

Introduction

The topic of the investigation in radical political struggles takes us into familiar and strange territory. It takes us into familiar territory because the investigation has become a banal practice, especially with the advent of the Internet. Investigations of all types regularly constitute us as objects of knowledge. We are regularly enjoined to offer detailed information about our experiences as consumers through consumer satisfaction surveys. A seconds-long telephone conversation with a customer service representative suffices to prompt the solicitation of information about the quality of our experiences as consumers and the predictable plea for a ranking of these experiences on a nauseatingly familiar numerical scale. State institutions also have a long history of launching investigations to determine the truth of a crime through the painstaking accumulation of facts. One need only remind oneself of the very name of the domestic intelligence agency in the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, to begin to ascertain a sense of the weight of this history. And it is hardly uncommon to hear politicians call for investigations into the activities of other politicians. Yet the investigation also had another rich history, one inscribed in the annals of radical political struggles and theories in the modern era. Intellectuals, students, militants, workers, peasants, prisoners, patients, and feminists forged this history in a multiplicity of institutional and geographical sites, often under conditions of great duress. This history is not well known even among radicals because the investigation simply does not occupy as prominent a place as it once did in radical political struggles. Yves Duroux, a former Maoist militant once described by Louis Althusser as

the “cleverest” student in his seminar leading to *Reading Capital*,¹ helps us understand this peculiar state of affairs, albeit in rather exaggerated terms. “Today we know nothing about the world of labor,” he laments.² Duroux attributes this collective ignorance to the disappearance of the investigation as a militant practice. “There is no longer the investigation,” he declares.³ “There are,” he hastily adds, “opinion surveys, consumer surveys.”⁴

My immediate aim in this book 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. To be more precise, this book explores the constitution of knowledge in radical political struggles and theories by focusing on the concept and practice of the investigation in these struggles and theories. What *was* the investigation in this context? At its most rudimentary, it consisted in acts of publicity in newspapers and pamphlets as well as in physical displacements to other geographical and institutional spaces to gather information about the conditions and struggles of workers, peasants, and other subalterns for explicitly political purposes. Investigations were thus eminently militant acts. They were undertaken before Marxism in the workers’ movement in France in the early 1840s, across the history of Marxism in its diverse forms, and beyond Marxism in the form of movements concerned with the struggles of prisoners and women. In terms of method, investigations varied from the use of questionnaires, to one-on-one interviews, to more collective fact-finding meetings with selected informants, to the solicitation of individual narratives and other forms of writing, but they tended to proceed from suspicions about the official representations of subalterns in the party and state, the presumption of not knowing enough about these subalterns and its corollary of learning from them, often in situ. Investigations were also analyzed, initiated, supported, and even personally undertaken in many cases by a wide range of intellectuals. Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, Mao Zedong, C. L. R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, Raya Dunayevskaya, Raniero Panzieri, Dario Lanzardo, Danielle Rancière, Daniel Defert, Michel Foucault, and Alain Badiou all participated in investigations in some form or other. Yet their names often remained anonymous and pseudonymous to privilege the name of the group or publication undertaking the investigation and to offer protection against political repression. In the following pages, I set out to disclose the diverse histories, underappreciated difficulties, and theoretical import of

investigations in radical political struggles. My core argument 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.

Fragments for a More Comprehensive Analysis

The study of the investigation in radical political struggles and theories compels us to adopt the tirelessly inquisitive posture of an investigator because its history is dispersed across footnotes located in the density of texts, obscure pamphlets, short-lived newspapers and journals, as well as posthumously published questionnaires and reports outside voluminous collected works. In more than one case, researchers have not been able to track down the primary materials for investigations, such as the responses to questionnaires. To further compound matters, some documents authored by titanic thinkers have simply failed to elicit a lot of sustained commentary. Astoundingly but tellingly, the number of English translations of Karl Marx's 1880 questionnaire for French workers, "A Workers' Inquiry," exceeds the number of elaborate interpretations of it in the English language.

Fortunately, there is a recently reinvigorated literature on investigations in radical political struggles, which itself reflects the renewed academic and practical interest in these investigations over the last two decades. The contributions to this literature are invaluable, but they tend to illuminate militant investigations only in bits and pieces, as if the full scope of these practices across time and space eludes a more comprehensive analytical and historical consideration. To be more precise, these contributions tend to focus on one iteration or set of iterations of this practice to the detriment of others. They rarely engage in a critical dialogue with one another, and they tend to leave the much deeper history of the concept and practice of investigations in radical political struggles entirely unaddressed.⁵ Even studies of these investigations that manage to achieve a greater degree of breadth across time and space leave a lot to be desired. For instance, Michel J. M. Thiollent devotes a whole chapter of his book *Crítica metodológica, investigação social e enquete operária* to workers' inquiry from its origins in the first half of the nineteenth century through its various articulations in Marx, Lenin,

Mao, Lanzardo, and Panzieri.⁶ Yet his remarkably condensed discussion of this practice is dated by more than three decades and limited in some noteworthy respects. It does not deal with the important experience of French Maoism and the experiences of some of the more post-Marxist movements that adopted the investigation. There is therefore a great deal more work to be done in the domain of research into investigations in radical political struggles. One of the immediate costs of not undertaking this research is a significant diminution in the diversity of the experiences of these investigations across time and space. This diversity concerns overarching objectives as well as methods and results.

