

Factory Work and Factory Workers

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(A review of Robert Linhart, The Assembly Line, John Calder, London, 1981; and Marianne Herzog, From Hand to Mouth: Women and Piecework, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980).

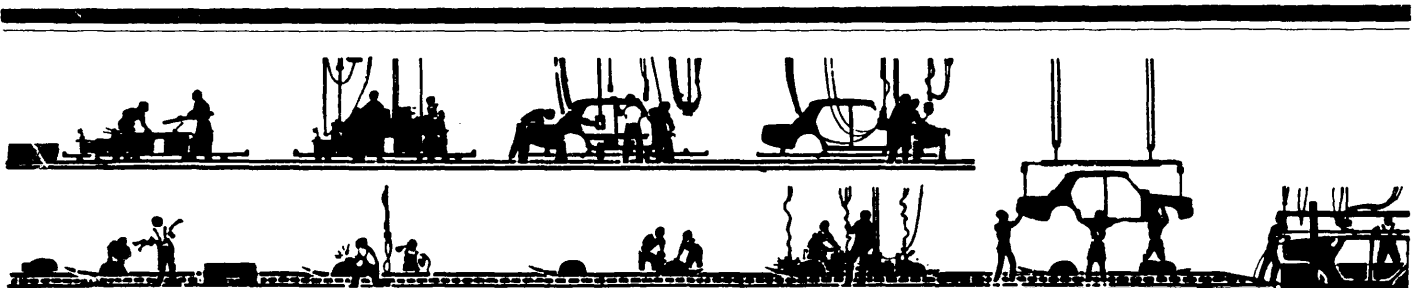
"Everyone who works here has a complex individual story, often more fascinating and more embroiled than that of the student who has temporarily turned worker. The middle classes always imagine they have a monopoly on personal histories. How ridiculous! They have a monopoly on speaking in public, that's all. They spread themselves. The others live their stories with intensity, but in silence. Nobody is born a semiskilled worker, you become one..."

The Assembly Line, pp.76-77.

"...when I see one of the rare reports about industrial production on television or at the cinema, I never find out as much as I'd like to. You never get to see an entire work process, I've never seen a basic work-unit that hasn't been cut. I find myself still seeing the pieceworker long after other images have replaced her..."

From Hand to Mouth, p. 115.

Factory work is an experience which dominates and distorts the lives of millions, yet it is an experience which only rarely finds expression in print. There is probably a more abundant literature on the delights of trekking in the Himalayas than on the burden of toil in the countless workshops of Los Angeles, Liverpool, Leningrad, etc. We can obtain glimpses of this experience in some autobiographies and memoirs,¹ as well as in the recorded results of certain oral history projects²; there are insights in at least

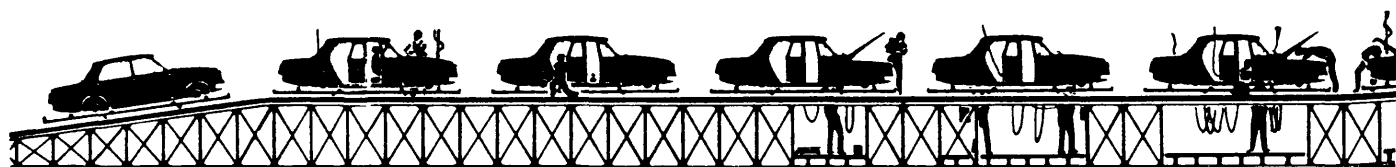


a few sociological studies which are prepared to draw on the words of the workers themselves³; and the tradition of investigative journalism, when and where it exists, is able to supply the occasional sensation.⁴ But it is a meagre harvest, given the importance of the subject-matter and the centrality of factory work in the life of most contemporary societies.

