



## Class struggle is like a box of chocolates...

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### review of

Hoffman, M. (2019) *Militant acts: The role of investigations in radical political struggles*. Buffalo: SUNY Press. (HB, pp 204, \$22.95, ISBN 978-1-4384-7262-1)

There are a number of debates that if one has the good fortune of living long enough you will find yourself getting periodically sucked back into regardless of whether you want to or not: is this particular form of social practice really art? Who's the best footballer, Messi or Ronaldo? These debates likely will never be resolved. Therein lies much frustration for those who think the purpose of a debate is to come to a resolution. Rather they are interesting precisely because it is through ongoing debate that the changing shape of a particular field is constantly redefined, from our understanding of what the arts are and could be, or, the nature of sporting activities. It is through these discussions that fields are reshaped, expanded, and re-defined.

Similarly, within academic worlds, for anyone with even the vaguest sense of holding on to a politics, there are always ongoing and usually fairly intense arguments over the relationship between theory and practice, and more generally on the often troubled and tenuous connections between radical politics and academic labor. These debates are likely never to end. But keeping in mind the idea of ongoing discussions shaping and redefining a field, this is

perhaps not so much a problem but the way that our worlds change through time.

Marcelo Hoffman's new book *Militant acts* throws us back into these debates yet again. But before we collectively sigh a 'this again' I'd like to suggest there's something intriguing about such discussions in the present. Looking past the title to the subtitle we can immediately see the importance that the concept of 'investigation' has in the book. Arguably we are at a historical point where mentioning the idea of 'conducting an investigation' is far more likely to evoke associations with CSI-style televisual crime investigation, or perhaps the way that we are constantly investigated, monitored, and surveilled (did someone say Cambridge Analytica?). In any case, whatever the association held, it is far more likely to be with something other than radical politics. Hoffman wants to go back to all those moments when the associations with the concept of the investigation were far different, and more associated with attempts to radically transform the world rather than the mechanisms that shore up the existing forms of hegemonic power.

It is precisely this connection that Hoffman's excellent book seeks to explore. As Hoffman frames it, his goal is to 'rescue the investigation in radical political struggles and theories from this position of an obscurity reinforced by the predominance of investigations tied to the imperatives of capital and the state' [2]. I would somewhat disagree with the idea that these are obscure histories, this is in part as these are histories that I have myself been involved in re-visiting and re-invigorating, not to mention a range of articles in *ephemera* that have done likewise.<sup>1</sup> But rather than quibble over the details, instead it is much more sensible to praise Hoffman's work in how it brings together explorations of investigatory practices that have at times been quite influential movements and political organizations involving students, militants, workers, peasants, patients, and feminists across a wide variety of geographical and social settings. These histories are indeed 'dispersed across footnotes located in the density of texts, obscure pamphlets, short-lived newspapers and journals, as well as posthumously published questionnaires

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples of this, see *ephemera* Volume 14 Number 3 (2014), Volume 5 Issue 4 (2004), as well as *Constituent imagination* (Shukaitis et al., 2007).

and reports outside voluminous collected works' [3]. *Militant acts* does a quite admirable job of bringing together this wide variety of materials and histories.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the way that it approaches investigations primarily as an organizational practice. As Hoffman frames it, his core argument is that militant investigation 'amounts to a highly fluid and adaptable practice whose value resides in the production of forms of collective political subjectivity rather than in the extraction, accumulation, and publication of purely informational contents' [3]. In other words, the primary purpose of the investigation is much more what it creates for those involved in it more so than the information it produces. With this deceptively simple idea Hoffman moves the stakes of what is important throughout the book.

The majority of the histories explored here, not surprisingly, can either be understood as part of a broader history of Marxist thought and politics, or having some connection to it. But regardless of what particular political milieu they emerged from, Hoffman argues that differing and disparate forms of investigation share a common trait of being based on 'an implicit or explicit skepticism with regard to official representations of workers and peasants' [27]. It is this skepticism about the official story regarding workers' conditions that underpins finding other ways to approach, understand, and intervene in particular social and historical contexts. But these circumstances vary widely, as 1970s France is clearly different from the 1860s UK, or Russia in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on this Hoffman argues that there can be no universal method approach to militant investigation which can thus be repeated and replicated elsewhere. Rather there is a close connection of how investigations are shaped by the context and political background from which they emerge; they are not pre-given but 'flow, rather, from the political orientation of the investigation and determine its realization' [7].