As a slight difficulty arises from the very terminology used to denote the concept and practice of investigations in radical political struggles, a few words are in order about my terminological choices before proceeding. Alongside “investigation,” there is another commonly employed word in English to designate this concept and practice. That word is “inquiry,” as in a “workers’ inquiry.” In everyday usage, there may be subtle shades of difference between these terms. “Investigation” may more forcefully carry the suspicion of wrongdoing, whereas “inquiry” may have more of a formal and official ring about it (at least to American ears), as in a “Commission of Inquiry.” An official body, the Canadian government’s Panel on Responsible Conduct of Research (PRCR), instructively captures the heightened sense of suspicion in the usage of the term “investigation,” as opposed to the term “inquiry.” The PRCR defines an “inquiry” as a mere “review” of an “allegation” of a “breach” of policy, whereas it defines an “investigation” as a “process” of “determining” the “validity” of such an “allegation.”⁷ I opt for “investigation” in the title of this book mainly for the sake of presentational economy. After all, one has to settle on one set of words over others in the limited space of a title. Still, my choice is not arbitrary. “Investigation” 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. However, for all intents and purposes, I do not draw a strident or substantive distinction between the concepts and practices covered by these terms. Moreover, I often shift back and forth between “inquiry” and “investigation,” depending on the usages of these terms among the theorists and practitioners under consideration. In this regard, my slippage back and forth between them is in keeping with other languages. Notably, the French word *enquête* translates as “investigation,” “inquiry,” and “survey.”

On the Production of Militant Knowledge

We can more elaborately stress the specificity of the concept and practice of the investigation in radical political struggles by dwelling on another seemingly proximate, if not identical, experience of investigation. Between 1929 and 1931, Erich Fromm initiated an inquiry of German workers on behalf of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Posthumously published as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*, the inquiry was undertaken to “determine the social and psychological attitudes of two large groups in Germany—manual and white collar workers.”⁸ It was carried out on the basis of the distribution of 3,300 copies of a questionnaire consisting of “271 items.”⁹ The questions themselves consisted of two types, those related to the objective circumstances of the workers and those related to their personality structures.¹⁰ The questionnaires were distributed to workers with the assistance of “doctors, newspaper publishers, teachers in further education and members of co-operative organizations as well as party and trade union officials.”¹¹ Wolfgang Bonss informs us that while 1,100 questionnaires were completed and sent back to the Institute for Social Research, only 584 of them survived the “enforced emigration of the Institute to the United States in 1933.”¹² The responses to the inquiry revealed varying degrees of congruence and incongruence between the personality structures of the respondents and their left-wing political commitments. In particular, Fromm identifies one set of workers who did not value freedom and equality at all because “they willingly obeyed every powerful authority they admired; they liked to control others, in so far as they had the power to do so.”¹³ For Fromm, these workers quite naturally gravitated toward Nazism as it grew in strength.¹⁴

At first blush, it may indeed seem that Fromm’s inquiry should occupy a prominent place in the history of investigations in radical political struggles. After all, his inquiry emanated from a research agenda with a heavily Marxist orientation, and it concerned itself with the conditions and attitudes of workers. Moreover, like other investigations in radical political struggles, Fromm’s inquiry was based on an elaborate questionnaire. No doubt for these reasons, Bonss outright describes Fromm’s inquiry as an “*enquête ouvrière*,” as if it simply belongs to the same tradition going back to Marx’s 1880 questionnaire for French workers of the same name.¹⁵ The basic problem with this identification is that Fromm’s inquiry *lacks* the manifestly political dimension of Marx’s inquiry. As we shall see in

