François Truffaut famously suggested that once there was ‘a certain incompatibility between the terms “cinema” and “Britain”’.¹ Till a generation ago one might have said the same about the words ‘Marxism’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’. Before the 1960s, the terrain was not completely barren, but the limited political influence of Marxism on the workers’ movement the United States and Britain corresponded to the relative weakness of Marxism as a theoretical discourse in these countries.

The impact of the 1930s

The left radicalisation of the 1930s did produce some important contributions. In the US the early writings of Sidney Hook, notably *Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx,*² represented an intriguing encounter between the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács and Korsch and the left-liberal pragmatism of John Dewey. In Britain, the writings of John Strachey brilliantly publicised a version of Marxism close to that of the Communist Party and, in the domain of economic theory, a more original analysis willing to

¹ Truffaut 1978, p. 140.
² Hook 1933.
engage with the work of Hayek and Keynes. And Trotskyist writers produced some outstanding texts of historico-political analysis such as C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and Harold Isaacs’s *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*.

The 1930s had, moreover, some significant longer-term consequences. The Popular Front and the struggle against fascism was the formative political experience of a generation of young intellectuals some of whom, during the harsher climate of the Cold War, refused to abandon Marxism, and instead creatively developed it. The most important example is provided by the brilliant gallery of historians – among them Edward Thompson, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, and George Rudé – who emerged from the Communist Party of Great Britain after the Second World War. The CP Historians’ Group provided in the late 1940s and early 1950s the milieu for a series of important debates that took as their starting point the Cambridge Marxist economist Maurice Dobb’s *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946). With the exception of Hobsbawm, all the leading figures left the CPGB after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. But, as independent socialist historians, they continued to develop a version of Marxism that sought to study history ‘from below’ – from the perspective of the oppressed and exploited – and to give the study of culture and representations a greater importance than had been accorded it in more orthodox approaches.

The American Marxist journal *Monthly Review* represented a somewhat analogous tendency the other side of the Atlantic. Under the guidance of figures such as Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, and Harry Magdoff, *Monthly Review* practised a version of Marxism that was broadly sympathetic to the Communist régimes (notably those in the Third World, such as China and Cuba) but intellectually independent, for example in its development of an account of contemporary capitalism that distanced itself from the labour theory of value. The two groups clashed in the celebrated debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the late 1940s precipitated by Sweezy’s attack on Dobb’s *Studies*.³