I. Introduction

Marxist thought came into existence in the nineteenth century as a reaction against the ahistorical utopian schemes of the then-existing socialisms. Instead of writing ‘recipes for the cookbooks of the future’, the Left sought to comprehend the actual movement of class formation and struggle, and to draw only the most general implications for the post-revolutionary future from the tendencies and contradictions of the present, as revealed by science and by practice.

In the short twentieth century (1917–91), an additional element emerged – most significantly for those on the Left who embraced the Soviet Union as the embodiment of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism: it was said that there could now be a political economy of socialism, because socialism had actually come into existence and was available for study on a scientific basis. The Soviet experience (and, later, those of Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, etc.) provided the material foundation on which socialist society could be theorised, in a non-utopian manner.

All of this, however, fails to face up to a crucial tension within the Marxist enterprise. As Marx and
Engels knew from quite early on, the transition to post-capitalist society is unlike any previous revolutionary transformations: it requires its agents to build the new social relations consciously – to implement a political programme based on a body of theory, or vision. This follows from a central fact about capitalism: unlike earlier ruling entities, the capitalist class maintains its domination through a spontaneous process that invades all sectors of social and economic life. This pervasiveness of the market form of social relations means that socialism cannot be established piecemeal; it cannot grow spontaneously in small units, only later to be acknowledged and sanctioned by political change. ‘The proletarians . . . have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify . . . their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions’. If this is true, then the question of what the proletarians’ ‘ends’ are must be faced squarely.

In several recent papers, I have tried to contribute to the re-conceptualisation of socialism, in the wake of the demise of the Soviet and Eastern European régimes. I have argued that those experiences – the Soviet one in particular – contain important elements for the positive reconstruction of socialist theory, elements that are often overlooked in Western Marxist circles. Precisely because there is no longer (or should no longer be) a compulsion on the Left to establish adversarial stakeholdings on the ‘nature’ of Soviet society, it should now be possible to draw both positive and negative lessons from that set of experiences, and this is one way to distinguish Marxist from utopian modes of projecting a socialist future at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The entire movement of capitalist society is one material ground for socialist theory; the experience of twentieth-century post-capitalist social construction is another.

As a final preliminary, I believe we should now strive to avoid the error of splintering socialist theory into discrete and warring ‘models’. The desire for product differentiation ought not to prevail over the very real task of developing a complex and nuanced vision, which will undoubtedly incorporate many elements from the various positions currently being put forward. No single model is likely to be adequate to this task, and we should recognise that we are at an early point on a long road of discovery. This road leads to an understanding that will progressively incorporate new qualities as it draws upon (what will hopefully be) a growing Left and working-class movement world-wide.