greater detail in the next chapter, Marx formulated his questionnaire to enable workers to act politically on their own knowledge of their own conditions and struggles. By contrast, Fromm frames his inquiry as a strictly social-scientific exercise in the accumulation of empirical insights for the purpose of theory building. In the words of the opening paragraph of his inquiry, “[Decisive for this venture] was the conviction that the elaboration of a theory of social development was critically dependent on a general increase in empirical knowledge, in particular on data concerning the group-specific attitudes and personality structure of individuals.”¹⁶ Fromm even informs readers that the questionnaires distributed to workers contained a cover letter from the Institute for Social Research stressing “the *purely* scientific nature of the inquiry,” as if he and other researchers sought to steer their research endeavor away from any political intonation or reception.¹⁷ Of course, such maneuvers did not necessarily mean that workers could not have taken Fromm’s questions in more political directions. Fromm himself reports that at least some workers responded critically to his questionnaire.¹⁸ But Fromm’s aversion to a manifestly political purpose in his inquiry *does* put it at odds with the investigations under consideration in this study. These investigations stand out for being *designed* as militant acts rather than as purely social scientific exercises in the accumulation of empirical insights for the purpose of theory building. In other words, the investigations under consideration in this study manifestly serve the broad purpose of facilitating political action and organization among investigators and the investigated. Peter Hallward concisely picks up on this distinctive feature of militancy in his own consideration of the investigation in Badiou. “Investigation,” he writes, “is a militant rather than a scholarly process.”¹⁹ Thiollent reminds us that the explicit political objectives of this type of investigation dictate its choice of methods. In his deeply illuminating words:

The launching of a workers’ inquiry presupposes a clear political definition of the objectives of the group. Otherwise, the methodological control of the process of investigation is impossible. The political objectives of the group determine the choice of the inquiry as a militant activity and the prioritized targets of the investigation. For example, a political definition is necessary to be able to choose the thematic of the investigation and its recipients. Problems with wages and

the cost of living? Working conditions in a sector? Broader political problems? Which type of worker is to be privileged as an informant? An “average” worker without class consciousness? A conscious worker? Established militant? Unionized or non-unionized?, etc. Definitive criteria do not exist to answer these questions. Everything depends on the objectives of the group and the evaluation of the conjuncture.²⁰

Methods, in other words, cannot be determined in advance of political objectives in the practice of militant investigations. They flow, rather, from the political orientation of the investigation and determine its realization. The more subtle point to be made here is certainly not that this political orientation implies a pure and simple rupture with or exclusion of sociological methods. Debates about the utility of these methods for workers’ inquiries raged in the pages of the Italian journal *Quaderni Rossi* in the early 1960s. Sociology also inflected investigations in radical political struggles in far less obvious ways. The Prisons Information Group (GIP), founded by Foucault and others in 1971, emphatically distinguished its own investigations from sociological investigations, yet the sociologist Jean-Claude Passeron had reviewed what became the first questionnaire of the GIP for its authors.²¹ It would therefore be more precise to suggest that investigations in radical political struggles were employed to constitute knowledge for explicitly political purposes *even when* they relied on sociological methods. Or, rather, these investigations employed and modulated sociological methods for their own unique political purposes.

Militant investigations can also be distinguished from certain iterations of the much more diffuse notion of “militant research.” In one such iteration, militant research amounts to “research that is carried [out] in a fashion in keeping with the aims and values of radical militants.”²² This gloss on militant research, taken from a glossary entry in a whole edited book on the topic, offers a much looser and even incidental relationship between research and militant political goals than what can be found in the militant investigation as portrayed here. This incidental relationship also comes through in the same book in the very wording of its presentation of the nuances of the translation of the Spanish phrase “*militancia de investigación*” from the Argentine group Colectivo Situaciones. The translators of the contribution from this group ask: “Does the Spanish phrase refer to knowledge production that *happens* to be radical in some

way (militant research)?”²³ The investigation as it is portrayed in this book does not just *happen* to be radical. It is not *merely* “in keeping” with radical political “aims” and “values.”²⁴ A professor sitting in his or her office could easily and very effectively realize that kind of endeavor. The militant investigation is, once again, *designed to fulfill* radical political aims and values *through* solicitations of knowledge in some form or other from subalterns.

Why should militant investigations retain our attention? Why not leave them buried in long-forgotten and elusive documents as well as in the recesses of the living memory of the *soixante-huitards* and others? Let us clear up one point straightaway: the purpose of revisiting investigations in radical political struggles is certainly not to conjure up nostalgia for a revolutionary or insurrectional past. Such nostalgia would be especially misplaced because these investigations resulted more often than not in stark failures by conventional measures. The value of revisiting investigations in radical political struggles as an object of study resides elsewhere. First of all, the militant investigation has undergone something of a rebirth in the last two decades, as we shall see in greater detail in the conclusion. Now therefore seems like an especially germane and propitious time to revisit the details of its history and draw lessons from it. As a second approximation, we can say that the little-known but rich history of the militant investigation vividly illustrates that political struggles concern the constitution of knowledge as well as the exercise of power. We can be even more precise about the character of this knowledge. Alongside (and as an intrinsic part of) the well-known and repeatedly staged drama of sabotages, occupations, protests, strikes, rallies, revolts, and revolutions, there were perhaps less dramatic but no less ambitious efforts to constitute a popular knowledge in radical political movements. Broadly speaking, these efforts sprang from a profound skepticism with regard to official and theoretical representations of workers, peasants, and other subalterns. It was deemed necessary to appeal directly to these others to find out what *they* thought about *their own* conditions and struggles. These efforts involved the deployment of a wide range of tools: questionnaires, individual interviews, fact-finding meetings, and the solicitation of individual narratives as well as other forms of writing. These tools reached their intended recipients (and plenty of others) through acts of publicity in newspapers and pamphlets as well as through the physical displacements of the investigators themselves to other geographical and institutional sites, often for prolonged periods

