Toni Negri’s work is enormously attractive, not only for its own merits, but because it responds to a desperate need. We are all looking for a way forward. The old state-centred model of revolution has failed catastrophically, reformism becomes more and more corrupt and barren, yet revolutionary change is more urgent than ever. Negri refuses to give up thinking and rethinking revolution: that is the great attraction of his work. The problem is that Negri leads us in the wrong theoretical direction.

Negri, and now Michael Hardt who joins him as co-author of Empire, seek to develop Marxist and revolutionary theory as a positive theory, rather than a negative theory. This has important consequences, theoretically, politically and in terms of the analysis developed in Empire.

Part I

Behind the analysis of Empire lies a theoretical movement, a rigidifying of the autonomist impulse. It is to this that we must turn before looking at the analysis itself.
Autonomist Marxism came on the scene with a furious energy, which can be seen in the oft-quoted passage by Tronti:

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class.¹

The force of autonomist theory is that it starts explicitly from the subject, from the working class. It proclaims itself to be a theory of struggle, rather than a theory of the framework of struggle, as mainstream Marxism had become. It sees working-class struggle as the driving force of social development, the key to the changing forms of capitalism. It suggests a way of thinking about society in terms of our potential rather than in terms of the oppressive power of capital, and thus immediately opens up the perspective of a revolutionary transformation of society through the unfolding of our creative energy. Where orthodox theory closes, the autonomist impulse opens.

There has, however, always been a tension at the heart of the autonomist project. On the one hand, struggle is negative, struggle-against, a constantly shifting, never-defined against-ness, always moving against-and-beyond the definitions of capitalist oppression. A theory founded in struggle must be a negative theory, a theory of negation. This does not mean that it is not important to understand the changing forms of class struggle, but a theory of struggle implies that these must be understood as just that, changing forms, forms which do not stand still, which cannot be pinned down and defined, forms of struggle which constantly negate themselves, forms which do not contain, but overflow. Like struggle itself, a theory of struggle is negative, open, anti-definitional.

In the actual development of autonomist theory,² on the other hand, there has always been a tendency to seek a positive understanding of struggle. Despite the ‘Copernican inversion of Marxism’³ which autonomism represented, the theoretical assumptions of orthodox authors (Della Volpe and Lenin, for example) continued to influence autonomist theorists. The result has been a tension in autonomism between the restless negativity of strug-

¹ Tronti 1979a, p. 1.
² For an excellent account, see Wright 2002.