Editor’s note on texts and translations

All translations in this volume are new and are based on first editions or reliable copy-texts of manuscripts unpublished in Marx’s lifetime. Successive editors have hardly altered the ‘classical’ English translations, produced between the 1880s and the 1930s, of the Manifesto of the Communist Party, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, the ‘Preface’ to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, and the Critique of the Gotha Programme. The Civil War in France was written in English, and so does not pose a problem. The manuscript materials – the ‘Introduction’ of 1857 to the Grundrisse and the ‘Notes’ on Adolph Wagner – appear in my own translations of 1975. I am grateful to Basil Blackwell Ltd for permission to reproduce this material from my Texts on Method.

It is my aim as editor of the present volume to depart substantially from the way that Marx has previously been presented in English, and in other languages, including German (which was not always the original language of his work). Marx was made responsible for a doctrine or doctrines by Engels and by subsequent Marxists, and by editors who took the view that he should be presented doctrinally in terms of what his thought became, according to a posthumous scheme, rather than what it arguably was, when his writings were generated in the political context that prevailed at the time of first publication or authorial production. Famously Marx commented: ‘I am not a Marxist.’

I have tried to capture something of the freshness of the moment, even when this means a certain awkwardness in expression or
deviation from later terminology. Interestingly the two works (other than the first volume of Capital) that Marx was able to see reproduced in his own lifetime – the Manifesto of the Communist Party (new edn 1872) and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (2nd edn 1869) – were offered by him to the reader as ‘historical’ documents with only minimal correction and updating. He remarked that ‘we have no longer any right to alter’ the Manifesto, and that revising The Eighteenth Brumaire ‘would have robbed it of its peculiar colouring’. Engels, by contrast, generally adopted a much more intrusive editorial policy, appending footnotes, rewriting passages and ‘correcting’ terminology so as to make the texts that he produced consistent with his view of Marx’s ‘scientific’ achievements. Thus readers familiar with the traditional English versions of these Later Political Writings will find differences, and a number of stock terms and phrases have disappeared.

There were mistranslations and obscurities in the traditional English versions. Indeed I was consistently struck by the awkward and clumsy English through which Marx has been transmitted. I have tried at all times to adhere to the flow and tone of Marx’s German, and to find appropriate expressions and metaphors in English that reflect, as much as possible, his forthright and punchy style. Every translation is an imperfect reflection, but I hope that mine is more vivid than previous renditions. I have corrected minor errors without indication. Where I have felt that editorial insertions are required to help the reader, or where the text itself is excessively abbreviated and requires amplification, I have used square brackets to enclose my insertions. For some works there are more complicated editorial notes.

Translation is inevitably interpretation, and interpretation is inevitably personal. I hope that I have been clear about what I have attempted to do in this collection: to present Marx in selected, complete writings as a political theorist who was deeply, though analytically engaged in politics. And about the way that I have tried to do it: using first editions rather than later edited versions, and striving for clarity in reaching a present-day audience.

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