Dogmatic Marxism reduces the contemporary capitalist crisis to an economic one. Reducing this crisis simply to economic factors is not very different from the ideological discourses emanating from mainstream economic commentators and analysts. This volume does not reject the importance of economic mechanisms and processes in contributing to the crisis of capitalism, but argues that it is not sufficient to merely hold up declining profit rates, output levels, or the presence of financialised practices to explain it. This volume breaks new ground in understanding the complexity, totality and spatial spread of the contemporary capitalist crisis. Many of its features are unprecedented, such as the climate crisis and peak oil. For many activists as well as movements and progressive scholars, this historical specificity is crucial for a compelling analysis. The contributors to this volume rise to this challenge to show what is new and distinctive in contemporary capitalism’s crises and how these crises are understood among global left forces.

Beyond thinking about capitalism’s crises, a number of chapters in the volume highlight the emergence of new forms of resistance, which challenge neoliberal capitalism with a new politics and new institutional political forms. This takes us beyond twentieth-century vanguardist politics. Social movements that have emerged over the past few decades are driving struggles from below in relationships with left think tanks, parties, alliances and trade unions. The chapters in this volume highlight a post-vanguardist politics, practice and imagination in the making among the new global Left and as part of the
new cycle of resistance. At the same time, some of the cases in the volume also demonstrate that where the mass democratic impulse from below is curtailed by left parties, like Brazil’s Workers’ Party, contestation through the streets and mass symbolic actions, including voting for the opposition to challenge technocratic class pacting at the top, are all possibilities. In places such as India, where the Left has demonstrated a dogmatic and formulaic vanguardist politics in its approach to national politics, this has ended in disaster. The unwillingness to rally and unite an array of progressive social forces from below has opened the way for right-wing fundamentalist forces to capture mass discontent while continuing neoliberalisation, despite its limits in economic terms and its negative social impacts.

In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC)-led Alliance, in its vanguardist orientation, has consistently managed and eviscerated mass, working-class aspirations, as it has neoliberalised and globalised accumulation. The state-capital-labour relationship underpinning this process was ruptured by the Marikana massacre of mineworkers by the ANC state. This conjunctural development has inaugurated significant working-class political realignment. The telling lesson in all these experiences is simple: a left project wanting to shift the relations of force today has to be consistent about democratically aligning mass social forces from below while ensuring that the logic of state power strengthens mass-led transformation. Anything short of this deepens co-option by capital’s ‘passive revolution’. At the same time, the democratic alignment of mass forces from below contains the prospect of utilising the crisis to open up the space for systemic alternatives and trajectories beyond neoliberal capitalism. These are crucial insights contained in the chapters in this volume.

RETHINKING CAPITALISM’S CRISES

For most dogmatic Marxists, the conception of capitalism’s crises and the various political economy analyses shared in this volume about the spatial dynamics of the capitalist crises are easily dismissed as anachronistic. Put differently, the analyses in this volume do not speak in the abstract categories of crisis associated with classical Marxism. Moreover, for many in society it is either denialism or catastrophic thinking that frames the responses to capitalism’s contemporary logic of marketisation and the destruction of life, both
human and non-human. These are responses that undermine the role of human beings and, ultimately, a strategic class agency in the present. This volume demonstrates that it is necessary to analyse contemporary capitalism’s crises from the standpoint of recognising that these crises are the result of capitalism’s class and imperial practices, in the context of transnational techno-financial accumulation (1973 until the present). These crises are socially constructed and can be overcome through class struggle. By suggesting class struggle, this does not mean evoking jaded and outmoded ways of advancing transformation of the capitalist system. Resistance today is conjoined to capitalism’s crises and is also shaped by the contradictions, limits and crises of contemporary global capitalism. An effective resistance is able to use these crises to find exits and solutions that build a new, popular and working-class hegemony to sustain life.

