

Time of Rage: The Psycho-Politics of Populism

Sergio Benvenuto

Abstrakt Czerpiąc inspirację z najnowszej książki filozofa Carlo Invernizziego-Accetti (*Twenty Years of Rage*), autor analizuje źródła dzisiejszej fali populizmu, zarówno lewicowego, jak i prawicowego. Postrzega ją jako konsekwencję niespełnionej „obietnicy” liberalnej demokracji, ponieważ zwykli ludzie – ci, których pozostawiono w tyle – czują, że nie mają już znaczenia we współczesnym społeczeństwie. W związku z tym narasta głęboki resentment wobec elit politycznych, a przede wszystkim wobec tej grupy społeczeństwa, którą autor nazywa „wyprzedzającymi”: kulturowo zaawansowanych klas zamieszkujących wielkie kosmopolityczne metropolie. Krótko mówiąc, populizm nie jest buntem spowodowanym trudnościami ekonomicznymi, ale „walką o uznanie” w sensie Hegłowskim. Ta frustracja spowodowana brakiem uznania prowadzi do upadku demokracji i groźby pojawienia się demagogicznej autokracji.

Słowa kluczowe Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, gniew, populizm, walka o uznanie, autokracja

Abstract Drawing inspiration from a recent book by the political philosopher Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti (*Twenty Years of Rage*), the author analyzes the origins of today’s populist wave, both on the left and the right. He sees it as a consequence of the failed liberal-democratic “promise,” since ordinary people – those left behind – feel they no longer matter in modern society. Hence, a deep resentment has grown toward the political elites, and above all toward that segment of the population the author calls the “running ahead”: the culturally advanced classes who inhabit the great cosmopolitan metropolises. In short, populism is not a revolt driven by economic hardship, but rather a “struggle for recognition” in the Hegelian sense. This frustration over a lack of recognition is leading to the decline of democracy and the looming prospect of a demagogic autocracy.

Keywords Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, rage, populism, struggle for recognition, autocracy

Sergio Benvenuto is an Italian psychoanalyst, writer, and philosopher. He is a retired researcher of the Italian Academia of Sciences (CNR). He is president of the Institute Elvio Fachinelli in Italy. He was the founder and editor of the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and is a member of the Editorial Board of *Psychoanalytic Discourse and of American Imago*. He has authored many books in different languages, and has worked on Freud, Lacan, the philosophy of science, political theory, and monotheisms (with J.-L. Nancy).



The Italian political philosopher Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti has proposed a new socio-political category that deserves wider attention: *lo sfigato*, the loser, something between the jinxed and the uncool. This cosmic-historical figure – as Invernizzi describes it – is the protagonist of the last two decades of politics and the subject of his book *Vent'anni di rabbia. Come il risentimento ha preso il posto della politica* (*Twenty Years of Rage: How Resentment Has Replaced Politics*).¹

Losers are also called *the left behind*, even if today they are political winners – especially after Trump's election as President of the United States and the spectacular electoral successes of populists across Europe. According to Invernizzi, these losers are the source of what has, for years, been called populism. He focuses on populist champions such as the anti-globalization movements around the turn of the millennium: Occupy Wall Street, Grillo and the *grillini* in Italy (Five Star Movement), the uprisings in French *banlieues*, the Spanish *Indignados*, radical environmentalists, #MeToo, the *gilets jaunes*, the increasingly large far right (Le Pen, Salvini, Meloni, AfD, Farage, Trump, etc.), and other electoral or street movements, which he sees as connected by a common thread. Importantly, he disregards whether these movements are considered to be left or right. His analysis even includes so-called red-brown parties, such as Sahra Wagenknecht's Alliance in Germany. Today, in fact, the left/right divide does not seem to be the most relevant lens for understanding the polarization in our societies.

Invernizzi gets straight to the point: the fuel of populism is *not* poverty or economic downgrading. He points out that the *grillini* electorate of the Five Star Movement, which governed Italy from 2018 to 2022, at its peak, cut across all social and income groups. Similarly, the *gilets jaunes* who shook France were not poor but mostly middle-class residents of urban peripheries or provincial areas. He writes: “[Populist movements] rarely refer to material claims, but instead often invoke concepts such as ‘value,’ ‘greatness,’ and ‘dignity,’ hinting at a hypothetical universal hierarchy of prestige.”

In short, the dogma held by much political science, whether left or right, that economic factors are *always* the key to political phenomena, has been invalidated. Today, many intellectuals assume that, in order to understand the strange sentiments behind such animosity, one must always know who is making or losing money and why. But, as Ernst Bloch once said, people do not live on bread alone – especially when they do not have it.