of time. The knowledge sought through these manifold activities was “popular” in the straightforward sense of emanating from popular strata. Questions about what exactly these strata thought as well as how their thoughts might have palpable political consequences figured centrally in the minds of militant investigators. And these investigators tended to put this popular knowledge to distinct but interrelated (and potentially incompatible) uses. One was to enable militants to formulate effective political strategies and tactics. The other was to furnish popular strata themselves with a basis for their own political activities. In other words, the history of investigations in radical political struggles shows us that radical political movements turned *directly* to workers, peasants, prisoners, and other subalterns for processes of knowledge production. Ideally, these strata would be the bearers and/or agents of a knowledge that would serve to facilitate a process of thoroughgoing social and political transformations culminating in their own emancipation as well as the emancipation of society as a whole. However, given that bearers of a more theoretical knowledge, such as militants, intellectuals, and students, tended to *initiate* the solicitation of knowledge in the practice of investigations, we need to exercise some caution in our references to “popular” knowledge. Indeed, it would be more accurate to suggest that investigations in radical political struggles sprang to life from the immensely complicated and fraught intersection of the aspiration to constitute a popular knowledge, on the one hand, and the recourse to more scholarly or erudite forms of knowledge, on the other hand.²⁵

Investigations from Marxism to Post-Marxism (and Pre-Marxism)

This book interlaces historical and theoretical threads of argument. The historical thread begins with the Marxist tradition of investigations, though we shall see that the practice of workers’ inquiries predates Marxism. This starting point is not arbitrary. Among radical political traditions, Marxism stands out for its elaborate practices and theorizations of the investigation. Marx’s 1880 questionnaire inaugurated the tradition of investigations in Marxism. His questionnaire offered a methodological matrix for the practice. It also spelled out one of the main objectives of the investigation, namely, to enable the working class to constitute its own knowledge for the sake of its own political activity. Yet Marx’s

questionnaire failed to generate enough responses from workers in spite of its mass distribution. One of the many possible reasons for this failure is that workers were asked to respond to a lengthy questionnaire consisting of demanding questions at a time when they experienced acute constraints in their literacy, time, access to information, and political organization.

Lenin and Mao also made very important though often overlooked contributions to the Marxist tradition of investigations. In the mid-1890s, Lenin formulated his own questionnaire for workers and engaged in a series of interviews with a factory worker from St. Petersburg. Yet his disappointing experiences with these interviews led him to disavow workers' inquiry in favor of a critical recourse to official and legal sources of knowledge. In the 1920s and 1930s, Mao framed his investigation as a collective experience centered on the fact-finding meeting. The purpose of this experience was to align the subjective orientation of militants with objective conditions for the sake of formulating successful revolutionary tactics and strategies. Mao obtained a modicum of success in his investigations and therefore retained an overall emphasis on the investigation in his oeuvre.

Notably, each of these contributions to the investigation made no reference to the preceding one or ones. The contributions of Marx, Lenin, and Mao also shared markedly different historical and political fates. Lenin's practice of the investigation did not have *any* political afterlife, owing to the remarkably belated publication of his questionnaire (roughly sixty years after his death) and his own harsh judgments about his interviews with a worker. Marx and Mao's articulations of the investigation, on the other hand, flourished in radical political movements into the late twentieth century in large part because they spoke readily to the aspiration in these movements to ground critique and political practice in popular knowledge rather than simply defer to the representations of subalterns in official and theoretical forms of knowledge.

In the 1940s and 1950s, breakaway Trotskyist and post-Trotskyist groups, such as the Johnson-Forest Tendency and Correspondence in the United States as well as Socialisme ou Barbarie in France, latched onto Marx's effort to enable workers to write about their own experiences to facilitate their own self-activity. Yet, in a sharp break with Marx, these groups based their versions of workers' inquiry on the solicitation of individual narratives rather than on the questionnaire. In the early 1960s, Italian workerist currents affiliated with *Quaderni Rossi* resuscitated the practice of workers' inquiry in the form of the questionnaire after its eclipse in the hands of oppositional Trotskyist and post-Trotskyist groups.

Italian workerists used questionnaires to gauge the political implications of the emergence of a new working class consisting of deskilled old workers and unskilled young workers. They also formulated groundbreaking interpretations of Marx's questionnaire that framed workers' inquiry as a means of spurring a process of consciousness-raising to transform the working class into an antagonistic class.