The authors of these two books - one French, one German - share a similar background in the milieu of those Marxist-Leninist groups which sprang up in Western Europe in the mid- and late-1960s. Robert Linhart was a prominent figure in the Union des jeunesses communistes (Marxiste-Léniniste) (UJC(M-L), a pro-Chinese splinter group from the French communist youth organisation which included amongst its founding members many ex-students of Louis Althusser.⁵ In the wake of the failure of the May 1968 events and as part of the strategy of the group ('serve the people') he secured a job at the Citroën factory at Choisy, in Paris. The Assembly Line is his account of a period of just short of a year working for Citroën. Marianne Herzog commenced factory work in 1970 in Berlin while a member of what she describes as 'a group of Marxist-Leninists in the Proletarian Women's Centre'. Although she was expelled from the group soon after, her continued participation in a variety of industrial jobs - welding tubes, packing spare parts for lorries, packing olives, assembling vacuum cleaners - in Berlin, Munich and other cities of West Germany over the succeeding 5 years (broken by a spell of two years in prison) is the foundation for what is recounted in From Hand to Mouth.

This common political background is clearly important in providing the skills and the incentive for writing these books. But what is striking and perhaps surprising is the complete absence in the two books of any attempt to expound a programmatic politics. Certainly there is a profound political commitment at work - and this is never concealed - but there is no hasty scraping together of 'lessons', and no grand reflections on the 'tasks' of the working class or the 'demands' of revolutionary strategy. On the contrary, in their different ways, each book is relentless in the way in which it concentrates on the immediate experience of factory work and the varied responses of the individuals entangled in its coils.

It seems to me that this feature is a definite strength. Of course we do need an adequate socialist strategy and of course we do need a theory which can grasp the reality of a class divided society with appropriate concepts ('exploitation', 'oppression', 'working class', etc.) But unless this is infused with a broad enough understanding of the complexity of the individual experience that these concepts gesture towards, there is an all-too-clear risk of simply indulging in empty slogans and of ultimately reducing socialist politics to a form of self-expression. This is not a risk which



only confronts Marxist groups - and all social theories seem to have their cherished images, including their cherished images of the 'factory worker' - but it is a risk which is particularly threatening to a movement and a theory which aspires to be revolutionary. The success of these two books is that they manage in the face of this danger to recuperate so effectively crucial aspects of the experience of factory work.

The Assembly Line is the more self-consciously literary work and indeed it does represent a major literary achievement.⁶ At one level it is a straightforward narrative of the experiences encountered by the author in his efforts to 'establish' himself amongst the workforce at Citroën: of the different tasks to which he is assigned - soldering, fitting windows, making seats, unloading the gantry crane, hauling carts, helping the hoist operator - of his relations with other workers and with the supervisors, of his participation in a valiant attempt to refuse an extension of hours, and then of his final dismissal. But Linhart is also intent on conveying an impression of the implacability of the factory as a system - an integrated system which incorporates both the labour of supervision and the technology of the workplace, and which seems to grind down the individual workers almost as a mere side-effect of the overwhelming obsession with production. The book is studded with acute and sensitive observations on this system: on the rhythms of the various tasks; on the differences between piecework, working on the line and labouring; on the 'dictatorship of the object'; on the subtle and not-so-subtle tricks of an aggressive management; on the burden of fatigue, torpor and fear.

The book rarely moves outside the factory gates and concentrates on building a comprehensive picture of what it can be like to experience the system. The only figures it appeals to are those elementary statistics which relate to this experience - two arms, 4 francs an hour, one Citroën every four minutes, piecerates, time of start, time of finish, etc. And, as the following passage shows, the message is aptly reflected in the very flatness and staccato rhythm of the prose itself:

"Before coming to the factory I had never understood with such clarity the meaning of the word 'economy'. Economy of movement. Economy of words. Economy of desires. This intimate part of the finite quantity of energy which everyone carries within himself, which the factory draws out of him, must be measured out now if you want to retain a minute fraction of it, and not be left completely drained. Yes, at the three o'clock break I'll go and give a newspaper to Sadok and discuss what's happening in Gravier's area. And yet no. I'm too tired today. I have to go down a flight of stairs, up another one and then rush back.



