

# Globalism and the Contradictions of “Populism”: Immigration Skirmishes Between Italy and France

When populism is a tool of the ruling class

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*In one of the best known and most beautiful fragments of *The German Ideology of 1846*, Marx and Engels summarized:*

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.”

So far so good, but the most interesting aspect is not that which concerns the sphere of so-called “conformism,” but that of dissenting reactions, generated by what is just as Marx used to call contradictions. Another 20th-century Marxist, Ernesto Laclau, in his reflections on hegemony, populism and socialist strategy, liked to speak of “unsatisfied questions.”

We can experimentally note how in recent years of Italian politics, the so-called contradictions or *unsatisfied questions* have been managed by a particular kind of “populism.”

The crisis of traditional parties, after the 1980s, have been managed with populist concepts such as “the cancer of corruption,” the “corrupt parasitism of the south” concepts from time to time used by parties such as Lega Nord and Movimento Cinque Stelle (almost for the first argument).

Alongside these, almost all formations that have made use of “populism” have never failed to reserve a place for the immigration issue: not only Lega Nord, from its beginnings to recent times, but also Movimento Cinque Stelle. Let us not forget that the agitation of this

issue was a fundamental theme in the first Government of Mr. Conte, where the “exploits” of Interior Minister Salvini were somehow endorsed by Transport Minister Toninelli. It comes good in this regard to recall an ancient speech of Luigi Di Maio, former Labour and then Foreign Minister, who discussed NGO’s finding their own stage to “challenge Italy.” Video aged badly. (1)

However, our reflection is not so much about the merits of this issue, which would deserve wider and more debated spaces, but about the use of concepts considered populist to manage the dissatisfied sphere of citizens by the ruling power.

We can test this hypothesis experimentally, by analyzing what happened regarding the Italy/France querelle over the landing of the Ship *Ocean Viking*, with its migrants, in France.

Taking advantage of an unspecified French openness, regarding the willingness to accept a quota of refugees bound for Italian ports, it was arranged that the rescue ship *Ocean Viking*, with the migrants still on board, was sent to the port of Marseille. There, “under the supervision of the competent Italian Prefecture,” the migrants were to disembark directly in transalpine territory, and then registered as asylum seekers.

In the evening, there came from the government, also published via twitter, a note of appreciation to the French government. “We express our heartfelt appreciation for France’s decision to share responsibility for the migration emergency, which until now has remained on the shoulders of Italy and a few other Mediterranean states, by opening its ports to the ship *Ocean Viking*.” The alleged French opening reportedly followed a conversation between President Meloni and President Macron. (2)

Mrs Giorgia Meloni thus tried to cash in, on a “populist” media blow, going so far as to claim “the first time an NGO ship was forced to disembark migrants picked up in the port of its flag.

In fact, the NGO that owns the ship – SOS Mediterranee – clarified that

“In the face of Italy’s silence and due to the exceptional nature of the situation, the *Ocean Viking* is forced to request a safe port from France.”

The French government just as vibrantly denied this opening almost immediately, declaring that the emergency situation had been irresponsibly created by the Italian government and that the French authorities had decided to accept the ship in the port of Toulon only so as not to endanger the lives of the 234 migrants housed aboard the ship. (3)

What had happened in France? Following the news of the impending “landing,” almost all right-wing political contenders, led by Marine Le Pen, had hurled accusations at Macron, complaining about his lax attitude in allowing Italy to humiliate France by making it swallow its illegal handling of immigration. (4)

It should be mentioned, moreover, that while waiting for the ship’s arrival in Toulon, a large group of French people called a demonstration to express solidarity with all 234 migrants on board (5).

However, the reaction of the transalpine government was harsh. This leads one to wonder why every capitalist government reserves central attention to the landing of a few migrants,

where the period would counsel to allow for heavy and explosive social contradictions, such as the high cost of living and lack of employment futures.

However, a small rational exercise would help expose the mystifications.

Starting with Italy: is it really corresponding to the truth that “the responsibility for the migration emergency falls on Italy’s shoulders?”