French Maoists adopted Mao's investigation before and after the tumultuous events of May 1968. Unsurprisingly, they followed Mao in directing their investigations toward poor peasants in the countryside as well as toward workers in the factories. Perhaps surprisingly, however, French Maoists stretched the bounds of the investigation beyond these classical revolutionary figures to include prisoners and former psychiatric hospital patients. They also framed the investigation in varying degrees of relation to *établissement* as the practice of taking up working positions alongside others to radicalize them. Finally, French Maoists launched their investigations to explore possible instantiations of collective political subjectivity inside and outside the party form.

Here again, however, the original divisions in the birth of the investigation in Marxism cast a long shadow over its subsequent history. Remarkably, the contributions of Marx and Mao each spurred largely independent experiences of the investigation. Most notably, Italian workerists drew explicitly from Marx's questionnaire, rather than the Maoist investigation, whereas French Maoists built on Mao's investigation rather than Marx's questionnaire. The investigations in these different currents nonetheless had some noteworthy features in common, such as the channeling of doubts about the capacities of parties to represent workers and an overall emphasis on the physical displacements of the investigators to factories and other spaces of labor. And yet there was very little obvious influence of the experiences of workers' inquiry in Italian workerist currents on the experiences of investigations in French Maoism, as if they belonged to mutually exclusive spaces. Tellingly, Duroux admits that the French Maoists with whom he circulated simply did not know about the nearly contemporaneous experience of workers' inquiries in Italy. "At the time," he rather candidly informs Andrea Cavazzini, "we did not know all that. And I still don't know it today."²⁶

Perhaps paradoxically, then, it took a group that was more transversal in composition and orientation than Marxist to fuse together different sources of the investigation in Marxism. That group was the aforementioned GIP, which lasted from 1971 to 1972. The GIP drew

its own practice of investigation into prisons from Marx's questionnaire and Mao's investigation. To be more precise, it used these sources of the investigation in early Marxism to enable prisoners to express themselves about the intricacies of the materiality of the prison. But the novelty of the investigations of the GIP hardly ended with this fusion of otherwise disparate sources. The Marxist self-presentation of investigations does not appear to have even hinted at the experience of workers' inquiries *outside* Marxism, as if Marxism possessed sole ownership of these inquiries. By contrast, the declarations of the GIP authored by Foucault sought to build on a whole tradition of nineteenth-century workers' inquiries *prior* to the birth of Marxism. The GIP and Foucault thus help us redraw the historical parameters for the study of investigations in radical political struggles. They gesture to the significance of these practices in an earlier period of industrialization in nineteenth-century France. However, as they get no further than mere gestures, it is incumbent upon us to supplement their remarks with a greater degree of content. We turn to Hilde Rigaudias-Weiss's account of early nineteenth-century workers' inquiries for that content.

There is one more feature to the investigations of the GIP that makes them stand out against the backdrop of so many Marxist experiences: they were successful in generating and publishing written responses. The GIP solicited, received, selected, and then published the written responses of prisoners to an amalgam of detailed questions about what makes the prison intolerable. I suggest that the success of the GIP in obtaining these responses had to do with the simplicity of its questionnaires, the availability of time in the prison, and the reliance on a ramified network of confidants.

While I address very recent experiments in militant investigations from remarkably diverse groups in the conclusion, the core historical thread of the argument in the main body of this book culminates in the early 1970s. This cutoff point is no more arbitrary than our starting point in Marx's questionnaire. Deployments of the investigation among radical political movements peaked right around 1970 to 1971 simply in terms of acquiring a greater breadth. During these years, the framework for conducting investigations exploded to suddenly encompass women, prisoners, and former psychiatric hospital patients *in addition* to the standard revolutionary figures of the worker and the peasant. Afterward, many of the groups and publications that had undertaken investigations retreated, if they did not cease to exist, under a variety of pressures,

including outright state repression. More generally, the more restricted notion of a *workers'* inquiry, which remained at the root of the practices of the investigation in radical political struggles and informed so many of these practices well beyond the space of the factory, went into precipitous decline. Cavazzini helps us understand this decline. He suggests that neoliberal policies in the mid-1970s began to undercut the notion of the working class as the embodiment of an alternative organization of modern society. In his deeply sobering words:

The working class ceased to exist as an antagonistic force to the existing economic and political system; it ceased, above all, to represent the possibility of an alternative organization of society. The moment of irreducible negativity upon which it had been possible to found both a critical theory of society and a political strategy in which worker centrality was the bedrock disappeared. The demands of philosophical or political critique no longer had a structural link with active historical forces; and the workers once again became the passive objects of sociology and economics, even of a morbid or hypocritical pity directed at the consequences of deindustrialization and liberalization. Fatal accidents and plans for mass layoffs became the only occasions for public visibility of a social stratum which now exists only as the recipient of a humanitarian morality, and which now only asks to be helped to bear an increasingly difficult life, without opportunities and hopes.²⁷

This transformation of the working class into an object of humanitarian pity undermined the core rationale in workers' inquiry of enabling the working class to emancipate itself and, in the process, emancipate the whole of society. As this transformation began in the mid-1970s, this period marks an appropriate cutoff point for the main historical thread of the argument in this book.