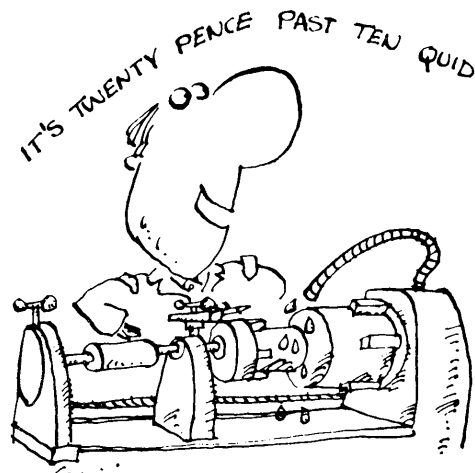
Another day. Or when we go home. This afternoon I don't feel capable of taking any time off my ten minutes' break. Others, who are sitting down around me, with empty expressions on their faces, are making the same calculations: should they go to the end of the workshop to talk to so-and-so or borrow a cigarette from him? Or get some lemonade from the vending machine on the second floor? They're thinking about it. Economy. Citroën measures out to the very second the actions they extort from us. We measure our fatigue down to each moment". (p.50).

This picture of the implacability of the system is not presented with any liberal intent - to stir the good conscience of the gentle reader. It serves a quite different and more important purpose. It allows Linhart to situate and to assess the significance of the manifold forms of adaption and resistance, the inevitable expressions of human individuality in the face of the mechanism of exploitation. In a sense, the book can be seen as a celebration - it is certainly much more than a mere exposition - of these expressions of human individuality. Its dominant spirit is one of solidarity.

It is here that we approach the heart of the book and the key to its achievement. Underlying the surface narrative a central theme of the book concerns the meaning of being a Citroën worker (a 'factory worker', a 'member of the working class'). Linhart takes up this theme in a skilful and at first sight puzzling way. On the one hand, and most immediately, he explicitly insists on the complex-

ity of the histories of individuals: Algerians, Yugoslavs, single mothers, old workers trying to hang on until retirement, craftsmen, workers from the provinces, etc. He resolutely refuses the temptation to assemble a composite portrait of the 'worker' or the 'worker class', but instead, without any hint of speculation or privileged judgement, confines himself to brief and often quite moving descriptions which emphasise the individuality of his fellow-workers.

At first glance this seems to be all that Linhart is saying on the topic. But of course these are individuals who share a common fate, caught up in the system of the Citroën works. It seems to me that the book as a whole can be seen as oriented to bringing out the implications of the fact; that in effect it is concerned to draw attention to the structure of an experience which is necessarily individual but which is also, by virtue of this shared context, a distinctive class experience. For example, resistance and adaption in all their complex forms are modes of behaviour which are the province of individuals, but they are also at the same time modes of behaviour whose boundaries are clearly fixed by the nature of the factory system. What seems to emerge here, in a subtle and very tentative way, is a new and more sensitive conception of the 'factory worker'. Linhart gestures towards this at one point when he exclaims,



"Try if you can to forget class struggle when you're a factory worker! The boss doesn't forget it and you can count on him to remind you of it!" (p.127).

The 'factory worker' does not appear as a figure drawn from a set of statistical indices. Nor even just as a place in the relations of production. On the contrary, it seems to me that the book as a whole is suggesting that the 'factory worker' must be seen as the result of a process of the subjugation of individuals. It is a process of class struggle waged in the first instance by the bosses, and it is a process which is identical with the factory system itself. What Linhart appears to be doing here is fleshing out some aspects of the Marxist thesis that it is only in and by means of class struggle that we can speak of a working class coming into existence.

The emphasis of the book is on the implacability of the system. But by seeing the system as a process Linhart is also able to give an idea of its weak points. It is a system which depends on a drive for greater and greater production and which is continually forced to test the resistance as well as the endurance of its workforce: rationalisation, intensification of speeds, modification of piecework payments, change of machines, extension of hours, punishment, reduction of staff... In a sense the very power of the system - its need for stringent control over the workers - is a sign of its vulnerability and of the high stakes involved in even the slightest change. Linhart provides an account of one episode of resistance when the shift is extended to ten hours. Although the workers' struggle is rather easily defeated by the strength of the 'anti-strike machine' which Citroën puts into operation, the message is not a completely bleak one. We get an indication not only of the strength of this machine but also of the desperation which lies behind it.