The rigid application of the economy-centered paradigm leads people to say foolish things. For example, not long ago, an educated lady – who therefore assumed she understood politics – was discussing the war in Ukraine with me,

¹ C. Invernizzi Accetti, *Vent'anni di rabbia. Come il risentimento ha preso il posto della politica*, Mondadori, Milan 2024.

and the standoff between Russia and the West. With a stern expression on her face, she said: “At the root of the war in Ukraine there are economic issues!” I pointed out that if the whole matter revolved around the economy, then the West should be allied with Russia, because Russia extracts vast amounts of oil and many NATO countries depend on it, while Ukraine has very little to offer us. For this lady, the idea that a war could be fought for ideals, for principles, was unthinkable. (This conversation took place before Trump’s pro-Russian political turn, but even now, we still can’t say economic realism has replaced the ideal of international justice: I think that the deeper reason behind Trump’s shift is his admiration for Putin as a model head of state.)

In short, the “losers,” with all their anger, feel that way for reasons that are essentially political – or rather, psycho-political. They express the frustration of people who feel they *lack prestige*. According to a classic sociological list, social inequalities are *economic*, of *honor*, and of *prestige* (Niklas Luhmann would add: inequalities in *love*). But in practice, economic inequalities are analyzed in minute detail, while inequalities of honor and prestige are scarcely examined. This is where Invernizzi takes up one of the most influential themes in the political philosophy of the last century: the life-and-death struggle for pure prestige, the dialectics of which was described by Hegel. In other words, human beings do not live on bread alone, but also on *glory*. Everyone wants to be recognized by others as “cool.” If this recognition is missing, people feel despised, worth nothing.

The populist and/or far-right vote electorate consists of people living outside major urban centers, mostly older men with a medium-to-low level education. In short, people who know they are looked down on by the elites that count. They lack prestige not as a “social class” – since everyone today is middle class, meaning classless – but as individuals. What political thought constantly forgets is that people cannot be reduced to the *social concept* we assign them to: they are individuals, each with their own Luhmannian desires to get richer, to be admired, loved, and recognized.

We can therefore say that the populist revolt is not against an *authoritarian* elite, but against an *authoritative* one. Which points to a narrative completely different from the usual one. It is anger directed at those who hold authority in a socially valued capacity.

Anger, resentment, wrath. Here we return to the theme of Peter Sloterdijk’s book *Rage and Time*, in which the author describes today’s political parties as “banks of rage.”²

It follows that the classic left-wing banner – “greater economic equality” – doesn’t attract these *losers*. It’s true that in recent decades income inequalities

² P. Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

have grown worldwide, but that is only a statistical fact; the data doesn't stir the heart. Who even knows what the Gini coefficient is? Does the reader of this article know what it is? I've spoken with Italian sociologists and politicians: they don't know either. It is the mathematical tool used to measure economic inequality in a country. There is also a ranking of countries by Gini coefficient (the most egalitarian are former communist European nations like Slovenia and Ukraine, while the least egalitarian country is South Africa). But it's just mathematics, not the heart.

The demand of populism's losers is not to tax the rich more, but rather to be *acknowledged*. And in our "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord), being recognized essentially means being *visible*. Today, a person seems important only if he or she appears on national TV. Invernizzi notes that the *gilets jaunes* chose as their emblem precisely the vests designed to make people *more visible* on a highway.

This yearning for visibility was already clear to me back in the days of the French May 1968 movement, in which I took part: barricades, the burning of cars, attacks on phone booths, clashes with the police... all of it was a way to be *center stage*. "The newspapers, the TV, the politicians, the philosophers... they're talking about us, the young rebels!"

The classic objection to this psycho-political approach is to say that even people who "don't count" can band together to make their complaints visible and effective. They can organize into parties, churches, unions... even armed groups. But the point is that the mass of losers doesn't really know *what exactly* to complain about. The causes of their revolts are occasional, often a pretext. The Parisian *banlieues* erupted because a teenager of Maghrebi origin died accidentally while being chased by the police – not at the hands of the police. The *gilets jaunes* began as a protest against an "ecological" hike in gas prices. "Politicians" in general are the obvious targets of protest simply because they are *visible power*, and above all: they are elected by the people. Thus, in its early phase, Grillo's party in Italy concentrated its protest against the salaries of deputies and senators, judged to be too high. Of course, cutting parliamentary expenses is economically irrelevant, but anger must be discharged against "those in power."

Years ago, I spoke with Norwegian friends about why they had rejected EU membership in a 1994 referendum, even though nearly all Norwegian political parties supported joining. Their answers were mostly along the lines of: "Joining the EU was mainly in the interest of our politicians, who wanted to attend prestigious international gatherings!" A textbook populist argument:

few were actually interested in whether EU membership would bring Norway real advantages or not. The primary motive for the rejection was envious in nature: to deny their elected officials the international visibility they supposedly sought. That didn't stop Norway from joining the European Economic Area (EEA), however, a shadow form of EU membership. When ordinary people "get their vote wrong," those who hold real power usually find a way to bypass that "wrong" vote.

