

*Wolf of Wall Street*, *The Aviator*, *Bringing Out the Dead*, *Cape Fear*, and *The Color of Money*, with only one passing citation of *Kundun* and one paragraph on *The King of Comedy*. Considering the box-office success of *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *The Aviator*, some attention needs to be paid to the way they highlight the growth of Scorsese as director. Moreover, one wishes for a full section on Scorsese's cinematographic genius and a look at his relationships with such figures as Leonardo DiCaprio and Harvey Keitel.

*Companion* advances the scope of Scorsese scholarship by analyzing numerous motifs and aspects of the director's opus in one volume and provides a robust and contemporary bibliography. Carefully charting Scorsese's evolution as director, it is a welcome addition that will enhance the fields of cinema and media studies, Italian and Italian American studies, as well as American studies and ethnic studies.

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*American Cicero: Mario Cuomo and the Defense of American Liberalism.*

By Saladin Ambar.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

224 pages.

*Fiorello H. La Guardia: Ethnicity, Reform, and Urban Development,*  
Second Edition.

By Ronald Bayor.

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018.

224 pages.

The careers of Fiorello La Guardia and Mario Cuomo, perhaps the two most famous and beloved Italian American politicians of the twentieth century, bookend the era in which American liberalism was most profoundly shaped by the institutions, attitudes, and assumptions forged during the Great Depression and World War II. La Guardia, a "New Dealer before the New Deal," spent the 1920s as a maverick congressman championing such policies as public power and unemployment insurance. Then, as mayor, he made New York City into a laboratory of New Deal reform, building bridges, airports, health centers, housing, public broadcasting facilities, and much more. Half a century later, New York Governor Mario Cuomo labored to keep the flame of liberalism

alight against challenges from conservative Republicans and centrist New Democrats until the 1994 midterm elections that swept the New Right into power carried him from the political scene.

In background, style, and temperament, the two men offer a study in contrasts. La Guardia's early life was as atypical of the Italian American experience as Cuomo's was typical. Born in Greenwich Village, he grew up primarily in Arizona and was raised as an Episcopalian. Cuomo grew up in the polyglot neighborhood of South Jamaica, Queens, the son of a small-business owner, and was educated nearby at St. John's Prep and St. John's University in the Vincentian tradition. Both studied law as an avenue into public service; La Guardia, the westerner, became a Republican, and Cuomo, the New Yorker, a Democrat. If Cuomo was introspective and famously deliberate, La Guardia was a dynamo, always in a hurry and at times impetuous. Cuomo was the greatest formal orator of his time; La Guardia's preferred media were the newsreels, where his frenetic energy could come through, and the radio, the vehicle for his informal wartime show *Talk to the People*. La Guardia seemed to be on personal terms with every major figure in American politics, from A. Philip Randolph and Upton Sinclair to Franklin Roosevelt and J. Edgar Hoover. Cuomo kept closer counsel.

Yet in other ways they were two of a kind. Both men possessed an integrity that won the respect even of their political opponents. Both managed to appeal to broad constituencies while remaining forthright liberals who made the case for an expansive and responsible government. Both embraced the immigrant experience; their knowledge of the challenges and promises of American life as seen from the tenement, the garment loft, and the small outer-borough family shop shaped their politics profoundly. In no small measure because they understood and gave voice to those struggles and aspirations, both men became beloved political leaders who meant something to people.

Two recent books, one a revised second edition, the other a new work of scholarship, give students of American politics an opportunity to consider La Guardia's and Cuomo's careers in dialog. Ronald Baylor's short biography *Fiorello H. La Guardia: Ethnicity, Reform, and Urban Development*, originally published in 1993, follows La Guardia from his Arizona childhood through his decade in Congress and his twelve years in City Hall. Saladin Ambar's *American Cicero: Mario Cuomo and the Defense of American Liberalism* offers the first book-length study of Cuomo's entire political life.