Linhart also shows how the normal procedures of rationalisation can be double-edged and can fail to meet even the bosses' own standards of rationality. Thus, in the final chapter he recounts the tale of Demarcy, a craftsman who retouches doors in the soldering shop: one morning his work bench, ramshackle but efficient, is replaced by a gleaming new construction which impedes his usually meticulous work. A group of senior staff pay a surprise visit to the shop and mock his skills. But the foreman and immediate supervisors realise that the rationalisation has gone too far and they quietly negotiate the return of the old work bench a few days later. It is a simple story of the humiliation and indeed eventually the destruction of this one old worker, but it is also a story which brings many crucial themes together and which at least hints at the contradictions percolating through the entire system.⁷

From Hand to Mouth is a shorter, more fragmentary book. Composed of 22 brief chapters, it incorporates historical material, photographs, songs, statistics, and testimony from other women, as well as the account of Marianne Herzog's own experiences. Although the focus is on factory work, there are also occasional forays into the world outside the factory gates - at the Labour Exchange, in prison, shopping, visiting a Turkish friend, an excursion home - and there is a short postscript which presents an outline of the author's life. But the core of the book is in the description of work and in particular the short cycle piecework which is seen as

characteristic of women's participation in manufacturing industry. As Herzog states in the forward:

"In this book I have described work done by women in factories. I have tried not simply to use the words piecerate and piecework, but to describe what they mean. If we are to fight this kind of work - which becomes no more than a few turns of the wrist - if we are to fight this working-to-the-bone, this having to produce five to twelve items a minute for eight hours at a time, then we also have to describe it". (p. 37).

The descriptions she provides are sensitive and powerful. She insists that in order to get an adequate understanding of the terror of the piecework it is necessary to concentrate on the one work process repeated again and again and again over a whole day. To this end she draws on her own experience to present an account of the rhythms of a day spent welding tubes for A.E.G.-Telefunken and a day spent assembling vacuum cleaners for Electrolux.

It is true that Herzog's book is more limited than The Assembly Line. The flatness of the prose is similarly successful in expressing the dominance of the rhythms of work. But here the flatness is a little over-reaching, and in the reflections on her fellow-workers, for example, there is still perhaps too much of the flavour of sociological case studies. Moreover, although the book seeks to put piecework in context and appeals to statistics and other studies, it is, paradoxically enough, much less analytical. The context is not so much the context of the factory as a system but rather the context of women's work and the ideological conceptions of that work. Thus, with the exception of an excellent chapter on the coming of the rate-fixer and the imposition of new piecerates at Electrolux, Herzog does not attempt to discuss the question of management and the logic of the system as a whole.

Yet the book does have definite virtues and advantages. The insistence on facts and figures appears less as an analytical tool than as a way of expressing and controlling the rage and compassion which shine through so many of the passages. Despite its form, the book has a strong feeling of immediacy and there is an impression of groping to find the right words to communicate an elusive, contradictory experience. In this sense it could be argued that the book is truer to the experience itself and that it captures more effectively the essence of that experience: the compulsion to work, the need to 'chase the money', and the feeling of being trapped in an alien mechanism. Nor is it lacking in moments of real literary power, as in the description of meeting her friend Ruth:

"Meeting people off the late shift is pleasant in the summer... Sitting next to me on the grass are Yugoslav women who are meeting friends, sisters and sisters-in-law. We chat, eat cherries, smoke - we belong together. The men, who have come to fetch their wives, sit in their cars or stand by them in the car park in front of the grass. They have arrived too early as well.

When the factory lights go out some of the men start up their engines. A little later we hear the approaching women talking and laughing, and as they come through the last gate they pass us in groups which are more like knots slowly disentangling themselves". (p.80).