Rethinking the “Failure” of Militant Investigations

The theoretical thread of the argument in this book cuts across the historical thread. It flows from the strident emphasis on the militant character of the investigation outlined above. In the following pages, I

treat investigations as a means of producing collective political subjectivity rather than purely informational contents. This point is worth stressing because there is a strong tendency to judge even militant investigations from the standpoint of the quantity and quality of the written responses to them, as if these responses exhaust their effects. Interpreters of militant investigations and former practitioners use this standpoint to arrive steadfastly at the following resounding and sobering conclusion: *these investigations failed*. Weiss, for instance, writes of the “failure” of Marx’s questionnaire to elicit enough responses.²⁸ Lenin ultimately deemed his own interviews with a factory worker a failure because the responses of his interviewee did not disclose a comprehensive enough view of working conditions. Duroux stunningly describes the investigation as “one of the gigantic failures of French Maoism” on account of its lack of any practical realization.²⁹ One can also find such conclusions in some of the more broadly construed experiences of the investigation in the following pages. Stephen Hastings-King refers repeatedly to the “failure” of a worker newspaper supported by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* to elicit the writings of nonmilitant workers.³⁰ He attributes this failure in large part to the social function of literacy in French society during the postwar period.³¹

As we can see from this mere sampling, “failure” figures as a central and powerful leitmotif in the literature on militant investigations. This leitmotif understandably spurs efforts to come to grips with the reasons for the failure of this type of investigation. Interpreters ask how and why these investigations failed, and they come up with a wide range of reasons. There is thus a problematic of failure in the literature on militant investigations that tends to revolve around the failure of worker writing in particular.

To be resolutely clear, I should add that I do not fully escape this problematic in the preceding and succeeding pages. Obviously, the publication of written and spoken responses to militant investigations can be quite important in drawing persons not involved in them into their political objectives. The act of reading these responses can politicize or further politicize the non-investigated and the non-investigators. Written and spoken responses also enable investigators to generate larger findings. They offer a clear standard by which to evaluate the success or failure of an investigation.

Yet judgments about the failure or success of investigations in radical political struggles should not hinge entirely on their written, spoken,

and published responses because these investigations are *first and foremost* about realizing political objectives, rather than generating informational contents, and there are other far less obvious ways in which they can still facilitate these objectives. The exchange of questions and answers tends to be at the heart of the practice of the investigation, at least outside its iteration as a narrative form (and even in that iteration there is still a demand for and expectation about information from the narrating individuals). Determining the political effects of questions can be a very tricky matter because questions in themselves are neither inherently liberating nor inherently constraining or oppressive. Their political effects depend to a large extent on their framing, ordering, context, and resonance. But the simple act of posing a carefully crafted and ordered question or set of questions in certain institutional or geographical contexts (*without* even eliciting an immediate and recorded response) *can* invite others to appraise their political situations differently. It can instill doubt, spur unanticipated reflections, incite the imagination, and foster conversations between the investigator and the investigated as well as between the investigated and others belonging to their situations. What goes missing in the often hasty and resolute judgments about the failure of investigations in radical political struggles is any sense of the political potentialities involved in the mere process of exchanging questions and answers.

More than any other interpreter of militant investigations, Dario Lanzardo helps us see this point through his deeply innovative interpretation of Marx's questionnaire. For Lanzardo, whether or not workers actually responded to the questions in Marx's meticulous and lengthy questionnaire is an entirely secondary matter. What matters for Lanzardo is that the questions in Marx's questionnaire stimulate workers to generate their own politically impactful knowledge of capitalist exploitation by provoking forms of reflection and communication among them.³² Lanzardo thus shifts the center of gravity in his interpretation of Marx's questionnaire away from the paucity of *written* responses, which underpins the problematic of failure, and toward the less obvious resonance of the questions among the workers themselves. Of course, none of the foregoing means that we cannot speak of the failure or success of militant investigations. What it does suggest, however, is that what we say about the failure or success of militant investigations should be framed in more careful and expansive terms with a view to their political objectives and effects.

