

Mario Cuomo and the decay of American liberalism

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The career of Mario Cuomo, the three-term former governor of New York state who died on New Year's Day at the age of 82, sums up the decay and decrepitude of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

The tributes on various editorial pages and from such political figures as Barack Obama and Bill and Hillary Clinton describe the former governor and the father of the sitting chief executive in Albany as the "personification" of liberalism. To the extent this is so, it only underscores the transformation of American liberalism over the past two generations.

There is no more powerful evidence of this than the career of Mario Cuomo's own son. The elder Cuomo served as governor between 1983 and 1994. His son Andrew first won the post in 2010 and has been the most right-wing Democratic governor of New York in at least a century.

Mario Cuomo was born in 1932 to poor Italian immigrant parents and often referred to this background as he climbed the political ladder. He grew up in the borough of Queens, attended St. John's University Law School and first became prominent as a lawyer appointed by liberal Republican Mayor John Lindsay to mediate some high-profile local disputes.

Cuomo first ran for office in 1974, when he was defeated in a contest for the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor. Hugh Carey, elected that year as the first Democratic governor in 16 years, appointed him to a statewide office, secretary of state. This served as a platform for an unsuccessful campaign for mayor of New York City in 1977, when he lost in the primary to Congressman Edward Koch.

Carey then picked Cuomo as his running mate for his second term, and he was lieutenant-governor for four years. In 1982, Cuomo won a bruising Democratic primary fight against Koch for the nomination for governor, in which he burnished his liberal credentials by attacking Koch's support for the death penalty.

This was the start of Cuomo's three terms as governor. In his second year in office at the state level he won a national

audience when he gave the keynote address to the 1984 Democratic Party Convention. Cuomo's oratorical rebuke to Ronald Reagan endeared him to Democratic Party liberals, although reading the speech today confirms that it contained little of substance, and certainly no programmatic challenge to the vicious social cuts under the Reagan administration.

Reagan went on to win a landslide reelection victory over Democratic nominee Walter Mondale. For the next two presidential cycles Cuomo became the great hope of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party establishment.

During this same period, however, as leader of what was then the second most populous state in the US, Cuomo built more prisons than any previous governor—29 adult prisons and 12 juvenile facilities. At the same time, claiming his actions were dictated by the national economic recession, he presided over budget cuts and attacks on social programs. By his own admission, Cuomo's twelve years in office were not associated with any grand initiatives such as the earlier expansion of the state's public higher education system.

Cuomo's record, and his declining popularity in New York state itself, made a mockery of his rhetoric of compassion. Each time he came up as a likely candidate for president, both in 1988 and 1992, he hesitated—earning the somewhat derisive epithet of "Hamlet on the Hudson"—before finally withdrawing his name from consideration.

The efforts to ascribe Cuomo's refusal to run for the presidency to a mysterious psychological weakness on his part obscure the basic forces that determined his political fate. Cuomo, like all of his fellow Democrats, represented the interests of American capitalism. As far as the ruling class was concerned, however, the last two decades of the 20th century were no time for social reforms, or even the rhetoric of reform. The last gasp of Democratic Party reformism had long since passed with the Great Society programs of the mid-1960s.

Under Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression and even with John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, there was still an economic basis for modest social

reforms within the framework of capitalism, and thus a certain constituency within the US ruling class for such policies to forestall the danger of a revolutionary challenge to the profit system.

By the time Mario Cuomo came along, however, the objective basis for such policies was gone. US capitalism had entered a period of decline on the world stage: the United States became a net debtor nation in 1985, during Cuomo's first term in Albany. The needs of big business demanded an onslaught on the working class. It was this basic reality that gave Cuomo's rhetoric of liberal compassion such a hollow character and determined the trajectory of his career.

The shift within the two-party system was vividly summed up by Reagan's presidency, with vicious social cuts and the smashing of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers' strike. The rightward trajectory of US politics had, in fact, begun under Republican Richard Nixon and continued under Democrat Jimmy Carter in the 1970s.

Under Reagan, the Republicans became the spearhead of a bipartisan offensive against the working class, and Cuomo's rhetoric was deemed out of step. His fatal hesitation reflected this shift within the ruling elite that controlled both political parties. The Democratic Party was whipped into line, dropping any advocacy of meaningful social improvements.

It was Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, running as a Southern "moderate" on a program of backing for capital punishment, attacks on welfare and support for the needs of Wall Street, who brought the Democrats back to the White House. Andrew Cuomo became secretary of housing and urban development under Clinton and built his career as the same kind of "new Democrat" as his boss.

During this period, as the Democrats openly embraced Wall Street, supported deindustrialization and abandoned those sections of workers that had voted for them since the days of FDR, the social base of this capitalist party shifted more and more towards affluent layers of the middle class.

The Democrats covered their shift to the right by redefining liberalism to mean the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation, rather than policies to combat poverty and raise living standards for working people. The result has been a steady decline in support even in those states where the Democratic Party remains dominant in electoral politics, such as New York, where voter turnout reached a low of about 30 percent when Andrew Cuomo won reelection last November.

There are no fundamental political differences between the Cuomos, father and son, as revealed by their actual records while in office. As one political consultant who worked for both revealingly told the *New York Times*,

"Comparing them is impossible—the times are totally different."

The times are different because the decline of American capitalism has made even the hollow reformist rhetoric of Mario Cuomo unacceptable to the rulers of the profit system. His son has drawn the conclusions appropriate to a servant of Wall Street, most notoriously in budget deals in which he has flatly opposed any increase in taxation on the super-rich. But even during the elder Cuomo's governorship it was impossible to combine defense of the profit system and any significant social reforms. That is why the media obituaries and tributes to Cuomo by politicians and pundits suggest a well-meaning but failed and forlorn political figure.

The elder Cuomo went quietly into retirement after losing his bid for a fourth term in office in 1994. He spent the next two decades making millions of dollars with the corporate law firm of Willkie Farr and Gallagher.

As noted in every account of Mario Cuomo's death, the speech inaugurating his son's second term was delivered just hours before his father's demise last Thursday. This inaugural speech, perhaps in a nod to his father, included some demagogic references to inequality. The younger Cuomo announced with a straight face his sudden discovery that "the offer of fairness and opportunity that was the American compact is now in doubt."

The current governor's record speaks for itself. He has led vicious attacks on public education, forced wage freezes on state employees, flaunted his cooperation with right-wing Republicans in the state legislature and reveled in his warm relationships with banks and hedge funds. Last spring, Cuomo joined forces with charter school mogul Eva Moskowitz in a crude and reactionary attack on New York City's public schools.

With Mario Cuomo's passing, there are those who profess to see in Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren or New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio new claimants to the mantle of liberalism. The records of these latter-day "progressives" demonstrate, however, that the search for a standard bearer in the mold of Mario Cuomo serves only to prop up the corpse of liberalism.

The simple fact is: there is no way to meet even the most basic social needs of the vast majority of the people without building an independent political movement of the working class to replace the capitalist system with socialism.



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