It would be wrong to make too much of the stylistic differences between the two books. I am suggesting that both are important and that both constitute significant achievements in helping to give a voice to factory workers. They address issues which of course are by no means confined to France and Germany,⁸ and it is to be hoped that both will attract a wide readership in Australia. In the case of From Hand to Mouth, this may be helped by its feminist orientation and its publication in Pelican. In the case of The Assembly Line, readers will have to overcome the problems of distribution and may have to chase around (but it is worth it!). In both cases, readers will also have to hurry past the rather inane cover blurbs. Sally Alexander provides an introduction to From Hand to Mouth which tries to draw out the socialist-feminist analysis of women's factory work and which remedies the damage done by the blurb. John Calder, the publisher (?), provides a brief introduction to The Assembly Line which presents the work as something along the lines of a nineteenth century inquiry into the 'social question' and thus only compounds the damage.

Both authors have since left the world of factory work. Linhart seems to have resumed a more conventional intellectual career; he is in fact also the author of an excellent study of Lenin's policies on the peasantry and on industrial organisation which we can hope will soon be available in English.⁹ Herzog explains in her postscript that she has collaborated with a Yugoslav woman on an autobiography which attempts to examine the experience of 'guest workers' in West Germany, and that she is currently writing about her own experiences in prison. It is true that both Linhart and Herzog can be categorised as intellectuals who have done a stint of factory work and who have then produced books which are part of a distinct, although neglected, genre.¹⁰ I haven't highlighted this point since I feel that both books easily manage to overcome the obvious dangers of such a project. We can only benefit if there are more such writings, as well as writings from people with a more comprehensive experience of the world of factory work.

FOOTNOTES

1. But most working class autobiographies and memoirs are written by politically conscious workers, and even when the authors have remained on the shopfloor they tend to concentrate on the storm of political and even trade union struggles rather than on the daily grind of work. If we take the relevant example of the car industry, we can note that even such excellent autobiographies as those by Arthur Exell ('Morris Motors in the 1930s: Part I', 'Morris Motors in the 1930s: Part II', 'Morris Motors in the 1940s', History Workshop Journal nos. 6, 7 and 9), Wyndham Mortimer (Organize: My Life as a Union Man, Beacon, Boston, 1971), and Charles Denby (Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal, South End, Boston, 1978) provide little direct

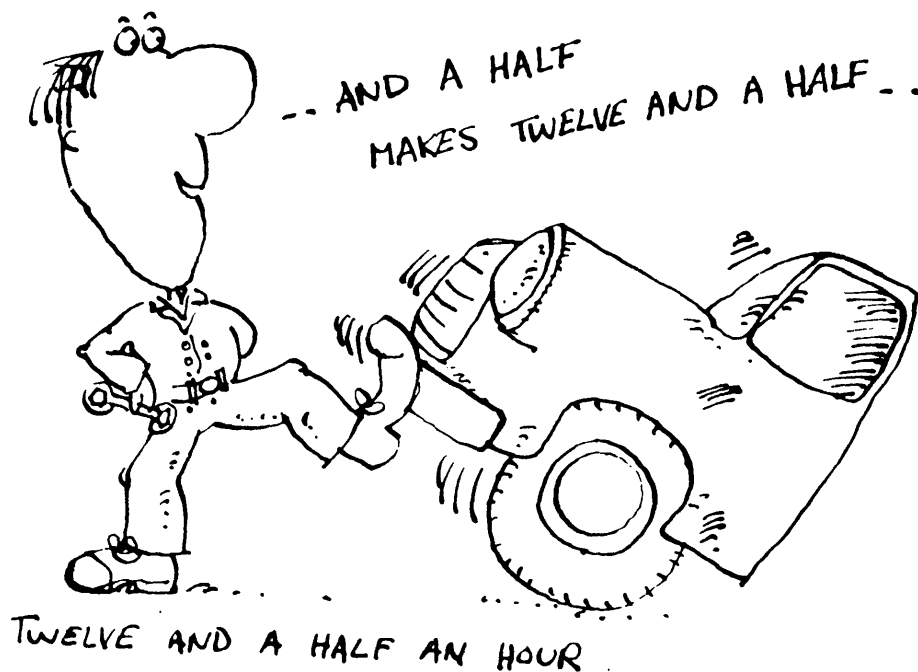
evidence of the nature and experience of their work. However, some of the recent, more explicitly agitational, documents are informative; see, for example, John Lippert, 'Shop Floor Politics at Fleetwood', Radical America, 12/4, July-August 1978.

