

with some of today's educational crises. It is again told in the form of a story (a 'curious coincidence' followed by 'still more coincidences', as the introduction has it). It's February 1923, a time of despair for Benjamin. He has just left a sanatorium on the Austrian border, cast aside plans for editing his own journal, begun 'something like a tour of Germany' during the nadir of hyperinflation, and has met Erich Rothacker, who teaches philosophy at Heidelberg. Seeking a home for the essay, Benjamin has passed his 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' onto Rothacker, who enters into a correspondence with Paul Kluckhohn, a professor at Münster. The two, equivalents of an 'adjunct' and 'assistant professor' respectively, have recently begun their own scholarly journal. They feel compelled to support the work of emerging 'would-be' scholars (a young Heidegger was in talks about submitting something too), but Benjamin's essay is of an awkward length, and he is unwilling to entertain the thought of cutting it. Besides, a more senior scholar, in fact Benjamin and Heidegger's former teacher, Heinrich Rickert, has submitted something which, though 'forgettable', needs to be published. Antisemitism also, again, inflects the mix of admiration and scorn: 'Strange, these altogether rigorous moral Jews (including Cohen quotes!) who have

gone through Goethe and Hölderlin', Rothacker writes.

Ultimately the decision is a polite no, or rather a 'revise and resubmit': 'Benjamin is accused', we read, 'of making a mistake typical of young scholars, who are always trying to cram everything they want to say into a single piece of writing.' This summary might give us pause. Is the judgment Fenves' or that of the journal's editors? Might it apply to today's young scholars too, as the interpolation of contemporary academic jargon suggests? The use of free indirect speech makes it hard to be sure, but it's suggested that, rather than trying to say everything, there are still opportunities for the kind of 'philological rigour' that Benjamin himself admired in others, which might help to curb such tendencies. Half of Rothacker's correspondence with Heidegger is now lost ('or is perhaps still in the Heidegger archive, waiting to be found'), for example. Fenves later asks a good question about how Benjamin, just about eking out a living, might have related to Kühnemann's overlong book, which happened to come out with the same publishing house that rejected his own: 'But is this separation of good from bad philology enough to generate the energy required to go through a thousand-page nullity?' It's very hard to say.

Christopher Law

Communist encounters

Robert Linhart, *The Sugar and The Hunger: An Inquiry into the Sugar Regions of Northeastern Brazil* (Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press, 2023). 177pp., €16.00 pb., 978 9 52651 834 3

In September 1979 Robert Linhart, former *établi* and militant of the *Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes* and *Gauche prolétarienne*, undertook a two-week investigation into the condition of sugarcane workers in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil. Following an amnesty after fifteen years of military dictatorship, Linhart travelled as a 'French journalist' to the *zona da mata*, the historic centre of the sugarcane plantations. There he made wide-ranging inquiries with landless agricultural workers, small peasants, trade unionists, government supporters, mill owners, scholars and old revolutionaries, documenting a new and deadly capital-intensive transition towards the production of ethanol fuel.

What he found there 'shattered' him: an escalating situation of 'elaborate hunger, advanced hunger, a hunger to be booming, in one word, a modern hunger', driven by a new wave of dispossession and mechanisation that eliminated whatever precarious access to land remained on the margins of the estates. Families were pushed to the slums from where they still travelled to work in the fields for less pay. Stuck between the urban and the rural (as one worker put it, 'lost in the middle of the world'), this intensified regime of real subsumption generated a crisis in the reproduction of labour-power: extreme malnutrition and alimentary monotony, widespread disease and high childhood mortality. For Linhart it was a

‘systematic production of subaltern humanity, reduced to an almost vegetative existence, but one from which capitalism draws a workforce’. Francisco Julião, the exiled leader of the *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasant Leagues) likewise described the region in 1968 as ‘a concentration camp where twenty million starving human creatures are suffering’.

