Author's preface and acknowledgments

As long as I can remember, I have had a keen interest in history. Yet, growing up it wasn't the stories of antiquity or the Middle Ages that particularly excited me. Rather, it was modern history – the events and people that I could see as having directly shaped my world. In hindsight, I feel that in a sense I was trying to understand both my own family history (which was greatly impacted by the upheavals of the twentieth century) and another period of change happening all around me that I could not yet contextualize. I vividly remember being glued to the television, watching people a world away take hammers to the Berlin Wall, knowing that something big was happening but unsure yet of the significance. I watched bodies and oil wells burning in the Kuwaiti and Iraqi deserts and Boris Yeltsin standing atop a tank before the Russian Parliament. And then, closer to home, came Ruby Ridge, Waco, the Oklahoma City bombing, the capture of the Unabomber, and the Columbine school massacre.

I was also becoming acutely aware of the stark contrast between my relatively privileged, leafy, middle-class suburban neighborhood and the deep poverty mere miles away in the capital of the supposedly most powerful nation on earth. By the time I entered high school, this had developed into the start of an understanding that there was something fundamentally broken with an economic system that even during its boom years was marked by tremendous inequality and suffering. This led me first to the burgeoning anti-globalization movement, and then to the Green Party campaign of Ralph Nader in 2000. The former opened my eyes to the immense power of multinational corporations, while the latter shook my faith in mainstream politics as a vehicle to effect real, substantive change. I saw how in the American political system the deck was firmly stacked against outsider candidates, and I was castigated by the liberals with whom I had previously identified for having encouraged people to 'throw their vote away' and let George W. Bush into the White House.

Less than one month into my first semester at university, the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred – followed by a sickening anti-Muslim backlash at home and the invasion of Afghanistan abroad. At the time, I was studying another period of intense domestic and international turmoil in United States history: the 1960s and 1970s. This not only gave me an important alternative perspective on the momentous events unfolding around me, but also embedded in me a deep appreciation of ‘history from the bottom up’ and the forgotten (or deliberately erased) stories of everyday radicals, subversives, and activists. It also introduced me to the likes of Howard Zinn, E. P. Thompson, C. L. R. James, Staughton Lynd, Harold Cruse, Gabriel Kolko, Stuart Hall, and C. Wright Mills, to say nothing of the legendary activists of the time, such as Malcolm X, Dennis Banks, Angela Davis, Bayard Rustin, Tom Hayden, Assata Shakur, and Fred Hampton, among many others. Furthermore, my studies of this historical period – along with activism against the disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq – reinforced in me the need to participate actively in various ways, both in the street and in the library, in the struggle for a better world.

Another historian I came across during my studies was Gar Alperovitz. While he is a well-known political activist in his own right, I became acquainted with Gar through his groundbreaking historical work challenging the dominant narrative around the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War. This was part of my own efforts to really begin to understand the development and implications of the projection of American military and economic power around the world. Years later, while searching for a job during the worst economic crisis in 80 years, I came across Gar again and applied for a job as his research assistant. It was working with Gar that really sparked my interest in political economy and economic history, and the role institutions play in both. It was at Gar's suggestion that I began to focus on public ownership when, at the time, this seemed to be no more than a provincial backwater of political economy, a curious relic of a particular historical conjuncture in a modern, globalized world. I am profoundly thankful to Gar for all of his wisdom, training, support, and encouragement these past seven years. Without him, this book would not have been possible.

I am relating this personal story at the outset because if studying history has taught me one thing above all, it is that objectivity is largely a myth – and a dangerous one at that. Every writer comes to their topic with their own conscious and subconscious biases.

Being as forthright as possible about these is, in my opinion, important. Lest there be any doubt, I happily confess up front that I am a broadly sympathetic proponent of public ownership. I believe it is a powerful institutional strategy with deep historical roots, one with the potential to address some of the pressing political-economic problems facing our world in the early part of the twenty-first century. When deployed to support the development of broad-based and prosperous economies from the ground up, it stands in marked contrast to the increasing dominance of giant, increasingly unaccountable, and monopolistic for-profit multinational corporations. For me, however, public ownership is a means and not the end goal, and I do not believe it is the only strategy to get there (wherever *there* may be). Nor am I uncritical. In my view, public ownership cannot simply be expanded in its most common contemporary forms. It must, I feel, be democratized and embedded within a broader movement toward some vision of an alternative system based around principles of economic democracy. This book, in other words, argues that public ownership – by virtue of being tried, resilient, popular, and scalable – has the potential not only to be deployed more widely to deliver real, tangible socio-economic benefits, but also to be reimagined and reinvented in such a way that it can serve as the institutional basis for a more far-reaching transformation of our failing contemporary political-economic system.

