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Social Liberalism Versus Neo-liberalism: Reinterpreting the
1955 Congress for Cultural Freedom Conference in Milan

Just four months before the Congress for Cultural Freedom's famous 1955 conference in Milan, Raymond Aron – the French Sociologist and Cold War Liberal – published what became his most well-known book, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Aron's book is typically viewed – and for good reasons – as perhaps the most scathing polemic written against the French Marxist intellectual scene of the 1950s. Yet it was the argument of the last pages of the book that would take on a life of its own in the United States. Aron raised the question of whether the rise of the welfare state and the success of post-War economies in Europe and the United States would lead to an end of ideology. *Opium of the Intellectuals*, in fact, simply raised the question without providing an answer. Yet what was initially posed as a question became, for many, a de facto way of understanding modernization by the time of the Milan meeting.

My talk aims to contextualize the 1955 Milan meeting. In doing so I will make the following claims – based on significant archival research - about the significance of the Milan meeting that have either been ignored, under-stressed or forgotten: 1) Although the notion has an interesting history, Aron ultimately is responsible for starting the end of ideology debate; 2) the aim of Aron's talk in Milan was to apply the question of the end of ideology not to Marxism but to neo-liberalism or "inverse Marxism" as he described it. 3) As such, the scholar who was most criticized at the Milan conference was the economist Friedrich Hayek, who outright rejected the end of ideology thesis. In this sense it was not only Marxists that the Congress opposed but neo-classical liberals who threatened the newly established European welfare states in the post-War period.

The method by which this paper is approached is intellectual history with a stress on the transnational networks that allow ideas to move across nation-state borders and take on a life of their own—this was especially the case, I argue with the end of ideology thesis, which has German and French origins, but took on quite a different expression in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Congress for Cultural Freedom facilitated the means for transitional dispersion of the idea not only in the West but throughout Africa, Asia and South America.

Key Words: intellectual history, Neo-liberalism, political theory, global history, welfare state.