The following engagement with Marx’s critique of political economy has two implicit social-historical assumptions, which can only be alluded to, here. I assume, first, that the concept of the working class employed by Marx was not suitable for the breadth and heterogeneity of the proletarian class-composition of the middle of the nineteenth century – just as, incidentally, it was also never suitable for the class-relations in revolutionary Russia or at the time of the tricontinental liberation-movements in the twentieth century. Second, it appears to me to be evident that Marx’s theory was not able to take up the virulence of the anti-capitalist struggles and the massive social challenges from below, as they appeared above all in the European subsistence-revolts up until 1848. I intend to show in these pages that this is no historically contingent deficit but regards, rather, the status of the theory itself.

At is well known, before the wage-labour relation could be generalised, the subsistence-basis, external to capital, for large parts of the population of Europe was destroyed from the middle of the eighteenth century. Control over the reproduction and the first means of life thus became the centre of struggles between the lower classes and capital. The determination of grain-prices according to market-laws, like all other commodity-prices, was a precondition for making labour-power itself marketable and for subjecting it to exploitation in the value-form. The transformation of means of life
into commodities confronted the pauperised masses at the same time with the transformation of their own conditions of existence into conditions of capital. In a cycle of revolts that lasted for almost 100 years, they had to learn that their survival was no longer to be secured through the processing of external nature and was also no longer valid as an authoritative norm originating out of village communal habits and apportioned by the authorities, but rather represented a market-dependent variable. The passed down ‘moral economy’ of the lower strata (E.P. Thompson)\(^1\) took on the form of a modern antagonism. Leading these struggles were mostly women, ‘rebellious \textit{femmes};\(^2\) who took over control on the market, over the costs of life and prices and over the circulation of grain and export. The made the subsistence-question a public affair, by positing for the first time the praxis of social appropriation of goods in the commodity-form against the violent expropriation and separation of the producers from the means of production.

The resistance against a mode of reproduction determined by capital united a broad spectrum of social layers and classes. It can be summarised under the concept of ‘mass poverty’.\(^3\) This mass poverty was not simply ‘pre-industrial’, as has been said; its roots were not predominantly in the late-feudal social constitution and in its periodic agrarian crises; but it was also not limited to the misery of the workers in the early factories. It was in the first instance absolute ‘overpopulation’, disproportional in relation to the social organisation of capital at the historical level then current, and the result of a directed policy of impoverishment of broad sections of the population as a precondition and lever for the accumulation of capital as well as for the industrial take-off. At the same time, it embodied the anomian effects of the process of industrialisation as well as the expectations and the uprising of people who had been set free from feudal society. Mass poverty was above all working poverty, the form of existence of a class that was bound to labour and for which labour now only meant lack of property. This class of the labouring poor consisted of beggars and vagabonds searching for work, day-workers in the country, impoverished farmers and sharecroppers, weavers of the proto-industrial cottage-industry, domestic servants and city-handymen, seasonal migratory workers, railroad-construction workers, proletarianised craftworkers, the manufacturing and factory-proletariat and, last

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3. The concept comes from the German \textit{Vormärz}. It was taken up by the post-Nazi West German social historiography of the 1950s and 1960s, with the intention of explaining pauperism in the epoch of early industrialisation in Europe on the basis of pre-industrial causes – ultimately, from the growth in population. The industrial-capitalist integration of the ‘workers’, mediated by the social state, thus appeared as a tactical overcoming of mass poverty. An exemplary case is Conze 1954; Abel 1972.