The Sugar and the Hunger, now translated forty-three years after its publication in French in 1980, is an exposition of the bloody origins of neoliberalism in the repressive laboratory of Latin America, and its operation as a movement to re-coup the super-profits of imperialism in the face of anti-colonial and agrarian revolutions. This short and vivid book deals with this transitional moment as it occurred in Brazil. Prior to the coup of 1964, Pernambuco was the site of intense class struggle and international interest over the so-called ‘Northeastern Question’. Peasant Leagues awakened the spectre of agrarian revolution as the left popular regional government of Miguel Arraes struggled to implement reforms in tension with US interference under the guise of aid relief. Paulo Freire experimented with literacy programs in Recife. Ted Kennedy even visited Eugênio Galileia – the expropriated mill from which the peasant movement originated – promising a generator. In the end the US gave the green light for the military takeover.

In his encounters fifteen years later, Linhart can still detect amidst the fear and destitution a legacy of resistance carried on from the Peasant Leagues, and in a poignant final scene, the survival of Eugênio Galileia. Witness to the stirrings of a strike that is eventually settled, his account of this political re-awakening also prefigures the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST). Founded in 1984, the MST has revived the occupations of the huge *latifúndios* and now has approximately 900 encampments with 150,000 families living in them across Brazil.

More broadly this book also speaks to a wide range of recent debates over primitive accumulation and super-exploitation, the relationship between the market and violence, necro-politics, unequal ecological exchange, extractivism and critiques of green capitalism and developmentalism. It shares much with Mike Davis’ work on slums and late-Victorian holocausts. Linhart’s main conceptualisation of ‘modern hunger’, builds on the anti-Malthusian work of Recife-born Josué de Castro whose pi-

oneering *Geography of Hunger* (1946) first brought global attention to the crisis in the Northeast.

Linhart account of the thanatotic force of capital in the slow destruction of human bodies, his detailing of foetal brain damage and dwarfism from malnourishment, can only now remind the reader of what is being inflicted on Gaza’s population by Israel’s relentless campaign of genocide. Zionism’s operation as a system of apartheid and now outright extermination, raises the question of capital’s ambivalent interest in the reproduction of human life in settler colonial contexts, just as the same question is posed by the transition from chattel slavery to a kind of wage slavery in Brazil.

Linhart’s investigative outrage is also in the same vein of Engels’ prototypical communist encounter with the proletarian world of 1840s Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). Where Linhart speaks of an ‘immense rotting’ without end, Engels excoriated the ‘social murder’ of early industrial England. This book serves as a latter part of that long and largely neglected genealogy of communist ethnography which begins with the young Engels, whose immersion in the diversity of working class life was the pre-condition for historical materialism’s reading of political potential in an otherwise immiserated proletarian condition.

More provincially it also serves as an alternative ending to the adventure of French Maoism, one which counters the renegade teleology of the *nouveaux philosophes*. As former comrades sank quietly back into civilian life or turned to the right, and other *établissements* and *enquêtes* like those of Badiou’s *Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste* and *Le groupe d’information sur les prisons* ended, Linhart continued to experiment with investigative forms in the 1970s. Focused on revealing the hidden and changing world of production and the concrete reality of situated class struggle, he wrote reports on technology transfer in Algeria (1977) and the petrochemical complex near Marseille (1978), as well as a series of sociological inquiries in the 1980s with his sister Danièle Linhart on a neoliberalising industrial France.

Yet he is perhaps best known through his other ethnographic memoir *L’établi* (1978), later published in English as *The Assembly Line* in 1980. A first-person account of his year-long *établissement* in a Citroën factory in Choisy directly after the unsettling experiences of May ’68, during which he led the UJCml to oppose the events as a

petty bourgeois ploy, Linhart focuses on the racialised division of labour within the factory. Passed from job to job as incompetent, but still judged more skilled than his Algerian, Yugoslavian or West African co-workers because he was French, the story unfolds through a series of sustained encounters at different points of the assembly line. Character profiles of immigrant histories and strategies towards work build a focus on the coloniality of the division of labour, and the plurality of proletarian experience. The book counters the idealisation (or demonisation) of the working class as a homogenous bloc, railing against the illusion that the middle class 'have a monopoly on personal histories'.

Inspired by Mao's famous 1930 dictum 'no investigation, no right to speak', *établissement* was a movement to re-educate intellectuals in the school of the masses, and through working and militating in factories and fields build a new kind of party rooted in actual working class struggles and aspirations. An *enquête* (investigation) was a short-term inquiry, not necessarily focused solely on the working class nor immersed in a space of labour. In Brazil Linhart relied on two guides, a young student Reynaldo and union activist Antonio, and spoke to people across a spectrum of classes. In the metaphoric typology of Mao's 1957 speech, it involved 'dismounting the horse to look at the flowers' as opposed to 'settling down'.

