Editors’ note: Bertram Wolfe explained in 1940: ‘Roughly, Marxism consists of five things: a world view or Weltanschauung; a theory of history; an analysis of capitalist society; a guide to politics or social action; and a forecast, vague and tentative, of a coming social order’. One might add that the purpose of Marxist theory was to help the working class comprehend and change the world along socialist lines – analysing the capitalist present, also analysing, summarising and theorising the positive and negative lessons of an accumulation of working-class struggles in order to contribute to the workers’ political clarity and hoped-for victory. This certainly was the way that members of the Lovestone group understood Marxism, and some of them made distinctive contributions to the body of Marxist thought in the United States. Some of this permeates items in other sections of this book, but some of the particularly pertinent contributions have been gathered here.

The Lovestone group entered the Great Depression of 1929 believing that the general collapse of capitalism and the forward movement of the world toward a new socialist order – led by the Soviet Union – were unfolding before their eyes. There were, of course, the rising threat of fascism and of a second imperialist global conflict, but these were aspects of capitalist decline and could be overcome by the rising movement of revolutionary labour. Unfortunately, Stalin was riding roughshod over affiliates of the Communist International, on which he was imposing destructively sectarian and ultra-left policies, but his regime and his policies within the Soviet Union were worthy of support. The loyal (or opportunistic) Stalinist ‘yes men’ at that time leading the US Communist Party were vastly inferior to the Lovestoneites and were destined to become an increasingly marginal force in the labour movement. The Stalin leadership would be forced to recognise this and eventually to make adjustments and corrections, bringing the Lovestoneites back into the Communist mainstream. These perspectives were inseparable from the way members of the Lovestone group understood and utilised Marxism.

As the 1930s came to an end, reality was obviously unfolding quite differently than leaders and members of the Lovestone group had anticipated. The contradictions of the class struggle, as well as of US and global politics, yielded developments they had not anticipated – and certainly not the hoped-for revolutionary triumphs. The unanticipated dynamism and horrors of Nazism and of Stalinism went beyond their conceptual framework (and some of the
Stalinist horrors – the murderous ‘revolution from above’ and forced collectivisation of land in the early 1930s, the initial purge trials in 1936 – they had actually defended, or in some cases at least, quietly gone along with). The inexorably approaching second imperialist war generated powerful and complex pressures for which they were not fully prepared. The beliefs that had animated them at the beginning of the decade could not be sustained, and the result was a re-examination of the belief system, Marxism, to which they had been committed. Some of the key documents of that re-examination are also gathered here.

Applying Marxism (Items One–Five)

There have been a number of studies seeking to explain unique features of US history that – in contrast to Europe as such, and most industrial-capitalist countries – have blocked the development of a substantial working-class socialist movement in the United States. We have already noted the practical tasks for trade-union activists discussed in Jay Lovestone’s pamphlet, The American Labor Movement: Its Past, Present and Future, but in this section an historical exposition from the same pamphlet examines ‘Some Specific Features of the American Labor Movement’, an issue also dealt with in Bertram D. Wolfe’s pamphlet Marx and America, excerpted here. Presented here in its entirety is Will Herberg’s pamphlet, The Heritage of the Civil War, a cutting-edge discussion of the anti-slavery movement, the Civil War of 1861–5, and the Reconstruction era. Challenging both explicit and inadvertent racism in the dominant ‘bourgeois’ scholarship, Herberg’s 1932 account also dramatically breaks from the shallow approach characterising most left-wing accounts up to this time – anticipating contributions that would be made by W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and others. We also present here the future theologian’s positive review of V.F. Calverton’s attempt at a Marxist critique of religion, and the second and third segments of his far more substantial seven-part series on Fascism and its embryonic forms in the United States.

1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were among the first to pose the question, in material touched on by Lovestone and Wolfe, and presented in Rumyantseva (ed.) 1979. The question was raised in a sustained manner in 1906 by Werner Sombart (Sombart 1976), which was immediately utilised by Karl Kautsky in his pioneering review-essay, ‘The American Worker’, reprinted in Kautsky 2003; also see Le Blanc 2003. Another influential work dealing with this question is Perlman 1928. Also relevant are Lipset and Marks 2000 and Foner 2002, pp. 110–48.