While it has inspired more than its share of critical essays and polemics over the past forty years, the political tendency of operaismo (workerism) has been the subject of few book-length analyses in Italy or elsewhere. Perhaps this is less surprising in the English-speaking world, where, for whatever reason, Italian workerism has commonly been passed over in discussions of postwar Marxism(s). In Italy’s case, this is a little more perplexing, given operaismo’s influence for many years within the local Left and labour movement. Back in the late 1970s, it is true, there was a collection of papers from a conference organised by the Istituto Gramsci. There, leading Communist Party (PCI) intellectuals – many of them former workerists – grappled with the tendency’s historical significance, as well as its meaning for their own political commitments of that time. Interestingly enough, the conference in question also allowed a certain space for contributions from workerist intellectuals deemed ‘to reek of autonomia’, at a time when that movement and the PCI were themselves daggers drawn. In any case, the arrests of 1979 onwards, led by Judge Calogero (himself close to the PCI), both put the final nail in Autonomia as a mass phenomenon, and marginalised operaismo

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1 This title was inspired by the phrase ‘Figli di un operaismo minore’, in Macera 1998, p. 311.
2 For many years, there was little movement on this front outside the efforts of a small number of individuals, starting with Ed Emery, Harry Cleaver and John Merrington. See ‘Preface to Second Edition’ in Cleaver 2000; Linebaugh 1997; and the numerous Red Notes publications produced in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating with Negri 1988. A notable volume in more recent years is Virno and Hardt (eds.) 1996, while Tim Murphy and others also have a number of interesting projects in the pipeline.
3 The conference proceedings are collected in D’Agostini (ed.) 1978.
4 Bologna 1977, p. 68.
as a current within Italy’s cultural and political life. To use a much-quoted phrase of Primo Moroni and Nanni Balestrini, the years that followed were ones of ‘cynicism, opportunism and fear’, granting little time or space for dreams of a life beyond capital and the state.

The revival of social conflict in Italy over the past decade or so has seen a growing curiosity there about operaismo, as well as about those movements that have been touched by it in some way. More recently, the English-speaking world has also witnessed the publishing success of the book Empire, co-authored by Antonio Negri, himself once a leading exponent of Italian workerism. Within the activist networks that have come together since the Zapatistas first launched their appeals ‘for humanity against neoliberalism’, there has likewise been a fascination with some sections of the Italian radical Left whose (far distant) origins lie in Autonomia.

In a certain sense, both Empire and the organisations Ya Basta/Tute Bianche represent distinctive (if in part convergent) attempts to settle accounts with, and move beyond, those workerist ways of seeing and acting first developed in the 1960s and 1970s. For those who would like to draw their own conclusions on the matter, there is now a growing body of literature that seeks to explore in a critical fashion the trajectory of operaismo as a distinctive Marxist tendency. In English, beyond my own recent survey, there is Patrick Cuninghame’s important research, including his as yet-unpublished doctoral dissertation concerning organisational expressions of working-class autonomy after 1968. In Italian, apart from some stimulating essays in the journal Intermarx and elsewhere, recent years have seen the publication of Franco Berardi’s reflections upon the experience and legacy of the revolutionary group Potere Operaio (Potop), and now, in 2002, the volume Futuro anteriore edited by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero.

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Why pay any attention to Italian workerism? Now that more and more of Negri’s writings are appearing in English, what else is there to know about this tendency? To start with, Negri’s work is far from the sum total of operaismo, just as his politics of the 1970s hardly exhausted the range of views then to be found either within Potere Operaio or the later movement of Autonomia. More to the point, workerism’s preoccupation with workers’ efforts to overcome the divisions imposed upon them in a given time and space by capital – the discourse it named ‘class composition’ – make its precepts of ongoing interest in this age of dynamic class relations. For the

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5 Balestrini and Moroni 1988, p. 387.
7 See Wright 2002.
8 See Cuninghame 1995; Cuninghame 1999.