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Speaker: Donald Sassoon, Professor of Comparative European History, Queen Mary, University of London, UK

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Associate Professor in Contemporary International History, Johns Hopkins SAIS Bologna Center, Italy

“Intellectuals and the Politics of Exceptionalism”

Professor Donald Sassoon’s lecture focused on the idea of the “*anomalìa italiana*” and its significance in Italian intellectual tradition. He gave a brief overview of this tradition, including Giorgio Galli’s anomaly thesis, followed by a discussion of what features of Italian society do, and do not, make Italy anomalous.

Italian intellectuals have never seemed particularly reserved with their opinions on their country. In an 1843 publication, politician and philosopher Vincenzo Gioberti damned Italians for their love of money and pleasure, among other vices. Later in the century, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi pronounced that Italy was heading toward decadence without having scaled the heights of greatness. From the other side of the political spectrum, Communist party founder Antonio Gramsci declared the Italian bureaucracy lacked any sense of duty and responsibility and was one of the sicknesses of contemporary Italian society. Intellectuals have produced a long list of publications lamenting the condition of Italy in its relatively short existence.

This pattern of pejoratives is an oft-noted feature of Italian culture and intellectual thinking, and Professor Sassoon argued that the idea of Italian Exceptionalism is almost always negative. Commentators stress that what happens in Italy cannot happen in other countries, and in the event that it did, it would be resolved quickly and efficiently; this reflects the well-known characteristic of the Italian love for all things foreign, something that has not escaped the notice of intellectuals. Additionally, while many countries often express alarm or pessimism about the policies or behavior of their leaders, few of these countries can complain that their president couldn’t *exist* in other countries, as a proof of national backwardness, in the way Italians do regarding Silvio Berlusconi. Though one of the key ways to recognize the Italian anomaly is by highlighting differences in other countries, Professor Sassoon argues the exercise assumes a standard that simply doesn’t exist – the cry of ‘*anomalìa*’ is simply an invocation for Italians to adopt a standard or model, rather than undergo effective analysis of where the problem actually exists. Italians are also extremely cynical, he argues, which when combined with indifference to their societal surroundings makes this analysis even less likely.

Of course, other countries express Exceptionalism also, Professor Sassoon argues, but generally with a positive connotation attached. France prides itself on being the birthplace of the principle of universal human rights; Britain celebrates its democratic liberalism and reaching modern democracy without the bloodshed France experienced; American self-satisfaction is always present in one form or another, from manifest destiny to superpower status; even Germany's *Sonderweg* thesis suggested a positive type of Exceptionalism until the mid-19th century. In Italy however, the anomaly is always backwardness. Other countries have exceptions, only unhappy countries have anomalies.

Italy converged economically and structurally on European norms after WWII, quickly bridging the wealth gap that existed between it and its wealthier European neighbors. Thus the postwar idea of the Italian anomaly was always political in nature. Giorgio Galli's Italian anomaly thesis, first mentioned in 1967, postulated a perfect two-party system as an imaginary European political norm, and stated Italy's large Communist party prevented it from adapting this pattern. Of course, as numerous critics at the time pointed out, this idea was far from a European norm, and in fact was more aptly characterized as an Anglo-Saxon exception.

The problem with this theory, Professor Sassoon argues, is its focus on government changes, or lack thereof, rather than on policy changes. Italy's political cycle was completely in sync with Europe in the first 30 years after WWII, following the pattern of reconstruction, then conservative centrism, and finally center left reformism. The implosion of Italian politics with Tangentopoli in 1992-3 even fit the major changes occurring in governing coalitions all over Europe. This implosion also spawned Silvio Berlusconi, whose business interests and legal problems would have disqualified him from politics in any other country. The eccentricities of Berlusconi should not obscure more important changes brought on by the Tangentopoli crisis, notably the complete renewal of not only the party system, but also the political elites. This change inspired an experiment, co-published by BIPR Fellow and Senior Adjunct Professor of European Studies at the SAIS Bologna Center Gianfranco Pasquino, comparing Italy to countries recently transitioning from dictatorships which showed that the party system in Greece, Portugal and Spain was more consolidated than in Italy.

Professor Sassoon concluded by highlighting two serious and well-known problems, among many, that continue to plague Italy. The first is the enduring significance of organized crime, which is unrivalled in most modern democracies. The second is Italy's economic backwardness, manifested in the high number of self-employed workers and a knowledge economy lagging behind its main European competitors. Though a family-oriented economy used to be positive, the 21st century has transformed it into narrow-minded capitalism, perpetuated by the political right. The institutional failure to develop modern infrastructure and human capital has led to a lack of economic competitiveness, trapping Italy in an export specialization model that the Chinese do better and cheaper, and causing many successful Italian firms to move their business elsewhere. Before the 1980s, the assumption was that a stronger state could resolve these problems, but now that link is far from evident, which partially explains inability of the center right to act decisively. Though reluctant to make predictions, Professor Sassoon concluded that the future looks anything but bright.