At the same time, the perspectives in this volume appreciate that capitalism is not in a singular economic crisis or what is popularly referred to as the ‘global financial crisis’. Global capitalism is not experiencing a narrow economic crisis which can merely be fixed by cranking up the growth machine and allowing the market to continue on its path of business as usual. While the financialised chaos of contemporary capitalism might be its most visible expression of crisis, capitalism’s crises today are multiple and exist at different levels of the global system. These crises have their roots in how production, trade and finance are organised around short-term profit horizons but they cannot be adequately explained by these dynamics. To appreciate the specificity of the crises, however, it is important to be less abstract and to look at concrete tendencies and dynamics. In this volume, we look at the multiple dimensions of capitalism’s crises by focusing on how crises register at the systemic level of capitalist civilisation, in multiple spatial locales (US, Europe, Brazil, India and South Africa) and at a conjunctural level in terms of the neoliberal class project. The volume shows how many activists, movements and left think tanks around the world are also thinking in these terms.

TRANSFORMATIVE ALTERNATIVES AND CLASS STRUGGLE

Dogmatic Marxism does not appreciate the new contradictions of capitalism’s crises that have to be harnessed to class struggle. Instead, dogmatic Marxists purport a narrow, abstract and productivist ‘reform versus revolution’ politics as part of responding to the capitalist crisis in which the working class
is limited to fighting for reformist concessions within the system or fighting to overthrow capitalism in a revolutionary moment. For many movements today, this bifurcated formulation of struggle does not capture the dynamism and range of struggles that are happening across the world. Today’s global and national struggles have given rise to a transformative politics that appreciates the weaknesses, contradictions and limits inherent in capitalism’s crises. Transformative politics uses capitalism’s crises against it to create space and to engender the conditions for systemic transformation. Moreover, such a transformative politics seeks to rebuild popular and working class-capacities from below to advance a new political economy analysis or critique, to advance systemic alternatives, to deepen democracy and to invent democratic political instruments.

The chapters in this volume contribute to this new debate through highlighting a range of issues: a new conception of the systemic crises of capitalist civilisation; a critique of methodological nationalism and varieties of capitalism; a critique of the global South as the dynamo for global accumulation, particularly Brazil and India; a critique of neoliberalism’s narrative of high labour costs and labour aristocracy, such as in South Africa; and a critique of left orientations that eschew democratic instruments found in progressive constitutionalism. Moreover, a number of chapters identify various systemic alternatives that are driven by class struggle, such as the solidarity economy, democratic public-sector reform, decentralised participatory budgeting and structural reform. All of this is tied to deepening democracy through contesting ideological discourses through left think tanks, promoting trade union capacities for worker-controlled politics, advancing a rights-based conception of social justice, and constructing systemic alternatives through a mass-driven democratic politics.

With regards to inventing political instruments, there is clearly a shift to new political forms that are neither social democratic nor communist. A post-vanguardist imagination is shaping and developing new ways of organising mass collective will and creating multiple political forms capable of advancing class struggle on different terrains and fronts. In the US the emergence of Occupy Wall Street demonstrated how mass popular discontent can be galvanised through a process of mass-based participatory democratic politics. This provided spaces for prefiguration and experimentation to ensure the alternative was lived as part of struggling. Moreover, such a politics demonstrated the use of symbolic power, the meme of the 99 per cent versus the 1 per cent,
as a means to rupture hegemonic discourses legitimating elite notions of the 'American Dream'. At the same time, such a political form also displayed its own particular limitations in terms of how mass popular struggle should be institutionalised and threw up challenges of interpretation. It raised a number of questions. Was a shift required in Occupy toward a more goal-oriented mass politics? Can the results achieved be construed as success given the conservative class and power structure prevailing over American society? Did Occupy play the historical role it needed to play given the limits it faced?

On the other hand, in the European context left political parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain are consciously trying to ensure that power-as-domination is subordinated to power-as-transformative-capacity from below. Many challenges and questions plague these political initiatives, including the recent setback faced by Syriza when the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission and International Monetery Fund) refused to soften the terms of debt restructuring. However, it is clear that inventing a political instrument capable of constituting power from below and wielding state power at the same time cannot be in the strategic frame of electoralism or state-centric vanguardism. A new mutation and frontier of political invention is being achieved with these initiatives. There are no guarantees of success but valuable lessons, whether of success or failure, are being learnt that take the global Left beyond dogmatic formulas of what constitutes a left political instrument.