2. See, in particular, the collections edited by Ronald Fraser (Work, 2 volumes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968 and 1969) and Studs Terkel (Working, Wildwood House, London, 1975). More specialised projects can also be useful: e.g. Alice and Staughton Lynd eds., Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers (Beacon, Boston, 1973).
3. In this respect the studies by Huw Beynon (Working for Ford, Allen Lane, London, 1973), Theo Nichols and Huw Beynon (Living with Capitalism: Class Relations and the Modern Factory, RKP, London, 1977), Theo Nichols and Peter Armstrong (Workers Divided: A Study in Shopfloor Politics, Fontana, London, 1976) and, more recently, Anna Pollert (Girls, Wives, Factory Lives, London, MacMillan, 1981) are justly celebrated. Closer to home, Roy Kriegler tries to do a similar job for the BHP shipyard at Whyalla (Working for the Company: Work and Control in the Whyalla Shipyard, Oxford U. Press, Melbourne, 1980), but the theoretical and political framework is weaker and the study is disappointingly diffuse. We should also mention here - although it is a more conventional project and is content to tap experience by means of the traditional apparatus of attitude questionnaires - the CURA study of migrant women in Melbourne industry ("But I wouldn't want my wife to work here ...", Centre for Urban Research and Action, Melbourne, n.d.).
4. See your local 'quality' newspaper? One fascinating but little-imitated model of 'social reportage' is provided by the activities of the West German journalist, Gunther Wallraff (see Wallraff, The Undesirable Journalist, Pluto, London, 1978, for a limited selection of his articles).
5. Richard Johnson (The French Communist Party versus the Students: Revolutionary Politics in May-June 1968, New Haven, Yale U. Press, 1972) gives some details on the split together with an unsympathetic account of the perspective of the group.
6. It is impossible to discuss here the relationship between fiction and non-fiction. But it is worth noting the weakness of most attempts to take up the theme of factory work in contemporary fiction. Two recent examples, one British and one Australian, are Peter Currell Brown, Smallcreep's Day (Picador, London, 1973) and David Ireland, The Unknown Industrial Prisoner (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971). Both ultimately rely for their effect on a kind of adolescent surrealism and the latter, in particular, does not get much beyond a rather haphazard pastiche of exercises in 'fine' writing. In terms of the criteria we normally apply to literature The Assembly Line is a far stronger and more successful work.
7. The original French title of the book is L'Etabli - in one of its meanings 'the workbench' - and thus gestures towards the significance of this episode. Unfortunately, the English translation has to miss this reference, together with the other, rather elaborate, meanings implied by the term 'l'etabli'.

8. For example, both touch on the issue of immigrant labour. Linhart speaks of a:

"Giddy whirlwind of nations, cultures, and societies, all destroyed, broken open, and ravaged, which poverty and the worldwide extension of capitalism throws, like a few crumbs, into the endless drainage canals of the work force ..." (pp. 35-6).

9. Robert Linhart, Lenine, Les Paysans, Taylor, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1976. The review by Paul Kelemen in Head and Hand no. 1 introduces the argument for English readers.
10. Other books in this genre are Goran Palm, The Flight from Work (Cambridge U. Press, London, 1977), a somewhat didactic account of an L.M. Ericsson works in Stockholm; Richard M. Pfeffer, Working for Capitali\$ism (Columbia U. Press, N.Y., 1979), which discusses work in a piston ring factory in Baltimore; and Miklós Haraszati, A Worker in a Worker's State (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977), an important work based on a period of labour at the Red Star Tractor Factory in Budapest. Each of these works is valuable. At least in the latter two cases the influence of the Chinese revolution in the previous history of the authors' political development constitutes an intriguing link with the two books discussed here.



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