For the past four decades historical Marxism as a body of social thought and radical practice has been systematically attacked. The cold war, the triumphalism of the liberal world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the spread of a hegemonic common sense naturalising financialised capitalism (in everyday life as credit-driven consumption and as unadulterated greed), the prejudice of the liberal media and the weaknesses of authoritarian vanguardist Marxism have all contributed to discrediting Marxism and even erasing its presence in public discourse, in many countries. However, the deep anti-Marxism of our time is unhinging in the midst of the deepest and most multifaceted systemic crises of modern capitalism. Not only are the limits and contradictions of globalised capitalism apparent for all to see, but the making of deep inequalities, hunger, mass unemployment, ecological crisis and growing violence are reaffirming a class politics and understanding of our social world.

The spectre of Marxism is back but this time freed from the cage of orthodoxy or dogma. Although those who believe Marxism is always right, does not have weaknesses and has all the answers (‘zombie Marxists’), will continue to exist and will also make an appearance in this conjuncture. The world, however, is no longer starry-eyed in the presence of such a radicalism. In the ferment of transnational activism, within the World Social Forum and with the rise of a new Global Left, a heterodox anti-capitalism has come to the fore, open to various resources of critique, imagining different ways of exiting capitalism.
and consciously seeking a democratic way forward rather than the ‘correct line’. A non-dogmatic and democratic Marxism is finding its way in this context. This volume has provided a glimpse of such a Marxism: its new axes of renewal, themes and challenges.

BEYOND VANGUARD MARXISM

Marxism being in crisis is not new. Even its death has been proclaimed many times in the last century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first crisis of Marxism emerged in the context of mass working-class politics and movements. The looming onset of World War I and positions on imperialist war – reform versus revolution, vanguard versus mass party – were all sources of deep contention and contributed to the crisis of Marxism at that time. After 1917, the Russian Revolution spawned a society that became an object of critical enquiry on the Left. For such a thinking and critical Left the collapse of the Soviet Union did not come as a surprise. The makings of the crisis of vanguard Marxism were long observed. However, the crisis of vanguard Marxism was more than Soviet orthodoxy and the failings of communist rule. In fact, the lineage of vanguard Marxism and its crisis extends to China, anti-colonial movements and national liberation movements, mainly in Africa.

In the late twentieth century various currents of academic Marxism have also entered into crisis. This includes structuralist and anti-humanist Althusserian Marxism, rational choice Marxism with its attempt to marry methodological individualism and analytical philosophy to Marxism and regulation theory with its grounding in post-Fordism and new social structures of accumulation. While South Africa has generally received its Marxisms from the outside (for example, Marxism–Leninism, Trotskyism, English Marxism, Poulantzian, Althusserian), many in the tradition of academic Marxism have long retreated and taken flight on the wings of postmodernism, the latest intellectual import into South Africa. Such post-Marxists have immersed themselves in postmodernism’s fetish for deconstruction, philosophic discourse and its obsession with individualism; the latter something postmodernism has in common with neoliberalism.

However, outside the academy and in the mainstream of South African politics a national liberation vanguardist Marxism looms large; it struts around the weak foundations of a post-apartheid society, claiming to be making history. South Africa is one of the last bastions of such a jaded Marxist imagination. Its
future is in question as it displays morbid signs of exhaustion within national liberation politics, as it degenerates into authoritarian populism and as it champions carbon-based and globalised industrial state capitalism. More fundamentally, vanguardist Marxism, as represented through the ruling African National congress (ANC) Alliance in South Africa, has engendered its own orthodoxy: the ubiquitous and ever-present march of the ‘national democratic revolution’. It is within this imagination and through its doctrinal framing that reality is engaged by the ANC-led Alliance. It is the window that mediates the real world.

Despite the exceptionalism sometimes claimed by national liberation doctrine, like all vanguardist orthodoxy it is easy to hold on to its doctrinal certainties while practice displays the opposite; it becomes the crutch for the ignorant or the arrogant, even when the interests, dreams and passions of the working class, the poor and victims of capitalism generally, are not realised. Moreover, the ideologues of such a Marxism are more about legitimating the ‘correct line’ of ‘scientific socialism’, handed down from above, than critically making intelligible the actual state of things and allowing a collective interrogation of the contradictions of contemporary South African capitalism. This is not new or exceptional and has generally been how vanguard Marxism brings about its own obsolescence; Marxism becomes ritual and obfuscation in its ossification. This volume reaches for a renewed Marxism that is an alternative to orthodox and vanguard Marxism.

THE AGE OF MANY MARXISMS

Marxism derives its resilience from the continued existence of capitalist social relations and oppressions. It is the dialectical Other of capitalism; the subterranean red mole. For Marxism to cease to exist, capitalist social relations have to be extinguished. Karl Marx, alongside other great modern thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, made a profound contribution to social thought by unlocking the inner workings of capitalism, its contradictions and historical specificity. Marx recognised capitalism as a historical social system; it had an origin and would not last forever. Marx’s contribution to critical social thought has not been surpassed, but instead has thrown up many Marxisms each with different analytical strengths, theoretical emphases and in some cases practical approaches to challenging capitalism. Such a proliferation of perspectives with different degrees of proximity to Marx’s categories and inflections
is a sign of strength and vitality. The originality of Marx’s social thought, his dialectical and historical materialist critique of modern capitalism lends itself to the making of different forms of anti-capitalist critique. It is a fertile resource to engage capitalism and its contemporary oppressions while thinking with and going beyond Marx. However, it is also important to recognise that many critical social theorists and theories, including feminism and ecology, have developed powerful critiques of contemporary capitalism. This has developed mainly from outside Marxism. In this context the embrace of and cross-fertilisation with critical contemporary social thinkers and currents of radical social thought become important in the remaking of contemporary Marxism. This volume is a collective effort to demonstrate this.

