Some people said the 1970s would never make a comeback, that postmodern retro would stop at flares and disco. As we now know, it just rode right over us. The late 1990s was all bell bottoms and white vinyl belts. In the wake of Seattle and S11, Toni Negri was on the top of the bestseller lists with his passionate political supermanifesto, *Empire*. Toni who? Negri was one of the leading figures in the extraordinary efflorescence of the Italian radical left, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. Jailed in 1979 and held without trial for four years on charges — false ones, as it turned out — of being the mastermind of the Red Brigades, Negri went into exile, returning to Italy in 1997 in solidarity with other leftists hoping for a full amnesty, and was promptly jailed for a number of years. Largely forgotten a few years ago, his return to global prominence marked a new interest in the ideas of those who worked in a tradition that came to be known as ‘autonomist Marxism’.

Autonomist Marxism, insofar as it can be given a single definition, sought to redress what it saw as a long-standing failure of the Marxist tradition — including Marx himself — to see the working class as an active determinant of the progress of capitalist development and the structure of capitalist societies. For autonomism, the tendency of much Marxism to see the working class as reactive to technological change was to miss the way in which their autonomous actions actually determined the way in which change proceeded. Once you had defined the working class as reactive, the autonomists argued, it was a short step to saying that it could only be organised and politicised by party or trade union leaderships. Autonomists believed that small organisations that connected with shopfloor workers and listened to their demands and life experiences would tap into a politics that was already there. The groups that formed around this practice, such as Lotte Continua and Potere Operaie (Keep Fighting and Workers Power), were not parties, but nor were they mere random collections of atoms. They were, to a degree, forerunners of some of the groups that now form part of the new global movement.

Indeed, the era and its ideas have become something of a
touchstone for many new activists looking for a way between the insularity and atomisation of ‘identity politics’ and the perceived rigidity of ‘Trotskyist’ groups. Though the acute Marxian analysis of labour-power value and transformation has long since fallen away, and while the term ‘autonomy’ these days tends to mean a species of anarchism, the original autonomists discussion of ‘the social factory’ — the idea that, via consumer capitalism, the factory had expanded to take in practically the whole of society — resonates with many in the era of brand values. But much of the understanding of autonomism has been swaddled in a romantic view of the times: the wildcat strikes and mass occupations of the 1960s and early 1970s, the right-wing strategy of tension, the rise of the counter-culture and the folly of red terror (which the autonomists condemned).

Until now, there has been little in either Italian or English that clearly maps the rise and fall of the movement. Steve Wright, an academic at Monash University, has pulled off something of a coup with Storming Heaven, creating a remarkably readable and thorough discussion not only of autonomist ideas but of the successes and failures of their political practice.

Wright traces the origins of autonomism to the late 1940s and the Italian Communist Party’s shift towards the centre. Profoundly influenced by Gramsci’s emphasis on the concept of ‘cultural hegemony’, and fearful that any armed uprising would receive no Soviet support, the PCI sought to entwine itself with every area of existing social life, to become indispensible and, eventually, inevitable leaders in a substantially electoral process. This shift, together with the body blows dealt to Stalinism’s legitimacy in 1956, opened a gap between the new workers in Italy’s fast-industrialising cities and the trade-union and party hierarchies that purported to hold new workers in Italy’s fast-industrialising cities and the trade-union and party hierarchies that purported to hold working-class interests in trust, through an indefinite period of compromise with the Christian Democrats. Yet it was the intellectually trained, especially sociologists such as Renato Panzieri and Mario Tronti, who first gave voice to a deep dissatisfaction. For them, the PCI’s move was not to be understood as opportunism but as a failure of praxis — it was simply the inevitable result of getting Marxism wrong. By rethinking Marx as primarily a political, rather than economic, philosopher, they and others like them around the journal Quaderni Rossi could come to a new political strategy. Primarily this involved direct connection to the working class in the major factories and an attempt to forge a politics around working-class life as a lived experience, rather than as a sociological category. The strategy was highly successful; while the counter-culture in many other countries was largely confined to marginal groups, Italy was rocked by waves of strikes emanating from the great powerhouses, such as the FIAT factories. Throughout this time, the numerous groups that could be loosely defined as autonomist were splitting and recombining in new forms. Initially, such splits did not have the theological acrimony that attended similar occurrences within the ‘Trotskyist’ side of things, but by mid-1970s such disputes were becoming intractable and even violent. Autonomism had become a very different animal. Much of that was to do with Negri, whose initial work gave the sharpest expression to the idea that it was working-class struggles that structured the history of capital. By the mid-1970s Negri had departed from relatively careful analysis and was painting a broader picture of the working class in ‘the social factory’ as an all-encompassing term. Women’s, gay, lib, anti-racism — all were expressions of the ‘battle of two Titans’, labour and capital. By 1977 he had fallen into a sort of mystical materialism: ‘the class composition of the contemporary metropolitan subject has no memory because it has no work … it has no memory because only labour and dialectic constitute memory … communist transition is absence of memory’ — and so on.

By this time, however, the roof was coming in. The assassination in 1978 of Prime Minister Aldo Moro was the high point of the Red Brigades’ bloodiest period; hundreds were killed over the next two years. Autonomist groups had become divided to the point where the movement was one of family resemblances without a core unity. Conferences such as a famous one at the University of Bologna descended into fist fights and struggles for the microphone. It was the wrong time to fall for the cult of violence. Italian democracy was all but suspended in 1979, and a mass round-up of intellectuals and activists occurred. By the time Negri and others came back to centre stage, the world had changed. A socialist revolution, which had seemed possible at any moment in the 1970s, suddenly looked like a mere ghost of a nineteenth-century vision, and the post-structuralist revolution had occurred. Negri’s new work takes in Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and ends with a paean to St Francis of Assisi.

Yet it is not St Francis but Berlusconi who is in power in Italy. The hope that the Italian proletariat could remove itself from the loop of consumerism now looks naïve in the extreme. Autonomism’s problem was that it couldn’t free itself from a range of metaphysical assumptions that Marx had made regarding the relationship between class and human being per se; thus, as the prospect of a mass revolutionary left dissipated, it became intent on finding the pure proletarian subject who would be the carrier of the working class’s historical role. Its intellectuals could never understand that they were seeking their own class character — as the intellectually trained — in a proletarian mirror.

That said, it would be foolish to dismiss the militancy of the Italian working class at a time when two million came out onto the streets to protest harsh new labour laws. And it is too early to tell what autonomism’s contribution to left history will be. In the meantime, Wright’s book is an invaluable picture of the movement, its enemies and the ideas whose power continues to propel its writers up the bestseller lists.