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Speaker: Piero Ignazi, Professor of Comparative Politics, University of Bologna, Italy

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Visiting Associate Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center, Italy

“Italian Intellectuals and the End of Marxism”

Professor Ignazi stated that the relationship between the Italian communist party and Italian intellectuals was one of a peculiar nature. The communist party provided a role and a sense of mission to Intellectuals, and many perceived the party as willing to have intellectuals present within its ranks. In order to illustrate the peculiarity of this relationship, Professor Ignazi divided the lecture into three parts: the period leading up to 1956, the period between 1956 and the late Seventies-early Eighties, the period after 1989.

In order to achieve cultural hegemony during the period leading up to 1956, the Italian communist party attempted to appeal to both the “high” and the “low” cultures of Italian society. Albeit an intense effort by the party, the PCI was unsuccessful in penetrating into the low culture since the masses, to a large extent, were embedded into the moderate-catholic political culture; on the contrary it was very successful in engaging the intellectuals of high culture. The party promoted the publication of newspapers, journals and other means of intellectual production, flattering the narcissistic egos of intellectuals by giving them outlets to express themselves, but under certain guidelines provided by the party leadership. Although there was a real cohesion between the party and the intellectuals during this period, it was also marked by a sense of rigidity, as the intellectuals could not, and therefore did not, deviate from the central Marxist ideology. This rigidity is best expressed by the rift between Paolo Vittorini’s flanking journal “Il Politecnico” and the party secretary himself Palmiro Togliatti on the “independence” of the intellectuals. This rift ended up with the exit of Vittorini from the party’s rank accompanied by despising comments by Togliatti.

Something started to change after 1956, (the year of the XX Congress of the PCUS with the denunciation of Stalin’s crimes) and the emphasis on “the national road to socialism”. Because of that, only in this period the role of Antonio Gramsci came to the fore. Gramsci became the national reference of the communist ideology, and he was used as a tool of legitimizing the party as a national party, not merely as a section of the international communist movement.

The lead-up to the crisis of Marxism, Professor Ignazi argued, can be explained by referencing the changes occurred after 1968. Some components in the left, and in the Italian communist party, became more and more unimpressed with the central party ideology. They wanted to renew the official ideology by moving away more radically from the alignment to Moscow. At the time, the events unfolding in China and Cuba were fashionably appealing to the Italian

intellectuals. The young party leaders gathered around the monthly “Il Manifesto”, expressed these uneasiness, but they were expelled by the party in 1969. Despite these internal splinters, the party was able deal with the various social movements, such as the feminist and civil rights movements, and the relationship between the intellectuals and the party continued to flourish. A clear example of this is the 1975 city elections in Rome, where the communist party won a clear majority and appointed Giulio Carlo Argan, an famous art historian, as mayor.

Curiously, this period of communist glory was shortly followed by the demise of the communist party, Marxist ideology, and the relationship between intellectuals and the party in Italy. In the early 1980s the party intellectuals were unable to counter the harsh critiques leveled at them from the liberal-democratic and socialist corner. Intellectuals like Noberto Bobbio questioned Marxism through various articles, arguing that the ideology was unable to thoroughly explain contemporary society. The renewed socialist party led by Bettino Craxi after 1976 adopted Bobbio’s position and promoted an intellectual challenge to the Marxist ideology. For the first time, the hegemony of the communist party was fragmented on very substantial and decisive questions, to which there were no effective answers or reactions from the communists.

Given the strict relationship between the Marxist intellectuals and the communist party, Professor Ignazi argued that the fate of the party was linked to the resistance by its ideology. When the party proved unable to answer and respond to criticism coming from liberal-democratic and socialist environment, it was the beginning of the end. Communist intellectuals were unable to provide an interpretation of where society was going, as Marxism could no longer provide these intellectuals with guidelines for interpreting reality. If the decade of the 1980s was a period of decline for the communist party both ideologically and politically, then 1989 was the final recognition of the collapse of communism.

Professor Ignazi concluded that 1989 was the natural end to the story of Italian communism. If not for the collapse of the entire communist empire shortly thereafter, the party decay could probably have been prolonged for a while longer, but the idea that there was a perfect interpretation of the world, with everything in its own place, was over. Marxism was unable to explain the reality of the surrounding world, and it became clear that the era of post-modernism was fast approaching. The intellectuals massively flew away from Marxism approaching either socialdemocratic or liberal-democratic references and in some case even neoconservative standings.