The new edition of Baylor's *Fiorello H. La Guardia* offers a wise, approachable introduction to the life and times of perhaps the best-studied mayor in American history. La Guardia receives a more comprehensive examination in the landmark works of Arthur Mann and Thomas Kessner. But Baylor relates all the key episodes of the Little Flower's career, locating them acutely in the

political and social contexts in which they unfolded—amid the arc of reform politics and the hustle and bustle of early twentieth-century New York City. The new edition offers a richer sense of what New York was like when the Little Flower was building his political career, giving the reader a sense of the city's social texture that brings La Guardia's politics into sharper focus. Bayor has also deepened the book's treatments of the domestic politics of World War I and La Guardia's relationship to the New Deal. (One anachronism slips through: Bayor writes that the FDR-La Guardia relationship "became the precursor to a solid city-federal government connection still evident in contemporary America" [115].)

The most distinctive aspect of Bayor's book is its treatment of ethnic politics—of how La Guardia mobilized group identities to build the political support he needed to realize his reform program. Drawing upon his own seminal book *Neighbors in Conflict* (which remains essential reading for those interested in the history of right-wing extremism in America), Bayor shows how La Guardia navigated the terrain of group conflict to build a winning (though ever-shifting) coalition of Italian, Jewish, and black New Yorkers, unionists, Republicans, and good-government reformers. As labor unions and community organizations brought hundreds of thousands of citizens more fully into the democratic process, La Guardia's ambitious city-building program offered a vision of government as a potentially useful resource in community life. That democratic mobilization not only made La Guardia's mayoralty but also reshaped New York politics.

Though black neighborhoods ardently supported him, and though La Guardia himself was for a white politician unusually attuned to racial inequality, Bayor rightly identifies La Guardia's record on racism as one of his primary failures. As Bayor notes, La Guardia considered antiblack racism akin to the bigotry Italian Americans had faced in the early twentieth century; he had little understanding of the depth and institutionalized nature of racial discrimination. Residential segregation grew on La Guardia's watch, not primarily because of his actions, but with his acquiescence and sometimes with his active support (as in his notorious decision to go ahead with Metropolitan Life's plan for its segregated Stuyvesant Town housing project).<sup>1</sup> The nexus of discrimination, segregation, and disinvestment that deepened during La Guardia's mayoralty would mark subsequent urban liberalism as profoundly as the progressive reform project he oversaw.

Mario Cuomo launched his public career in the divided landscape the New Deal had helped forge. He first emerged as a major figure when Mayor John Lindsay asked him to mediate a dispute between advocates of scattered site affordable housing and the white middle-class (primarily Jewish) homeowners of Forest Hills, Queens. Cuomo proposed halving the size of the proposed

complex. When he ran for mayor in 1977, he did so as the avowed champion of the “outer boroughs,” a strategy that saw him cede black and Hispanic support to Edward Koch in the Democratic primary runoff. But, as Ambar writes in *American Cicero*, by the time he reached political high tide in the 1980s, Cuomo expressed “an open appreciation for and connection with black [as well as] white ethnic voters,” speaking of a “politics of inclusion” and recasting the New Deal’s idealized vision of government as an agent of the community’s concern for all its members (xii).

Ambar’s powerful, elegant, and thoughtful book offers a foundational study of Cuomo’s political life as well as a valuable addition to a growing literature on liberalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It joins the historian Robert S. McElvaine’s (1988) *Mario Cuomo* as the only book-length study of Cuomo. McElvaine’s book, which drew on a staggering number of interviews with Cuomo’s contemporaries, offers richer biographical detail. But Ambar is able to situate Cuomo more clearly within the longer arc of American political history. Ambar follows Cuomo from his youth in Queens through his three terms as governor, with a memorable coda set in the Cuomos’ ancestral home in Campania. But since the heart of his book focuses on Cuomo’s political thought, he devotes particular attention to the three seminal speeches for which Cuomo is best remembered and that collectively express his philosophy of government: his first inaugural address, his keynote speech at the 1984 Democratic National Convention,<sup>2</sup> and the remarkable talk on religion and politics he gave at the University of Notre Dame the same year.