*Militant acts* is thus structured around exploring the history of militant investigations in these varying contexts: what conditions it emerged from, how it responded to them, what it did for the involved at the time, etc.. The main sections of the book move from Marx's use of questionnaires to Lenin's, followed by adaptations and updates of these practices by French militants Socialisme ou Barbarie, the Johnson–Forest Tendency, autonomist Marxist

currents in Italy (Wright, 2003), and by French Maoists, and by Foucault and the Prison Information Group. Each of these histories present a different set of circumstances that are responded to as well as difficulties, which often led to the practices being abandoned after a time. Hoffman suggests that dynamics of failure ‘figures as a central and powerful leitmotif in the literature on militant investigations’ [14] as practitioners expand and rethink what they’re doing to address the limitations of existing forms of organizing.

Not surprisingly, Hoffman starts his history of investigation with Marx’s use of questionnaires to scrutinize workers’ conditions. It is Marx’s work that is the most noted and drawn from in subsequent versions of militant investigation. This is somewhat ironic given that measured in terms of response rate to the questionnaire, very little, if anything, is known to have been produced. But this is perhaps not the problem it might seem at first. Hoffman emphasizes that for Marx, as well as many taking inspiration from him, the main point of the investigation is to focus on the self-activity of workers, and more particularly on the lack of comprehensive knowledge workers often have about their own conditions. This focus on self-activity coupled with the limits of current knowledge is meant to nudge workers on to investigating and shaping their working conditions. Thus, for Hoffman Marx’s questionnaire can be understood as ‘exercise in consciousness-raising’ [34]. But if the main focus is conducting an investigation as an organizational practice, then it is more about what it produces for the workers taking part and not the information produced: ‘success did not necessarily hinge on written responses from them so much as the far more diffuse reception of the questions’ [37].

This is an interesting contrast with how the much less known example of how investigations were taken up and used by Lenin very briefly before being abandoned. Lenin formulated an approach using questionnaires during his time in St Petersburg, though he ended up finding this a disappointing source of information gathering. For Lenin investigation thus was much more an informational practice, which explains why he ended up disappointed with it, and thus abandoned it quickly. If there were better and more comprehensive sources of information about factory conditions than what the surveys could produce, why not use them? As Hoffman frames this turn away from

investigations, for Lenin there 'is no need to instigate a process of consciousness-raising among workers through questions directed toward them because the answers to these questions already reside elsewhere' [42].

This more informational approach can be contrasted to how the US based Trotskyist group the Johnson-Forrest Tendency shifted their approach away from surveys and questionnaires in favor of soliciting worker's writing about their experience. In many ways this follows logically from the focus on workers' self-activity, and rooting that in the workers' concrete experiences. This approach was thought of as addressing the limitations of the questionnaire. This shift indeed meant losing some of the 'social scientific' aura of the survey, reoriented the investigation in a way even more focused on workers' subjectivity, rather than attempting to provide the forms of comprehensive knowledge that Lenin was looking for. It also had the added benefit of producing writing that was arguable much more interesting to read and engage with, as well as shifting and potentially changing the role between workers and intellectuals. Hoffman suggests that while the Johnson-Forrest Tendency failed in its effort to undercut the divisions between workers and intellectuals, they nonetheless did manage to succeed in reworking it, instead aspiring to invert that relationship. In the materials produced it is workers' voices that are emphasized rather than intellectuals', including critiques of theoretical materials written by workers, i.e. workers reflecting on and critiquing theory rather than only serving as the basis for theorization.

If Trotskyist and post-Trotskyist groups tended to move towards workers' narratives rather than surveys, the employment of militant investigations in the Italian autonomist movements tended to embrace a more hybrid approach. While they shared a focus on using investigation more as an organizing practice, and as a form of consciousness-raising, there were a significant number of figures taking their inspiration and methodological approach from sociology. It was sociology that was argued to provide rigorous tools for developing conceptual frameworks adequate to the ways that forms of class struggle were developing in Italy during 1960s and 1970s. Hoffman describes how the publications of the Italian autonomists 'served as the intellectual space for the most extensive reactivation of Marx's workers' inquiry in the postwar period' [68]. The embrace of workers' inquiry by the

autonomists was largely inspired by the work of both the Johnson-Forrest Tendency and Socialisme ou Barbarie, though they tended to be both appreciative and critical of the use of workers' narratives.

