

Between Columbus and Cuomo

Jerry Krase (January 02, 2015)



With the sad announcement of the death of Mario Cuomo on the same day of the inauguration of his son Andrew for the second time as Governor of New York State, people, like myself are rushing to comment on his legacy. I have heard and read many ranging from the insulting to the fawning. Like all great people, he and his many lives were complex and require much more time to appreciate. Therefore I offer here a piece of what I wrote in 1992 decorated with some current and sincere reflections.

With the sad announcement of the untimely (only 10 years my senior) death of Mario Cuomo on the same day of the second consecutive inauguration of his son Andrew as Governor of New York State, very important people (VIP), and not so important people (NSIP) like myself are rushing to comment on his legacy. The competition for notice is fierce. I have heard and read many "Odes to Mario"



ranging from sour insults to treacly gushes. Like all potentially great people, he and his many parallel lives were complex and will require much more time to appreciate. Therefore, I offer here a small portion of a speech I gave in 1992 decorated with some current and sincere reflections. I began my talk with an observation that remains true today: Five hundred years ago an Italian discovered America. Five hundred years later, Americans have yet to discover Italians.

A few months ago I attended an event to honor outstanding Italian American students at the CUNY Graduate and University Center. This occasion was one of many sponsored by the John Calandra Italian American Institute over the years. While enjoying the good company and collation, my good friend and colleague, Nick Spilotro, pulled me aside to ask me to address the Italian American Studies Committee of the United Federation of Teachers. He also graciously provided me with the title of my Italian Heritage and Culture Month presentation; "From Columbus to Cuomo." As he expected, I almost immediately began to change the text and the subtext of the Symposium. As I speak to you today, my title stands as not "From Columbus to Cuomo," but "Between Columbus and Cuomo." Who knows what tomorrow may bring. Perhaps next year's title will be "Between Queen Isabella and Geraldine Ferraro."

As a gubernatorial appointee to the New York Council for the Humanities, some people might assume that I am a close friend, neighbor, or relative of the governor. I am none of these. Speaking honestly, my two most momentous "Cuomoccasions" took place many years ago. The first was in 1977, when he came to Brooklyn College to talk on the student radio station while he was running in the Democratic Primary for Mayor of New York City. Vincent Fuccillo, a professor in the Political Science department, who was then Director of the Center for Italian American Studies, Mario DiSanto, an adjunct faculty member of the Sociology department and a community activist, and I had arranged to meet with him to offer our services as advisors concerning the City University of New York. We also intended to offer ourselves as campaigners. We thought to ourselves: "How could he resist such an array of talent?" Bursting with ethnic pride and hopefulness when we met Cuomo at the school, our egos were quickly deflated when he made it obvious that he felt he knew more about CUNY than we did. Like Christopher Columbus, Mario Cuomo is not easy to love.

The second Cuomomentous, and happier time in his presence was at the election night celebration after he had won the governorship of the State of New York. Then I stood with a group of ecstatic Italian American campaign workers chanting Ma- Re- O! In that campaign I helped in the Cuomo gubernatorial effort in Brooklyn while assisting in the bruising Congressional fight of Major Owens and the equally challenging Councilmanic race of Sal Albanese. In effect, I was trying to convince both African, and Italian-Americans that "Cuomo was the One." Cuomo's victory was Phoenix-like, rising from the ashes of the mayoral loss (to Ed "I" Koch). Like Columbus, when Cuomo decides to take a trip, he doesn't turn back until he reaches his destination; even if it's not where he thought he was going. Lacking intimacy with the governor, I polled a number of people who know him much better than I do to discover what he is "really" like. After a brief survey I have concluded that the nicest thing I can say about Mario Cuomo can be summed up in the word "Matilda." By the way (BTW), to this I received sustained, but cautious, applause.

With his passing, whether he would have liked it or, more likely, not Mario Cuomo becomes a member of my personal batting lineup (he preferred professional baseball to politics) of Italian American political All-Stars, among whom are left-handed, right-handed, and switch hitters Fiorello La Guardia, Vito Marcantonio, John Marchi, Ella Grasso, and Geraldine Ferraro.

As to the essence of Mario Cuomo: the more people disagreed with him, the more he was convinced he was right --- and he usually was. And, whatever personal faults he proudly displayed, as his archenemy Ed Koch (whom I doubt he will encounter is his afterlife) would have said "we should be so lucky."



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