

Bill de Blasio, Mario Cuomo, and “The Tale of Two Cities”

Ottorino Cappelli (September 19, 2013)



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On September 19, [The New York Times](#) [2] published an article with the following incipit:

"Bill de Blasio’s path to the Democratic nomination for mayor was built in large part around his theme that New York has become a tale of two cities. New data being released on Thursday by the Census Bureau lend support to that argument, showing that even as the recession has ended, the



city's poverty rate continues to inch up and the gap between the rich and poor remains stubbornly large."

The Times did not elaborate further on the origin of de Blasio's well-known slogan.

It is generally little known, for instance, that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a world-famous novel by [Charles Dickens](#) [3], written in 1859 and set in London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution. With 200 million copies sold, Dicken's book has been an enormously influential denunciation of the social and political situation in Europe at the time.

To be sure, pundits have linked the expression "A Tale of Two Cities" to its more contemporary version -- the hyper-famous keynote address by which Mario Cuomo opened the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco (see video above). Then Governor of the State of New York, Cuomo was on the rise as a figure of presidential stature in the Democratic Party. It was the Reagan era, and Cuomo was considered one of the best anti-Reagan orators in town, a Great (Democratic) Communicator. In that speech, he attacked President Reagan for saying that he didn't understand the fear of many Americans who were "unhappy, even worried, about themselves, their families, and their futures." "Why?" Cuomo reported Reagan as asking, rhetorically, his audience, "This country is a shining city on a hill!"

And here came the lunge: "Mr. President -- Cuomo erupted -- you ought to know that this nation is more a "Tale of Two Cities" than it is just a "Shining City on a Hill." Then Cuomo elaborated, using a language and arguments that have no doubt inspired Bill de Blasio's progressive rhetoric:

"A shining city is perhaps all the President sees from the portico of the White House and the veranda of his ranch, where everyone seems to be doing well. But there's another city; there's another part to the shining the city; the part where some people can't pay their mortgages, and most young people can't afford one; where students can't afford the education they need, and middle-class parents watch the dreams they hold for their children evaporate.

In this part of the city there are more poor than ever, more families in trouble, more and more people who need help but can't find it. Even worse: There are elderly people who tremble in the basements of the houses there. And there are people who sleep in the city streets, in the gutter, where the glitter doesn't show. There are ghettos where thousands of young people, without a job or an education, give their lives away to drug dealers every day. There is despair, Mr. President, in the faces that you don't see, in the places that you don't visit in your shining city."

(Listen to the whole speech in the video above, or [read it here](#) [4]).

This is not the place to elaborate further on a political parallel between 2013 Bill DeBlasio and 1984 Mario Cuomo. They are different under many respects, and 30 years have passed since that path-breaking speech. But it is intriguing that these two politicians are both Americans of Italian origin, a fact that is often ignored or presented as a mere coincidence. But it's not just a matter of shared ethnic origin. For Mario Cuomo, in fact, the "Two Cities" argument was strictly connected to a "Tale of Immigration." Here is how he elaborated it, turning the story of his Italian immigrant family into a universal symbol:

"I watched a small man with thick calluses on both his hands work 15 and 16 hours a day. I saw him once literally bleed from the bottoms of his feet, a man who came here uneducated, alone, unable to speak the language, who taught me all I needed to know about faith and hard work by the simple eloquence of his example. I learned about our kind of democracy from my father. And I learned about our obligation to each other from him and from my mother. They asked only for a chance to work and to make the world better for their children, and they -- they asked to be protected in those moments when they would not be able to protect themselves. This nation and this nation's government did that for them.

And that they were able to build a family and live in dignity and see one of their children go from behind their little grocery store in South Jamaica on the other side of the tracks where he was born, to occupy the highest seat, in the greatest State, in the greatest nation, in the only world we would know, is an ineffably beautiful tribute to the democratic process."

And it should not be forgotten that by that speech Mario Cuomo was introducing to the Democratic Convention the Mondale-Ferraro ticket, where fellow Italian American Geraldine Ferraro was to be, in



his words: “America's first woman Vice President, the child of immigrants, and she -- she will open with one magnificent stroke, a whole new frontier for the United States.”

True, the Mondale-Ferraro ticket was defeated. And seen 30 years later from the perspective of the Obama era, all this may seem political archeology. But we like to think that Mario Cuomo’s 1984 keynote address did contribute to future events in the Democratic Party as well as in the country at large.

Be it as it may, the fact that de Blasio – an Italian American who has married an African-American woman – is rediscovering Cuomo’s “Two Cities” slogan, goes beyond their shared ethnicity or political similarity. It suggests that the Italian-American community has grown into a mature and sophisticated segment of the American society, capable of generating political figures of high profile who can mobilize the dreams and hopes of the American public at large. Their appeal is definitely not limited to Italian Americans nor, of course, to those who put themselves on the liberal end of the political spectrum. Indeed national-level politicians of Italian origin in New York include people as diverse as the archi-conservative Senator Al D’Amato and the Republican-Liberal Mayor Rudy Giuliani. The above are just a few names from the past decades, to which one should definitely add Mario’s son Andrew -- a former Attorney General and former Secretary of Housing in the Clinton Administration, who became Governor of New York in 2010 after defeating fellow Italian-American Carl Paladino, a very vocal if inconclusive tea-party-style Republican.

In closing, and leaving aside any political consideration about Bill de Blasio and his future as a possible Mayor of this city, we want to point out that he is but the most recent manifestation of the enormous path traveled by the children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants in America. This fact alone cannot but bode well for the future of multi-ethnic integration in the U.S. and in Italy as well, where an African-Italian, Ms Cécile Kyenge, just became a Government Minister for the first time ever (she recently visited New York’s Italian community – [see our video here](#) [5].) The “Tale of Two Cities” is indeed a world narrative; so is the struggle to overcome it.

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