If in *L'établi* Linhart works solidly through a more ethnographic narrative fixed to the mise-en-scène of the factory floor, *The Sugar and the Hunger*'s visually fleeting style expresses its mobile and aleatory investigative form. Its 131 pages are split into 26 short, punctuated chapters which visually register a stream of different characters and scenes, building a momentum that integrates various scales of historical context, facts, worker and peasant testimonies and expert opinions, just as it is animated and undercut by a frequent descriptive zooming in and out of the cleaved social reality, an aesthetic that matches the uncertain political situation. This disjointed yet fluid style acts out the disjuncture of the encounter itself, of First World meeting its preconditions of violence and immiseration hidden away in the Third World.

This is aptly introduced in the prologue with the scene of driving in a car. Beatles songs and disco hits play as movie posters and golf club lawns pass by, whilst malnourished families set off to work. 'You pose questions about their living conditions. They give you short

answers, disjointed phrases. And you understand, as they speak, that they are hungry, their women are hungry, their children are hungry'. Yet you carry on, 'the road, again, that takes you far away. For you, life continues'. As one interlocutor puts it: 'The hunger in the North-East will make the cars go around in the whole country'.

The explication of starvation as a constitutive pillar of imperial living elsewhere exposes the reader to formerly repressed and excluded zones of capital's violent operation, generating an expanded sense of the totality of capitalism through which a new solidarity can be developed. *L'établi* identified how Citroën extended globally to 'skim off the poverty of the most remote villages', both preserving and re-making it in the fine hierarchies and complex technical composition of the factory. *The Sugar and the Hunger* follows the commodity to its origin point of destitution and traces its entanglement in historical legacies of colonial chattel slavery and *latifundismo*, now dynamised by multinational capital and innovations in the internal combustion engine.

Through this abiding preoccupation with revolutionary and capitalist transitions, Linhart developed a sophisticated account of inter- and intra-class formations in their relation to technical changes in the production process, and ensuing divisions of labour, all within the neo-imperial realities of combined and uneven development. Early in his trip he is confronted with the complexity of agrarian class positions, registered in the proliferation of different terminology. Day labourers are colloquially referred to as *boias frias* (cold lunches) or more technically *clandestinos* for their lack of papers in comparison to *fichados* (contracted). *Caboclo* is a racialised term, originally meaning a mixed-race indigenous person. It now 'denotes a miserable peasant'. The Peasant Leagues chose the term *camponesa*, even if in Pernambuco their inter-class alliance was largely formed of landless workers, as well as small *posseiros* who held precarious land rights, and *corvée*-style sharecroppers too.

Steeped in the history of post-revolutionary Russia – his 1976 *Lénine, les paysans*, Taylor remains untranslated – Linhart developed a concept of class as above all a political process of shifting formations. Linhart suggests in his work that class struggle can only be understood concretely: fought out through particular lives, from particular positions and conditions of living, in decisions, places, historical conjunctures and mobile situ-

ations. This revolutionary imagination seemed only to have survived the 1970s through a committed experimentation with the method of investigation, which kept him in contact with the dynamics of different political movements. It was also the outcome of working through his early Althusserian theoreticism and Maoist immediation, whilst critiquing the disillusioned workerism that re-wrote the *établi* experience as bourgeois *Bildung*.

Importantly, compared to many of his contemporaries, since his early days at the *École normale supérieure* Linhart was an active participant and observer of revolutionary struggles outside of metropolitan France. As he put in an interview in 1977, 'I don't see myself as a child of 1968. I made my choice several years earlier, in the Algerian self-managed farms, then in the French and immigrant working class. I find justification for my adherence to Marxism in all that I have seen and lived over fifteen years, not in a supposed moment of unrest'.