Collective Political Subjectivity

If, however, we should be attuned to these political objectives and effects of militant investigations, how are we to understand them? And what is the larger value of these investigations in radical political struggles? As indicated above, I suggest that the value of investigations in these political struggles resides in their potential to instantiate forms of collective political subjectivity. The investigation is not an activity between two ready-made subjects who simply exchange questions and answers (or information more generally) with no further consequences. It is an act that harbors the potential to *produce* a collective political subject, a new “we” among the various participants in the investigations, not to mention many others. Writing from the Argentine context, Colectivo Situaciones makes a similar point in its rendition of research militancy. In its words, “research militancy is not the name of the experience of someone who does research but that of the production of (an) encounter(s) without subject(s) or, if you prefer, (an) encounter(s) that produce(s) subject(s).”³³ For our purposes, the exchange of questions and answers in an investigation can compel participants to envision their conditions, positions, and struggles in the world differently. On the side of the investigated, carefully framed and ordered questions can serve to enable persons to locate the particularities of their individual circumstances within more general parameters. For instance, they can compel workers to view themselves as an exploited and potentially self-emancipating class rather than just as employees vying for greater compensation for the sale of their labor-power. On the side of the investigators, the answers to the questions can yield (sometimes shocking) revelations about the investigated that serve as political learning opportunities. More precisely, they can disclose previously unaccounted or even discounted social forces as suddenly integral to any definition of a more general political subject. The case of Mao’s practice of investigation is instructive in this regard. Shortly before his investigation of peasants in Hunan province in 1927, Mao did not attribute a great deal of importance to peasants in general and poor peasants in particular. He tended to abide by a more orthodox Marxist view of a revolution led by the industrial proletariat. After his investigations in Hunan, Mao concluded that the entire prospect of revolution in China suddenly depends on poor peasants. What changed his views were the process and results of the investigation. Something similar happened through the workers’ inquiries of *Quaderni Rossi* at

the massive FIAT factory in Turin in the early 1960s. These inquiries revealed unskilled young factory workers and deskilled old workers as suddenly integral to the definition of a new working class. *Quaderni Rossi* members then faced the question of whether this new working class might be oriented toward a rupture with the prevailing system of capitalist social relations rather than simply bargaining for more compensation within it. Investigators in both of these historical instances were confronted with the question of how to relate to and identify with newly revealed social forces for the sake of generating a more general political subject. What is more, investigations can enact a collective political subject by blurring the distinction between those belonging on the inside and outside of certain geographical spaces and institutional sites. Some French Maoists at least aspired to this kind of blurring by placing investigating militants in working positions alongside poor peasants in the countryside for lengthy periods of time. This placement was known as the aforementioned practice of *établissement*. Other groups sought to foster a collective subject of political knowledge by destabilizing hierarchies in the production of knowledge. The GIP, for instance, engaged in a destabilization of these hierarchies when it involved former prisoners in the formulation of questions for its first questionnaire. If it had fully respected hierarchies in the production of knowledge, the GIP would have left the articulation of such questions entirely in the hands of the eminent sociologists whom it also consulted. Finally, as indicated above, investigations can stimulate the production of a collective political subject in less tangible ways by merely disseminating questions and answers that can serve as occasions for reflection and communication within, between, and beyond communities of subalterns.

Yet, if the value of investigations in radical political struggles resides in the potential to instantiate forms of collective political subjectivity, how are we to understand these forms? Duroux provides one answer to this question in his own provocative consideration of the French Maoist experience. He suggests that the investigation raised the question of what it means to “consolidate knowledge in a non-party form.”³⁴ There is a lot of merit to this view. Investigations were used to channel and affirm suspicions about the capacities of parties to represent workers. Groups and movements that eschewed the party form in their internal organization also rather unsurprisingly used investigations to facilitate forms of collective political subjectivity beyond the party. And yet investigations were not so unequivocally indexed to “knowledge in a

non-party form” even in the French Maoist experience. After all, one of the first Maoist groups to practice the investigation in France, the Union of Marxist-Leninist Communist Youth (UJCML), did so to build a genuinely revolutionary party. Another group, the Group for the Foundation of the Union of Marxist-Leninist Communists of France (UCFML), more modestly launched investigations to *explore* the possibilities for the constitution of a new kind of party. My point here is not just that Duroux diminishes the historical complexity of the investigation in French Maoism. My point is, rather, that his identification of the investigation with this form grates against the whole emphasis on the polyvalence of the investigation in this book. In other words, the “we” generated through militant investigations can bear many names: an antagonistic working class, a party of a new type, a public intolerant of intolerable conditions in prisons. From a different and somewhat opposed perspective, this point seems all the more important to stress today because there is a concerted effort in some currents of radical political theory to index collective political subjectivity to the party form, albeit without any reference to militant investigations.³⁵

Once we definitively index the practice of the investigation to the non-party form (or the party form), we run the risk losing sight of its fluidity and adaptability, as evidenced by its much larger history within radical political struggles. We open ourselves up to the perhaps comforting view that the investigation can be possessed definitively for one purpose or another. We locate it outside the dynamic space of political struggles, with its seemingly incessant play of investments and counterinvestments. If Lanzardo is instructive in getting us to understand the wide range of potential political effects generated through questions in militant investigations, Foucault attunes us to this other point about the fluidity and reversibility of these investigations. Indeed, a consideration of Foucault’s deployment of the investigation on behalf of the GIP against the backdrop of his rich genealogy of the inquiry suggests that radical political movements had taken over and modulated a practice of the *official* inquiry that goes all the way back to Greek antiquity and the birth of the medieval state.

