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Speaker: John Davis, Emiliana Pasca Noether Professor of History, University of Connecticut, Storrs, U.S.; Editor, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

“Why Won’t Italy’s Southern Problem Go Away?”

Part of the Patrick McCarthy Memorial Series on Intellectuals & Politics

Professor John Davis spoke on the history of Southern Italy, its current economic situation, and its prospects for the future. He argues that the question of Southern Italy is ultimately a national, and not a regional question, and its future will depend on what happens in Italy as a whole.

Davis begins by explaining that, by the early 1990s, it appeared that Southern Italy was an issue the country was beginning to move beyond. People in the South began to believe that the Southern problem was a Northern construct that had served for too long to exaggerate the differences between the North and the South. It was also in these years that the ruling political coalition, and many in the South, began to argue that it was the South, and not the North, which had been the victim of the policies of the First Republic. The Southern populace greeted this with great enthusiasm, particularly as the rhetoric came at a time in which the post-war industrial investment project that had sought to create a foundation of industry in the region was beginning to wind down. The policies of this intervention movement were largely associated with failure, leaving behind a vast desert of de-commissioned steel works factories filled with unrealized potential. This environment created a situation in the South that welcomed a new narrative in which it was no longer the sole actor to blame for the issues that had plagued it, but rather a burden to be shared with the rest of the nation.

The 1990s seemed, at least on the surface, to be an era of hope for the South as many talked of a new economic blueprint modeled after the dynamic performance of the family-based enterprise of the “Third Italy” in the 1980s. A group of economists began draw up plans to emulate this model in the South, drawing on the diversity of the region to promote entrepreneurial skills already present in the region. Compared to the top-down strategies that had characterized Italian economic policy in the South, also known as the *mezzogiorno*, for the past 30-40 years, this was a unique bottom-up approach (discussed in details in Carlo Triglia’s *Sviluppo senza Autonomia*, 1992). Organized crime and political corruption were also fading. Despite the positive signs, however, the prospects for the region are now much less optimistic.

The 2013 economic report issued by the *Associazione per lo sviluppo dell'industria del Mezzogiorno* (SVIMEZ), one of the most reliable sources of data for the region, included a series of dire warnings. The study recorded that the performance of the Southern economy in the last 12 months had been worse than in the previous 50 years combined. Per capita GDP, investment, family incomes, consumption, production, and exports had all fallen in the same period. One family in four now live on or below the poverty line. If this were not enough, the human capital that might be useful in a push for a future resurgence is also beginning to disappear, with 2.7 million people emigrating from the South in the past 10 years, 65% of which are high school or university graduates. The economic challenge facing the South is therefore two-fold: shrinking investment coupled with a massive exodus of manpower necessary for a future recovery.

How can this change in outlook for the future of Southern Italy be explained? Davis pinpoints several factors that have contributed to this downward trend. First, the South's situation has not been helped by the overall state of the global economy that began to spiral downward with the 2008 financial crisis. Europe's sovereign debt crisis, troubles with the stability of the Eurozone, and the general condition of the Italian economy have only worsened the situation. Second, the rise of the right-wing *Lega Nord* (Northern League) Party also proved to be an unfortunate development for the South, as policies by the governing coalition which included the Lega, proved to be very unfavorable for the region. In 1994 for example Berlusconi declared 56% of Italian regions eligible for European Union (EU) funds designated for distressed economic areas, with the northern regions of Veneto, Lombardy, and Piedmont included in that category. Sufficed to say, the South ended up receiving very little economic assistance from the EU.

Davis concludes by re-stating that the Southern question is one that the entire Italian nation must address. He argues that the Southern issue is so complex that one cannot treat the problem solely as a regional issue. The problem is not the product of institutions, culture, or social traits that can be found only in the South, but is linked to the specific place that the South holds in Italy's national political system. This is ultimately one of the reasons why the question has become an existential one; it is about the origins of the Italian nation state and its viability.