The phenomena agitated obviously always have a real basis: migration, caused by the impoverishment of vast areas of the world due to the exploitation of dominant capitalist economies, is capable of generating very large contradictions in the states where migrants enter. One need only think of the phenomenon of the French Banlieues or the Swedish neighborhoods filled with immigrants, which have now become the scenes of films and well-known television series. Contact and confrontation with the native underprivileged groups generates explosive phenomena. The poorer areas of Germany are a profitable electoral pool for parties that agitate the issue of immigration in a securitarian manner.

However, the contradictions generated by immigration, if properly understood, should spur those who suffer them to mobilize against the root cause—the barbarism of the capitalist economy—which is as responsible for the hardship of natives as for the suffering of migrants.

Why does this not happen? The answer lies in the remarks contained in the quoted passage from the German Ideology: “the class which disposes of the means of material production disposes with this, at the same time, of the means of intellectual production.”

The issue of immigration is often agitated in the first instance by the media, including – and perhaps especially – generalists. Populist parties often jump on board seeing an opportunity for hegemony. Every day the migrant is presented as a social danger, a criminal event, a phenomenon to be fought with the “force” of the state. In contrast, the opposing visions that the mainstream media allows us to see polarize into pseudo-religious pauperism, which is dedicated to describing the phenomenon of migration as only suffering, forgetting that suffering often does not create angels, but thorns that cut into the living flesh of other sufferers. Since contradictions do exist, however, the native suffering strata perceive the humanitarian vision as lying and upper-class, while validating the securitarian propaganda of the immigration “hawks” as adhering to reality.

The populist tool thus allows the consequences of social contradictions to be skillfully deflected to a constructed enemy, and one that is in fact as innocent as the native sufferers. The main culprit is hidden with satisfaction, and with other benefits that we will describe below:

- the social marginalization of migrants allows for profitable exploitation by all sectors of capital, from the illegal black labor sector, to the poor labor sector, acting as a further impetus to wage deflation.
- the faith of the disenfranchised strata of the population in the securitarian anti-immigrant narrative reinforces the role and legitimacy of the state to use repression, also discouraging the mobilization of antagonistic struggles.

Unmet demands are thus skillfully deflected by the ruling class to an innocuous target, avoiding political and social responsibility. Dissent is thus “constructed” and organized in favor of maintaining the dominant power.

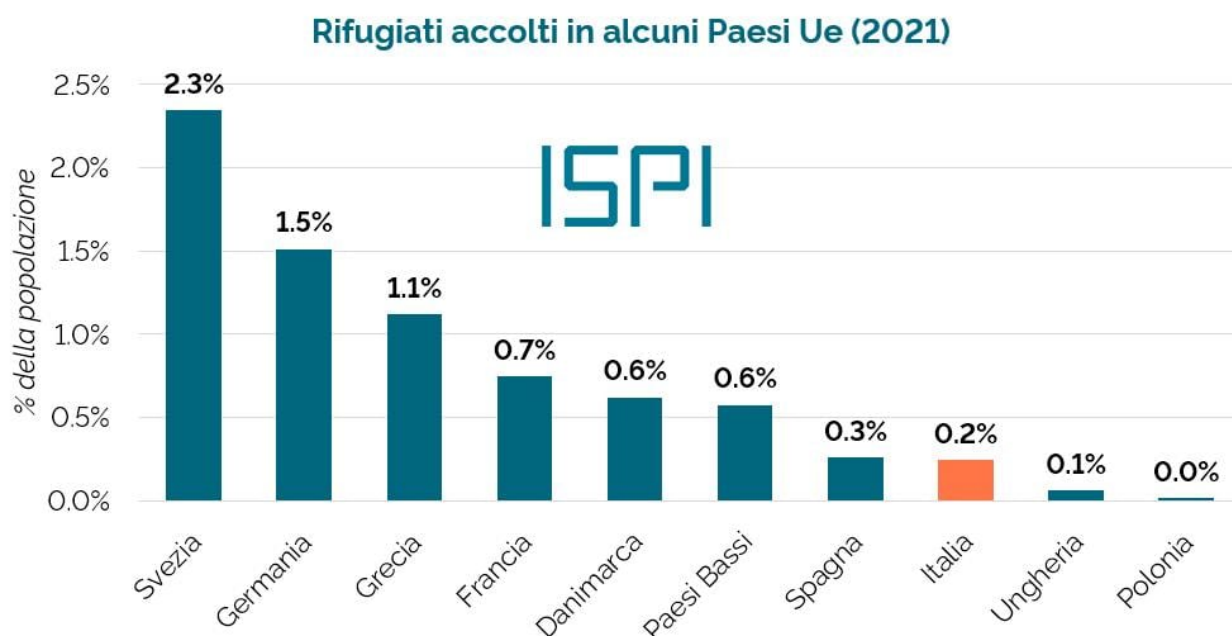
The mechanism is similar to that of religious faith. In the famous example of the teapot, Bertrand Russell amiably recalled that