Many Marxist schools of thought and analytical approaches have also come and gone. The cartography of Marxisms is beyond the scope of this short reflection; suffice to say that it is a cartography of keeping critical thought alive and in some instances engendering anti-capitalist practice. In this volume we also affirm that a crucial source for the renewal of Marxism comes from its place in contemporary struggles against globalised capitalism. Such a location of Marxism takes it beyond the academy or the global North and reshapes the cartography of Marxism in relation to myriad struggles and the global South. For Michael Burawoy in this volume (see chapter 2), unorthodox and engaged Marxism has to be the thin edge of the wedge in the struggles against the commodification of nature. But even without such a precise positioning of Marxism, new forms of capitalist oppression and critical learning from past experiences of Marxism, including socialist projects it spawned, such as those in Africa, are also crucial sources for inciting a renewed role for Marxism. In short, and as we demonstrate in this volume, the journey of Marxism in the twenty-first century is beyond the cage of orthodoxy; it is about Marxisms that have escaped and are being remade through new adventures within contemporary struggles unfolding on the planet.

THE ADVENTURES OF DEMOCRATIC MARXISM

Without orthodoxy what is left of Marxism? This is a crucial question. It is similar to asking: would Marx have been a Marxist today? Marx would certainly not have been a Marxist in the dogmatic mould, guarding orthodoxy. Instead, he probably would have been a Marxist in the sense of being alive to
the changing structural, agential and historical conditions of capitalism. This means the inherent categories of Marxism (for instance, class, class struggle, exploitation, value, capital, alienation and metabolic rift) would be put to work to make sense of our contemporary globalised capitalist world, grounded in Marx’s dialectal and historical materialist method. These categories would be used to engender new meanings and understandings about the global capitalist political economy, its crisis tendencies and trajectories. This is the task of democratic Marxism, one of the Marxisms journeying freely beyond the iron cage of orthodoxy. It is a task also begun in this volume but with a long way to go as part of a new and exciting adventure.

As part of such an adventure this volume also, in a bold way, tries to place the ship of historical Marxism on a new journey to find its association with democracy. While democratic theory itself is struggling to define democracy, a crucial departure for democratic Marxism is recognising that classical Marxist and vanguardist understandings of democracy do not assist us in the present. The reclaiming of democracy, from below, is happening beyond notions of ‘dual power’ and is inventing pluralities of power. The street politics and power of Tahir Square, of the indignados (unemployed youth) in the plazas of Barcelona and Madrid and the Occupy Movement, for instance, are shifting global political consciousness in ways beyond instrumentalist understandings of conquering state power. For instance, the notion of the ‘99 per cent versus the 1 per cent’ articulated by the Occupy Movement has become more than a moral rallying call against the super-rich transnational capitalist class: it is now actually part of global common sense as a discourse of delegitimation and for the needs of the majority. Assertions of symbolic and material capacities, through grassroots expressions of direct and participatory democracy, are inciting us to think against capitalism in a transformative manner. Moreover, the liberal appropriations of democracy ring hollow as transnational corporate power poses challenges to all forms of sovereignty and citizenship. At the same time, the face of contemporary capitalist empire is increasingly fascist in its imposition of neoliberal managerial rationality in every sphere of the global political economy. In this context, reclaiming democracy from below is a necessary political imperative. Democratic Marxism in the twenty-first century has to re-engage with the task of making contemporary democracy the political and economic means for transformation, while redefining it in practice to ensure it is about democracy by the people. Hence democracy is about a non-elite form of democracy that strengthens direct and participatory democracy and gives
these democratic practices a primacy within the overall logic of democratisation. In fact, a grounding in a conception of democracy as being by the people is even more radical than what any of the ‘isms’ have to offer, whether Left or Right. This is a crucial message of this volume.

Finally, democratic Marxism, through democratic practice, has to constitute a transformative historical subject, as opposed to a subaltern subject of financialised neoliberal capitalism, in order to advance change. Such a transformative historical subject expresses a capacity for self-emancipation through championing alternatives to a broken capitalist world and a crisis-ridden society. It is also a historical subject, conscious of the need to marshal all the material social forces and intellectual resources of anti-capitalism. In its practice it is about constituting a counter-hegemonic democratic left unity, even if the purity of Marx’s categories and orthodox Marxist discourse has to be diluted with broad left perspectives of how to understand and resist the oppressions of contemporary capitalism. All of this simply means that the adventures of democratic Marxism, in the twenty-first century, will only have meaning as a critical theory if defined through social struggle, grassroots-led democratisation and transformative change. Only in these ways will it be a crucial resource to make the world a better place.