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Speaker: Professor Adrian Lyttelton, Senior Adjunct Professor of European Studies, Johns Hopkins SAIS Bologna Center, Italy
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"Intellectuals in Crisis: 1956 and the Italian Left"

The lecture was the first of three in a series organized to honor the memory of Professor Patrick McCarthy, a leading scholar of contemporary Italian history and a distinguished member of faculty at the Bologna Center. The series "Intellectuals and Politics" was initiated by the memorial fund established by Professor McCarthy's former students. The seminars will deal mostly with Italy and aim to show the immense cultural and political strains that characterized its society in the post-war period.

Professor Lyttelton started by explaining the significance of 1956. It was a turning point in the conflict between capitalism and socialism, liberal democracy and single-party rule, and it was marked by simultaneous crises in both the Western and Eastern blocs. The four key events of the year were: Krushchev's "secret speech" on the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in which he denounced Stalin; the riots in Poland and their violent defeat by the armed forces; the Hungarian Revolution and its brutal repression by the Soviet Union and finally, the Suez crisis in Egypt.

The crisis between the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and intellectuals, who were its members or supporters, became evident in 1956. Its best-known episode is the publication of the "The Manifesto of 101", a document signed by leading left-wing intellectuals expressing solidarity with the Hungarian Revolution and dissent from the communist party's official support of the Soviet intervention. Professor Lyttelton, however, argues that discontents had already begun to emerge in the preceding years.

In order to understand PCI's significance and its widespread prevalence among intellectuals, we need to go back to the Second World War. The PCI – outlawed earlier by Mussolini - played a leading role in the Resistance movement during the war and later it contributed largely to the birth of the Italian Republic. Thereby, in the postwar years it had an unprecedented support and was defeated by the Christian Democrats in the first democratic elections only after an interference by the United States and a massive campaign by the Church. The PCI was the second largest party in Italy and the largest communist party in the Western world.

The late 1940s in Italy were marked by a highly polarized political system, by social conflicts, mass strikes and the government's repressive responses to these. Intellectuals had rising concerns about threats to the freedom of expression, of clerical pressure and of the re-appearance of a neo-fascist movement. On the other hand, there was an illusory picture of communism and a hope that a new democracy and a socialist system could be built in an autonomous "Italian way" without directly imitating the Soviet model.

The General Secretary of PCI for almost four decades (1927-1964) was Palmiro Togliatti. His personality and career are indispensable in analyzing the party's history and also its relationship to intellectuals. He was in many ways distinct from the typical working class leaders of other communist parties. Although he showed less intellectual integrity then his famous predecessor, Antonio Gramsci, and was a doctrinal and realistic politician with a keen sense of power, Togliatti, a former member of the "Turin Group" himself, was a genuine intellectual with notable capacity for argument.

During the 1950s discontent with the uniformity imposed by the party's cultural policy and doubts regarding its overall ability to keep abreast of contemporary socio-economic changes started to arise. A sheer rejection of American propaganda with a lack of alternative, for example of thoughts about productivity and consumer society was not satisfactory anymore. What is more, the discontent of the working class even in communist regimes, such as Poland or Hungary, was clearly manifested in the uprisings. This fact and the following brutal Soviet oppression added to the Italian intellectuals' doubts regarding communist thought.

After 1956, a number of well-known figures deserted PCI and the party's Youth Federation almost halved in membership. In the proceeding elections, however, the party did not lose votes and Togliatti also remained in power right until his death in 1964. As Professor Lyttelton said: "The most important result of the 1956 intellectual crisis was that many writers and artists freed themselves not only from external constrains of party discipline, but from the kind of inner censorship imposed by the efforts to be a good communist". This led to the publication of Dr. Zhivago and The Leopard, to the birth of pieces by Italo Calvino or Leonard Sciascia and films by Antonioni – all inspired by and expressing the feeling of disillusionment.

Although Hungary remained a taboo subject for almost 30 years, 1956 was the start of important changes for PCI. In the 1960's and 1970's the party still had a hegemony among intellectuals, but it had to be become much more tolerant and to concede more to the varieties of opinions. After Togliatti's death and still more, after the refused support to the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1969, there were hopes that the PCI would slowly transform into a reformist and democratic party. As it later turned out, such hopes once again contained a measure of illusion. But the alternatives were not more promising either.