“if I asserted that between the Earth and Mars there was a porcelain teapot revolving around the Sun on an elliptical orbit, no one could contradict my hypothesis as long as I took care to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed by even the most powerful of our telescopes. But if, since my assertion cannot be disproved, I claimed that doubting it was an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason, one would rightly think that I was talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught every Sunday as the sacred truth, and instilled in the minds of children at school, hesitation in believing in its existence would become a sign of eccentricity and bring the doubter to the attention of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or the Inquisitor in an antecedent age.” (5)

The agitation of migratory danger as a phenomenon to be kept across borders has been perpetrated in the media considered most respectable for a good thirty years now, with enormous frequency. The difficulty then becomes to propagate a different view based on the real contradictions between classes and the real perpetrator of these inequalities.

A little rational exercise, however, could unmask the mystifications.

Starting with Italy: does it really correspond to the truth that “the responsibility for the migration emergency falls on the shoulders of the Boot? A recent article in *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (6) highlighted well-known statistics, from which it is inferred that, in relation to population, Italy is in the last positions for receiving refugees and immigrants, while in the first positions are France Sweden and Germany, which Italian politicians often accuse of relegating the migration problem onto the shoulders of our country.



*Dati:* elaborazioni ISPI su dati UNHCR.

Although statistics do not determine the presence of irregulars, migrants arriving in the southern shores of the Mediterranean are often headed to richer countries with more opportunities, as also shown by the harshness with which countries such as France adopt strict border controls with Italy.

Then according to ISPI data, the number of irregular migrants in Italy is now stable and not increasing since 2014. Moreover, numbers proportional to Italy's are also there in other European countries.

Returning to France: is it so true that the direct landing in France of the two hundred and more poor devils aboard the Ocean Viking is a serious problem? Even more migrants would have arrived after relocation anyway, once they landed in Italy and obtained refuge. Except that the relocated arrive by plane, away from the cameras, and no one sees them, while the landings take place in front of a media stage hungry for furry sensationalism.

The harm lies there: sooner or later someone would realize that, despite these landings, the problem is otherwise manageable, and perhaps clues would begin to emerge as to the real culprit behind all the tragedies: from those at sea to those in the suburbs, caravans, and labor. It would turn out that no teapot orbits the skies, but, on the backs of poor people, capitalism sucks blood and life.

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*He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.*

Notes

1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT2DQIk37dl>

2 - <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/rise-above-arrivata-porto-reggio-calabria-AEJcP9EC>

3 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnc4fSUJom8>

4 - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ed1g6w\\_PNM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ed1g6w_PNM)

5 - Bertrand RUSSELL, Is There a God? 1952 article commissioned but never published by Illustrated magazine.

6 -

<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/11/10/migranti-lemergenza-sulle-spalle-dellitalia-abbandonata-dall-europa-la-verita-in-quattro-grafici-e-linutilita-dello-sbarco-in-francia/6868424/>

Featured image: Platform supply vessel Ocean Viking (1983). (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

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