In the autonomist movements there were contrasting views of the possible role of sociology as a tool in developing class struggle. The more sociologically oriented sections tended to want to move back towards using questionnaires and formal interviews.<sup>2</sup> This differed from what Hoffman describes as a vision of investigation that was 'a more militant one based on questions formulated through the interactions between researchers *and* workers' [71]. This more militant approach carried on the work that the Johnson-Forrest Tendency undertook in attempting to undermine, or even get rid of, the distinctions and dividing line between researchers and researched-subjects. Interestingly Hoffman observes that many of the most important theorizations of workers' inquiry appear in the autonomists' publications, although with a lag of several years after they had adopted these practices as their own [72].

The final section of Hoffman's book looks at how investigation as a political-research practice was adopted by French Maoists during the 1970s, in particular the Prison Information Group. He suggests that these groups and formations were more transversal in terms of their social composition, and this contributed to their attempts to bring together and fuse together the different sources and practices of investigation. In the more Maoist inspired conception of investigation the main focus shifted to utilizing it as a tool for testing the preparedness of emerging party formation for its organizational work. In other words, conducting investigations became part of party building, which is to say a particular kind of organizational practice, one more tied to producing specific forms of organization and subjectivity. Hoffman observes that by drawing on Mao's wider ranging conception of investigation it became possible for their groups to find ways to employ investigations as tools working with populations significantly outside the usual remit of workers' inquiry, namely with groups including prisoners and psychiatric patients. In this broader Maoist-inspired conception, investigations 'served

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Shukaitis (2013).

as a means of generating knowledge about poor peasants and organizing them in the process' [86].

Foucault's role in the development of investigation as political-research practice is described primarily as a synthetic one: he participated in supporting inquiries around prisons, taking part in ways that served to fuse together different approaches to investigations. Thus Foucault drew on pre-Marxist approaches, serving to 'historicize the investigation in stunningly novel ways' at the time 'he practiced it in equally novel ways in the streets of Paris'; based on this Hoffman claims that Foucault is the only major theorist to 'have *simultaneously* historicized and practiced the investigation' [104].

The prison investigations conducted through the Prison Information Group were described and theorized as an intolerance investigation meaning that their stated purpose was to increase attention to and intolerance of existing prison conditions. This was understood as being quite distinct from a more sociological approach, or one based around curiosity. Rather investigations were meant to function as practical forms of solidarity within political organizing, treating prisoners more as comrades rather than objects of investigation. When attempting to make sense of why the prison investigations were much more successful in terms of response and materials produced when compared to previous iterations, Hoffman notes that this can largely be understood as a byproduct of drastically different temporalities of prison life compared to factories. Or, to be blunter about it, they had higher response rates because prisoners had more time available to them for responding (and a general lack of other things to do).

After describing how these more synthetic approaches to investigation were used through the 1960s and early 1970s, Hoffman chooses to conclude the main narrative of the book. There is a certain logic to this as the movements that he focuses on went into decline throughout the 1970s. Hoffman suggests that the more restricted concept of workers' inquiry likewise became less used during this period, though it also informed ranges of practices going beyond the factory walls (such as those informed by the autonomist concept of the social factory). Hoffman seems to agree with the argument that the decline of

the militant investigations during the 1970s is connected with the ‘the hollowing out of the working class as the subject of social emancipation’ [134].

In more recent years, there have been efforts to revive militant investigation as a political-research practice. But these attempts, while drawing from the histories Hoffmann discusses, have also tended to depart from them in notable ways. There has been much more attention paid to the dynamics of cultural and affective labor, more so than to Fordist or industrial forms of labor. While this strikes me as a fair characterization, I would argue that in *Militant acts* Hoffman has shown that there is much to learn from these histories of militant investigation, not as models to be copied, but rather as examples of attempts to forge new tools for responding to ever-changing but always demanding circumstances

## references

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