

## Book Review

**Marcelo Hoffman (2019) *Militant Acts: The Role of Investigations in Radical Politics Struggles*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. ISBN 9781438472621. Paperback \$31.95**

*Reviewed by  
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Marcelo Hoffman's *Militant Acts* is an important contribution to a growing body of writing that seeks to understand how research and organising can be combined. There has been an increase of interest in these practices in recent years, both within and beyond academia. For example, in 2014 *Ephemera* published a special issue on workers' inquiry, *Vieupoint* magazine has published widely on the subject, as have *Ankermag* in Belgium, *Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes* and *Acta* in France, *Into the Black Box* and *Officina Primo Maggio* in Italy, *Invisíveis Goiânia* in Brazil, and *Angry Workers* and *Notes from Below* in the UK (I am on the editorial board of the latter). There have been collaborations with *Fever* and the Workers' Inquiry Network, sharing ideas and practices internationally.

In this context, Hoffman's detailed analysis of the role of "investigation" within radical political struggles is both timely and useful. While the publications and groups mentioned above have discussed this in terms of "workers' inquiry", Hoffman opts for the term "investigation" which he argues "has, perhaps, the slight advantage over 'inquiry' of lending itself more readily to the study of practices that were overwhelmingly *unofficial* in the hands of radical political movements" (p. 4). There is a similar motivation for examining this history of investigation for the groups currently experimenting with workers' inquiry. Hoffman cites Yves Duroux, a Maoist militant who attended Althusser's Reading Capital seminar, and exclaimed, "Today we know nothing about the world of labour" (pp. 1–2). Unfortunately, that lack of understanding about conditions that frustrated Duroux continues today. Hoffman's account of investigation is part of the ongoing attempts to refine tools to understand conditions in order to overcome them.

The historical analysis that Hoffman constructs takes in a wide range of theorists, including Marx, Lenin, Mao, C.L.R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, Raya Dunayevskaya, Raniero Panzieri, Dario Lanzardo, Danielle Rancière, Daniel Defert, Michel Foucault and Alain Badiou. This is broader than the genealogy often attributed to workers' inquiry, for example with Haider and Mohandesi (2013) or my own account (Woodcock, 2014). As Hoffman explains, there is a "rich history" of investigation that runs through different struggles of "intellectuals, students, militants, workers, peasants, prisoners, patients, and feminists" (p. 1). In a sense, the book is therefore an inquiry into inquiries, or to use Hoffman's terms, an investigation into investigations. The main argument of the book is that "the 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" (p. 3).

Gigi Roggero (2020: 5) has rightly pointed out that "in recent years workers' inquiry and coresearch have been much talked about, perhaps even too much, in the sense that it would be better to talk about them less and do them more". However, Hoffman's argument is an example of why it is useful to interrogate the history of investigation.

The book provides a detailed account of the early uses of inquiry, from Marx's questionnaire, to Lenin's failed interviews, Mao's "no inquiry no right to speak!", "breakaway Trotskyism", and Italian Workerists. While my own interest in inquiry has focused on Marx, the breakaways of the Johnson–Forest Tendency and others, and the Italian Workerists, this follows my own politics and those of the UK far left more widely, as well as accounts of Italian Workerism (Wright, 2017). Hoffman's account of Mao and different Maoist organisations remains somewhat removed from these traditions and, at first, I was sceptical of the inclusion of Foucault within this lineage of inquiry. The Maoist history provides a route into the inquiries with the Prisons Information Group (GIP) that Foucault was involved with in the early 1970s.

The discussion of Foucault provides a further interrogation of the role of knowledge production within struggles. As Hoffman argues:

Foucault takes us back in two fundamental ways: he takes us back to the birth of the official inquiry, and he takes us back to the birth of the militant investigation... It renders what was an all-too-familiar practice of knowledge production (to Foucault and his militant fellow travelers) strange by historicizing this practice and locating its emergence in the more general birth of political power in the West (p. 133).

This more technical argument allows a deeper reflection on investigation than is usually present in arguments about workers' inquiry. As I have argued in my own research, in the Italian tradition there was a "tension between the continued use of sociological tools in the inquiries and the search for other ways to inject the political component into the project" (Woodcock, 2017: 29). This can be found in many examples of inquiry, whether using questionnaires or interview techniques borrowed from sociology. Through Foucault, Hoffman critically revisits attempts that "employed and modulated sociological methods for their own unique political purposes" (p. 7).

This broadening out of inquiry allows Hoffman to critically survey a richer history of the practice, both beyond the worker and the workplace. There are a few moments where this goes a step further – for example, citing Andrea Cavazzini and the claim that the decline in inquiry in Italy was due to "the hollowing out of the working class as *the* subject of social emancipation" (p. 134). This post-workerist claim risks missing the changes in class composition. Instead of understanding how conditions and possibilities of struggles have changed, it could result in undermining workers' collective power. Instead of jettisoning working-class agency, it needs to be investigated further. This involves, as the editors of *Notes from Below* (2018) have pointed out, building on Battaglia's argument that "the best way to defend workerism today is to supercede it". One of workerism's key insights was the understanding of class composition: the relationship between the technical composition (labour process, technology, management techniques and so on) and political composition (forms of struggle). *Notes from Below* expanded this framework to include "social composition", including how workers were composed beyond the workplace, shaping their struggles in various ways.

The final chapter surveys contemporary investigations in light of these historical examples. It takes in *Colectivo Situaciones* in Argentina, an inquiry in a Manhattan cocktail bar, a Berlin bartender, and my own call centre inquiry (Woodcock, 2017). These attempts provide examples of how this theory can be put into practice, but since publication of *Militant Acts* there has been a flourish of new inquiries. If anything, the existence of more examples of groups – both connected and not – experimenting with the practice is evidence of the timeliness of the book. It is, however, unfortunate that these could not be covered in the concluding chapter.

In summary, Hoffman's book provides a useful historical account of the different forms of

inquiry and investigation taken by a range of groups. While broader and more heterodox than other existing accounts, it draws out the importance of learning from the past to inform struggles today. The challenges and opportunities of investigation are laid out to the reader. In the spirit of this history the book should not only be read, but then also interpreted in investigations that seek to understand how capitalism has changed today – not as an intellectual pursuit, but as part of a project of radical transformation.

## References

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