Part of this picture is the collapse, in the West, of popular participation in mass organizations, parties, churches, unions, and other associations, over the past few decades. And the fact that people do not turn out to vote. Everyone seems to retreat into private life. But the more one withdraws into the private sphere, the more one feels insignificant. A march or a political or religious demonstration once gave each individual a sense of pride in belonging to a unit that was advancing and imposing itself. Today, though, individuals no longer feel they belong to a great collective; rather, they pursue *their own* emancipation. The core message of the historical left – "you emancipate yourself by uniting" – no longer resonates. The spectacular protest of the losers substitutes emancipation, taking on an angry form: "We, who count nothing, also count!"

Why do people vote less and less? And when they do vote, why do they support so-called anti-system parties – in other words, paradoxical *anti-party parties*? In my view, because over time they have seen that no matter which party governs... they remain losers.

The fundamental democratic principle is that everyone can objectively judge whether a government has governed well or badly. But this is an illusory principle, because no one, not even the famous "technical experts" – that is, experts in politics – has objective, precise criteria for evaluating the outcomes of governing. Not even in economics, since both economic crises and booms are not usually the result of government measures, but of atmospheric cyclones that originate far away – a Wall Street crash, the outbreak of a war, technological innovation, and so on. Certain social processes are not at all controllable by governments, even if ordinary people tend to hold governments responsible for them. In Italy, since the 19th century, we've had the saying: "*piove, governo ladro*" (literally "it's raining, thief of a government!"): politicians are to be blamed even if it rains.

In short, voters hardly see any connection between their own ballot and what happens in the country. If things go well for them personally, they can always say: "That's all thanks to me." But if things go badly, they'll furiously declare: "It's the politicians' fault."

It's worth noting that whenever a popular vote derails a precise technocratic project, politics does everything possible to defuse its effect through various maneuvers. We saw this with the Norwegian vote against the EU. Similarly, the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 was nullified by the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, which essentially revived in another form the treaty that had been voted down. I believe the strategy of British Prime Minister Starmer is similar: he can't cancel Brexit, but he will try to slip back into Europe through the side door via something like the EEA. This is what Yascha Mounk calls "anti-democratic liberalism."³

In 2016, following the Brexit referendum, many (including the President of the Italian Republic) argued that it had been a serious mistake to allow the people to vote on major international agreements such as EU membership. In short, the great strategic choices of the "technocrats" cannot be judged by the people. Today, more and more democrats fear the effects of democracy, while, paradoxically, neo-fascists feel at ease with it.

There are countless examples of this.

There is no conspiracy against democracy on the part of technocrats, but they feel increasingly obliged to ignore the decisions of the "losers." This may be one of the deeper reasons why certain electorates prefer to vote for parties that are in some way subversive – or even *indecent*. The most striking case is that of Trump. The mere fact of referencing fascism or Nazism, or expressing support for Putin, makes these figures particularly unbecoming. I wonder whether the media's propaganda avalanche against Trump – which sought to present him as what he essentially is, a swindler – had the opposite effect: more and more people identified with him. There is a growing desire among the population to be rogues. It is as if the voter, by supporting these demagogues, is saying: "You intellectuals despise us, so we will impose on the nation figures as despicable as you think we are!"

Invernizzi tries to answer the question that asks why today such a large part of the population is so disillusioned and angry. The liberal-democratic narrative adopted by the left claims that "even you, who come from lowest sectors of society, can reach its heights!" Liberals thus celebrate the epics of people who are born extremely poor but who ultimately become extremely wealthy without resorting to criminality. The American left celebrates Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: the daughter of Puerto Ricans from the Bronx, a poor girl who worked as a bartender and a waitress until, at the age of twenty-nine, she was elected to the U.S. Congress. Stories such as this are indeed inspiring. But they mask the following truth: *very few* Puerto Rican bartenders in America will become

³ Y. Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*, Harvard University Press, Boston 2018; *The Age of Responsibility – Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State*, Harvard University Press, Boston 2019; *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*, Penguin Press, New York 2022.

political leaders. Most poor orphans and Puerto Ricans in the U.S. will live lives dictated by the status of their birth. In short, even if incomes were to become almost equal, there would always be glaring inequalities of prestige. The same as in an army, where there will always be a lot of soldiers and very few generals. Unless one hopes for Andy Warhol's consolatory prophecy, that in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.

Invernizzi writes: "Unlike the slaves of antiquity, the serfs of the medieval period, and the proletarians at the dawn of the industrial era, today's 'losers' enjoy both a relative degree of material well-being and universal legal rights. Their problem, therefore, is not survival or freedom, but recognition by others" (p.10).