In 1964 he visited Algeria, bringing back the Maoism that would lead him to the people's communes in China

in 1967 alongside other UJCml militants. He again went to Algeria in 1974, and it was his direct involvement in the land reform process in southern Portugal after the Carnation Revolution in 1975 that led him to Brazil over the winter of 1976-77 and again in September of 1979. Rather than being forever tied to the drama of May '68 and the legend of French Maoism, Linhart's work might instead be seen in terms of his sustained commitment to communist encounter and concrete struggles – both urban and agrarian, often centred on transitions, and often to do with the 'Third World' as both place and project.

In 1980, in an interview included in the book, Linhart critiqued the 'wooden language, ideological simplifications, media hypes and abrupt amnesias' of French intellectual culture. He spoke about the need 'to invent a style, ways of functioning, a kind of credibility' – outside the pseudo-survival of Marxism in the university – that could produce 'a living culture of social analysis'. Yet this cultural emphasis avoids in a certain sense a more diffi-



cult question: what kind of organisational form might mediate this analysis as part of political struggle? Despite his engagements, by the late 1970s Linhart cuts a rather lonely figure. Working as an academic and economist, he individually continued with investigation but was unmoored from a party-form that was supposed to be constructed through such praxis and occupy an obstetric or editorial role vis a vis the working class.

The work of American anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who conducted fieldwork in Pernambuco throughout the 1980s, also raises this issue of organisation. Focusing on the everyday violence of rampant childhood mortality and the ‘death without weeping’ that came with it, Scheper-Hughes was forced to rethink her assumed neutrality in response to interlocutors’ outrage at her lack of participation and seeming indifference to their political struggles. In 1995 she called for a ‘politically committed and morally engaged’ ‘militant anthropology’, animated by the ‘primacy of the ethical’ through which individual ethnographers could act less like friends or colonial patrons, and more like comrades. If Linhart never shared this notion of anthropological or academic

neutrality and viewed the problem of the traditional intellectual within firmly communist terms, both figures are nevertheless united by a concern to act in fidelity to the struggles of their interlocutors and the vicissitudes of the encounter. Both likewise leave open the question of a possible third *organisational* accountability, one that could house their commitment and put their inquiries to use beyond either the academy or public culture.

The Sugar and the Hunger represents the fruits of a long, difficult and patient course, or what Linhart referred to as the often ‘circuitous path’ of inquiry. In our moment of techno hype and fascist spectacle, and when left theory all too easily reproduces capital’s own omnipotent self-image, this book is a timely methodological call to inquire into the concrete realities of working class experiences and struggles, as a political strategy. In an oblique way it also raises a question which can only be answered in practice: what organisational form might politically mediate and use such a method, and how might this form – of the party for instance – rescue a Marxism barely surviving in a now crumbling university system.

Jacob Seagrave

Years of lead, years of hope

Michael Hardt, *The Subversive Seventies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). 312pp., £21.99 hb., 978 0 19767 467 3

Michael Hardt’s latest book, *The Subversive Seventies*, is first and foremost an exercise in reclamation. ‘Many of the progressive and revolutionary projects of the seventies today remain relatively unknown’, he writes in the introduction, ‘obscured or discounted in relation to the conventional images of the 60s.’ Dominant interpretations of the decade tend to oscillate between the contention that nothing much happened, representing little more than the settling of the radical tides that crested in ‘68; or proffer a variation of what Hardt christens the ‘good sixties/bad seventies’ thesis, reflected in the titling of influential histories of the era, such as Todd Gitlin’s shift from the ‘years of hope’ to the ‘days of rage’. Whether ripped apart by the internal torsions of identity politics, crushed by overwhelming state repression, or trapped by the *cul-de-sac* of clandestine activity, such

accounts present the movements of the era as cautionary tales.

Hardt’s approach departs decisively from this *doxa*. Marshalling an impressive range of material with an emphatically internationalist orientation – from Angola and Nicaragua to South Korea and Germany – he renders a survey of the decade as a ‘history of the present’, positioning it as a ‘vantage point from which to see more clearly what liberation movements can be and do today.’ Licensing this is a contention that such movements are, fundamentally, our *contemporaries*, both in the theoretical questions their practices evoked – principally, how to coordinate across multiple struggles or axes of antagonism, and how to generate autonomous modes of organisation beyond the recuperative forces of parties and trade unions – and the context in which they did so. Unlike the