Perhaps the most dramatic, immediate, and humorous (but also serious) case of a reversal of an investigation took place shortly before the creation of the GIP and Foucault’s public presentation of his genealogy of the inquiry. In November 1970, the French magazine *Elle* convened a conference on women’s issues with a predominantly male list of speakers.

The organizers of the conference distributed a questionnaire in advance of the event to solicit the preferences of women on a wide range of issues.³⁶ Militants from the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) objected to these efforts "to assume the right to represent all women through a questionnaire."³⁷ They deemed the questionnaire "a manipulation for channeling and taking back the rebellion of all women; for nipping in the bud any attempt at grouping together and for defusing the inevitable collective revolt of women."³⁸ However, rather than simply denounce the questionnaire for posing questions that address women's issues from within a patriarchal framework, MLF militants reformulated the questions in the original questionnaire in their own *counter*-questionnaire, which they proceeded to distribute at the event.³⁹ To take one of the many questions they reframed, MLF militants turned the question posed by *Elle* "Do you think that women are more, equally or less able than men to drive a car?" into "In your opinion, do double X chromosomes contain the genes of double declutching?"⁴⁰ Through such comedic but damning maneuvers, the MLF provided a condensed and highly dramatic instance of a questionnaire suddenly being used for a different and totally opposed purpose, namely, to compel the public to suddenly see the sheer vacuity and sexism of the questions in the original questionnaire.

Overview of the Chapters

Each of the chapters is organized around distinct experiences of the militant investigation. The chapters also proceed along roughly chronological lines, though not without returning us to earlier moments in the history of militant and official investigations or briefly projecting us forward in anticipation of other moments in this history. In the second chapter, I set out to engage the intricacies of the sources of the investigation in early Marxism in order to set up the larger historical and theoretical account in this book. The bulk of the chapter is divided into three parts: a section on Marx's questionnaire, a section on Lenin's version of workers' inquiry, and a section on Mao's investigation. I take on three main tasks that correspond to each of these sections. One is to lay the groundwork for rethinking the problematic of failure by suggesting other ways of assessing the much-discussed failure of Marx's questionnaire. I suggest that if we keep in mind the eminently political purpose of Marx's questionnaire and expand our historical horizons about its uses, then

it is far from clear that his questionnaire resulted in an unambiguous failure. I then turn to Lenin's little-known experiences with workers' inquiry through his questionnaire and lengthy interviews with a factory worker. Like Marx's questionnaire, Lenin's questionnaire prompted workers to recognize general patterns of class struggle in the fine details of their own circumstances. However, Lenin ultimately disparaged workers' inquiry because it failed to generate sufficiently comprehensive information about working conditions in the factories. He not only endorsed the recourse to legal and official sources of knowledge for information about these conditions, but he also plunged headlong into a critical deployment of these sources. In so doing, Lenin ended up eclipsing the more didactic political logic of his own questionnaire. Lastly, I suggest that Mao's investigations in China in the late 1920s and early 1930s succeeded in generating politically consequential results because they were based on comparatively immersive experiences. Mao's success with these investigations spurred him to offer more elaborate theoretical reflections on the practice of the investigation itself. He cast the investigation as a practice that mediates political subjectivity through a moment of objectivity. The result is that Mao easily stands apart from Marx and Lenin in having made the greatest strides toward practicing and theorizing the investigation in early Marxism.

What leaps out at us from chapter 2 is not only the compartmentalized formulation of the investigation in early Marxism (relative to the preceding contributions to the investigation in this tradition) but also the sheer heterogeneity of this practice in early Marxism. Yet common patterns cut across this heterogeneity. We can see that Marx, Lenin, and Mao turned to militant investigations out of an explicit or implicit skepticism about official representations of workers and peasants. We can also explain why Lenin's version of workers' inquiry never appears to have experienced *any* afterlife in radical political movements. His questionnaire for factory workers only appeared in print more than half a century after his death in altogether disadvantageous circumstances for its usage among these movements. Finally, we can see that the broad import of the investigations of Marx, Lenin, and Mao resided in challenging vanguard traditions of political practice by privileging the knowledge of workers and peasants about their own conditions and struggles.

In the third chapter, I turn to the resuscitation of Marx's project for a workers' inquiry among oppositional Trotskyists, post-Trotskyists, and Italian workerists between the late 1940s and early 1960s. This