This Hegelian struggle for recognition, however, entails a confrontation with an opposing party. Our social identity *consists* in this confrontation. It is the agonistic principle of all political participation: we *are* something politically only to the extent that we oppose someone else. In fact, the real great political passion of the masses is competitive sport, such as the Olympics. There is a human *drive* to compete, and the passion for war represents only the extreme case of this drive. Invernizzi notes that every struggle for recognition involves the *active participation* of individuals in political units and the *structured conflict* between these units. Yet, as we have seen, people participate less and less in political units; people increasingly tend to think and act in "swarms," in provisional aggregations of individuals. The fact is that swarms have no real political impact. Hence the sense of frustration and anger among many at their inability to influence the reality they live in.

I would like, however, to add a small building block to Invernizzi's construction. Why does populist protest – a desperate demand for recognition, as he describes it – characterize our era in particular? After all, in ancient regimes there were also fringe figures: vagabonds, lowly laborers, adventurers, and so on. Certainly, there have always been peasant uprisings and revolts of the lower classes, such as the French *jacqueries* or the tumult of the Ciompi in Florence in the fourteenth century. But these rebellions took a corporative form; they had a more or less precise social reference. What social reference, by contrast, exists for the *gilets jaunes* or for those who vote for Trump, Alice Weidel, or Orbán? My hypothesis is that populism as we know it is a *direct consequence of democracy*.

Modern democracies rest on a very simple principle: *one human being, one vote*. We no longer have social groups with a political representation, such as the nobility, clergy, or Third Estate – nor classes, nor guilds – but only individuals: *one person equals one vote*. You may be a Nobel laureate or illiterate, but your

vote counts the same. The liberal-democratic narrative is individualistic, which is why socialist thought, which has never believed in individualism, has always been wary of it. One person's opinion counts as much as that of any other. This individualism is based on utilitarian philosophy (Hume, Bentham, Mill), according to which only the individual subject knows what is good or bad for him or her – that is, what increases or decreases his or her own pleasure or displeasure. *What a subject feels* becomes the ultimate reference for all ethics and, therefore, for all politics. In this framework, it is not the proletariat, a religion, a region, the bourgeoisie, or the intelligentsia that vote, but only individuals. The entire liberal-democratic narrative consists of telling each and every person: *anyone can reach the highest peaks of society.*

The consequence of this narrative is that everyone believes they are entitled to wealth, honor, prestige, sex, and love. The promise that “*anyone* can become *someone*” is interpreted as “everyone *must* become someone” – hence the widespread disappointment. Absolute equality is utopian. Consequently, liberal democracy fails to deliver on its (imaginary) promises. In practice, “what *I* think counts for nothing.” Of someone, even if well-off, who counts for nothing socially, we say “he (or she) is no one.” Hence the overwhelming desire to express oneself, which today proliferates through social media, viewed as a means of ceasing to be “no one.”

All of this could translate into authoritarian regimes, as Anne Applebaum suggests.⁴ In other words, this protest against the *authoritative* could culminate in the triumph of *authoritarians*. If so, Trump's election would be only one of the first chapters in a broader shift of liberal democracy toward autocracy. The authoritarian prince frees his citizens from the atomized condition of individuality by presenting himself as the embodiment of an ideal, providing a sense of belonging. This was precisely what occurred in Italy during the transition from the free communes to the Renaissance principalities between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: the common people invoked princes as a remedy for the excessively violent conflicts between factions and parties in their free communes. Thus, wealthy and powerful Florence, proud of being governed by its own citizens, ultimately became the principality of intelligent bankers, the Medici.

Based on what I have observed firsthand, something similar happened in Russia. After fifteen years of ruin and widespread impoverishment, Putin managed not only to improve the economy but, above all, to instill a *renewed national pride* in all Russians. Following years of humiliation and frustration, Russians once again feel their nation is the Third Rome. As some Russians have

⁴ A. Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Doubleday, New York 2020.

told me, “Putin *is* Russia!” Hence the broad popular support for Putin’s criminal policies in Ukraine. No economic or political motive explains the invasion of Ukraine, aside from a desire for *grandeur*, which much of the Russian population shares.

In Italian Sabina I know a young Russian woman married to an Italian, who works as a waitress in a restaurant. She is a charming woman. Although she has lived in Italy for many years, has Italian citizenship, and is happy here, she admires Putin. She says, “Thanks to him, Russia has become great!”

Just as in the 1930s all Italian fascists, even the most miserable and insignificant, felt they were part of the fascist Empire, the many *no-ones* in a dictatorship feel redeemed by the *One* whom they are happy to be governed by. Under nationalist sovereignty, individuals are freed from the burden of having to attain for themselves an improbable glory; each person is glorious in his motherland. The swarm thus becomes a mystical body that, by reflection, grants dignity to each of its members. Democracy, alas, is an enterprise far too arduous for those who derive no personal benefit from it.

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