition, a more ad hoc structure of participatory innovation has emerged in democratic countries such as public hearings and forms of citizen deliberation, often as a response to pressure from civil society. Most western European countries manifest elements of such experimental participatory innovation, yet they are nowhere coherently institutionalized within the general cultural and structural framework of deliberative and decision-making arrangements (Abels and Bora 2004; Bora 1999). These developments signify a renewed interest in participation that extends beyond pluralist and corporatist models of interest group bargaining. They reflect a growing concern with the management of the spiraling complexity of modern societies and the twin phenomena of political alienation on one side and political conflict on the other.

The present volume addresses participation in the context of a pressing and divisive societal issue in contemporary European countries, that of GM plants. This issue is not simply a commonly experienced problem in different European societies, but is one that also raises the question of the balance between transnational co-ordination and national autonomy. As a divisive social issue, GM plants currently takes the form of an indivisible conflict in which compromise is hard to envisage and for that very reason calls forth the idea of expanded