What is probably apparent by now, or will be soon, is that I am no straight economist. I don't profess to be fully immersed in the minutiae of economic theory or an expert in statistical analysis. If you are looking for a book loaded with tables, graphs, and calculations, you are going to be disappointed. I also do not identify with any particular school of economic thought, although I would say that my orientation falls within a broad conception of heterodox economics, and that the approach taken in this book reflects that, often incorporating elements from a number of different theoretical schools. Yet, I believe, and hope, that what is presented in the following pages is broadly accessible both to people operating from a more orthodox perspective and those who have never been exposed to these distinctions. Lastly, this book has an explicit focus on the United States (and, to a much lesser extent, Great Britain). This is due in part to my personal experience of emigrating to the former from the latter as a child. However, it is also because I have found that the United States is grossly underexplored in the modern literature and politics around public ownership. In no way do I intend to discount the rich history and experience of other countries, particularly in the developing

world. In many ways, political movements in some of these countries are already blazing a trail for the scaling up of public ownership and its reimagination along more democratic lines that many supposedly more economically advanced countries like the United States and the United Kingdom can only hope to follow.

I had been researching and writing about public ownership for a few years when, in 2015, I stumbled upon the fact that the entire electric system in the fairly politically conservative state of Nebraska was publicly or cooperatively owned, with a very interesting history as to why that was the case. I realized at that point that public ownership in the United States was far more widespread and extensive than even I had recognized, and that this was something about which other people might be interested to learn. I therefore decided to consolidate several years of research and writing on the topic of public ownership into a short report. That short report became a long report – which then became this book.

Throughout this process, I have been extremely fortunate to have had the support and assistance of a great number of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. First and foremost, to my best friend and wife Caroline Lalonde-Hanna and our two children, for whose unconditional love and encouragement I am eternally grateful. Also, to my family who, although not agreeing with everything I espouse, read and share it all anyway. I want to specifically recognize my grandfather, Romano Borzoni, a survivor of the Blitz and a veteran of the Second World War who passed away in the spring of 2017 while I was writing this book. Much of my interest in history and politics is due to his influence (and classic movie collection); To all my friends and colleagues at The Democracy Collaborative, past and present, many of whom played key roles in helping shape and produce this book – specifically, Ted Howard, who, as President of the organization, has been both a mentor and a guiding light, and Steve Dubb, the former Research Director, who always had the time to thoroughly review my material and provide both constructive criticism and encouragement;

To my close friend, collaborator, and comrade Joe Guinan. Many of the ideas contained in this book we hashed out together over after-work drinks and in jointly authored articles (all errors are, of course, mine alone); To the research team at The Democracy Collaborative – Emily Sladek, Will Flagle, Kaylee Thornley, and Jarrod Green – who did a phenomenal job of reviewing the text and slogging through the hundreds of citations; To Adam Simpson and Johanna Bozuwa, who helped me think through the issues of automation and energy

democracy respectively; To the far-sighted philanthropic individuals and foundations whose generous support made all the work that has gone into this book possible through their support of either The Democracy Collaborative or its Next System Project, including the Kendeda Fund, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the NoVo Foundation, Richard and Marilyn Mazess, the Surdna Foundation, and the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation.

To the team at Manchester University Press, who have been positive and supportive throughout the publication process and incredible to work with; To Andrew Cumbers, whose trailblazing book on public ownership inspired my own, and whose insights continue to shape and advance my thinking on the subject; To my close friends and confidants Justin Adly, Mateo Gasparotto, Guillermo Zamora, Alex Cena, Will Pattie, Hilary Berwick, Marcelo Nina Valencia, Robin Slusser, Jimmy Fox, Benyam and Yoseph Teklemariam, Adam Sledd, Martin O'Neill, Andrew Small, Coy McKinney, Ashby Scott, Ryan Schell, Ariel Seden, Jesse Wagner, Nick Zamora, Kyle Dudley, and Ryan Scarano; and to all those I have neglected to mention by name but who have played a crucial role in shaping my life and work.

Thomas M. Hanna
October 2017