This volume and the terrain of transformative politics it identifies poses serious challenges to working-class-led politics. Both the empirical cases studied and the current cycle of global resistance suggest three important issues to be considered for a renewed democratic Marxist politics. In the first instance, the volume as a whole suggests that the working class has to be willing to consider and embrace new analyses of capitalism’s crises. This means that the everyday lived experiences of poverty wages, hunger, environmental degradation and democratic narrowing have to be connected and challenged as part of a broader approach to working-class struggles rather than simply understanding working-class struggles in narrow silos. In practice, this would entail fighting the struggle on different fronts and building allies on all these fronts.

Second, organisation together with capacity building for grassroots struggles and organising are key. All the chapters dealing with trade union politics affirm the need to renew traditions of worker control and working-class collective leadership as crucial. This also means valorising not only political parties as political instruments, but appreciating that every institutional form
expressing class and popular agency, from movements, unions, left think tanks, to networks, fronts and alliances are as important as political parties. The left political party today should not embody the monopoly of truth, knowledge and understanding of how to advance the struggle. Instead, a thoroughly democratic left party has to learn, negotiate, work with and even be led by other political forms with which it chooses to align. Its function in such a configuration might be very limited in a democratically agreed approach to the political division of labour. This is the ‘modern prince’ of a new type, not the party, but the sum total of all the political forms united around a common vision, political project and strategy.

Third, systemic alternatives have to be grasped and understood. This requires rethinking debates and learning from various social forces that are championing such alternatives, from the unemployed, the homeless, small-scale farmers and the landless, to solidarity economy movements, food sovereignty movements and climate justice movements, amongst others. Moreover, it means looking to international experiences to critically learn lessons about contemporary struggles and to extract relevant insights. This is not about merely copying but about translating left experiences in a context-specific way. All of this does not mean the state is unimportant, but in a conjuncture in which states are failing to address the systemic crises of capitalism and in which various constraints face internationalised states, a new mass politics from below is important alongside and on the terrain of the state. It is this transformative politics that could overcome capital’s passive revolution and create the conditions for a fundamental response to the crises of capitalism. Without a new transformative politics confronting capital, it will triumph but in the process it will destroy human and non-human life. The logic of marketisation and destruction will prevail.

THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND JUST TRANSITION

The conjuncture of systemic crises and transformative resistance is going to define the terrain on which class and popular struggles unfold. With climate change and its attendant climate shocks, capital can prevail in this conjuncture, through co-opting, dividing, rolling back and even ensuring states’ discipline any expression of militant resistance. Capital’s passive revolution will prevail as the logic of marketisation and destruction continues until all life falls victim to ecocide. This is the business-as-usual scenario with green capitalism asserted
CONCLUSION

as the solution to the crises of capitalist civilisation. At the same time, another imminent possibility exists given that green capitalism is a false solution and will not address the systemic roots of the crisis. This possibility would be driven by the ecocidal logic of global capitalism and US-led imperialism such that a fascist solution prevails. This simply means the global passive revolution is also likely to give way to an outright and naked supremacy to ensure capital prevails as a geological force and the system is maintained, despite its destructive logic. These possibilities in the conjuncture of systemic crises and transformative resistance require further analysis. This volume has broken the ground analytically for this to happen and has demonstrated that it is not only climate change that changes everything but, instead, the multiple crises of capitalist civilisation and the various levels through which it is expressed. At the same time, the climate crisis and the just transition it requires have to be more deeply interrogated from a democratic Marxist perspective. Does Marxism have an adequate conception of nature or is it anthropocentric? Is Marxism inherently productivist and hence part of the problem? Or, is Marxism capable of going beyond productivism to provide intellectual resources and strength to transformative politics to confront the climate crisis dimension of capitalism’s crises? These are questions to be explored in the next volume in the democratic Marxism series.