Cuomo deserves our attention, Ambar writes, not only because he offered “the most serious counter-argument” (xi) of his time to Ronald Reagan’s brand of conservatism, but also because his struggle with Bill Clinton and the New Democrats over the direction of the Democratic Party shaped American politics for the next thirty years. In the wake of Reagan’s victories, Clinton and his allies in the Democratic Leadership Council, many of them Sun Belters, proposed a new party message “based on fiscal responsibility, creative new ideas on social policy, and a commitment to a strong national defense” (87), together with a rhetoric of personal responsibility and a tough-on-crime posture. Though he made occasional tactical use of centrist language, Cuomo stood forthrightly behind the older politics of the working-class cities of the North that the New Democrats were attempting to overthrow. “[I]f a new philosophy is to be articulated,” he said, “I’ll leave that to others . . . [P]rograms and policies change; our principles *don’t*” (88).

Ambar skillfully delineates Cuomo’s “sacrificial and communal brand” (16) of liberalism—an updated version of the credo, at the heart of La Guardia’s New Deal, that government was simply the means by which a community took care of itself, and that those whose toil made it possible for the city to flourish

were owed an obligation by the community as a whole. Cuomo wrapped this older idea in the language of family: “Everything I do revolves around the notion of sharing benefits and burdens in the community,” he said. “That’s family” (Hall 1983).

Nowhere was this idea expressed more clearly than in the famous peroration of Cuomo’s 1984 convention speech. In it, Cuomo evoked his father, “a small man with thick calluses on both his hands,” working until he bled from the bottoms of his feet. He “came here uneducated, alone, unable to speak the language,” Cuomo told his audience; “They asked only for a chance to work and to make the world better for their children, and 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.”<sup>1</sup> Ambar quotes Clinton’s telling response to Cuomo’s evocation of the New Deal liberal tradition: “Come on, what did it really say about the issues we’re trying to raise” (57)?

In office, Cuomo’s and Clinton’s records were perhaps less divergent than their ideological postures suggested. Cuomo was a highly popular governor—he won reelection in 1986 by the biggest landslide in the state’s history—and he registered some real achievements: more school funding, a pioneering seatbelt law, and a veto of the death penalty (an issue on which he stood courageously against public opinion). Yet his expansion of the state penal system, Ambar notes, added more prison beds than “all previous governors in New York history combined” (49). He needed those prison beds, too, to accommodate the draconian anticrack law and Shock Incarceration program he proposed and enacted.

Cuomo’s role in building New York’s carceral state offers a reminder of how modern American liberalism has been compromised by its acceptance of, and at times support for, racial hierarchy—and a reminder that the failings of La Guardia’s generation were in part to blame for the dilemmas faced by Cuomo’s. Yet, if they fell short in crucial respects, La Guardia and Cuomo also aspired toward a cosmopolitan politics that transcended false distinctions between identity and interest, difference and commonality. Both men leveraged their ethnic identities as Italian Americans in the service of a politics of community solidarity; La Guardia, in particular, advanced a visible policy agenda that made a tangible difference to working people in their daily lives. As contemporary liberals navigate the rapids of identity politics amid demographic transition and vast economic inequality, they might do well to remember that they have been here before.

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## Notes

1. Professor Shannon King's ongoing research on policing in 1940s New York promises to deepen our understanding of another key feature of racialized governance under La Guardia.
2. Text and video of Cuomo's 1984 convention speech can be found at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/01/02/374529943/watch-mario-cuomos-1984-speech-to-democratic-convention> (accessed June 19, 2018).

## Works Cited

- Hall, Stephen S. 1983. "Italian-Americans Coming into Their Own." *New York Times Magazine*, May 15, 31.
- McElvaine, Robert S. 1988. *Mario Cuomo*. New York: Scribner.

### *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora.*

By Pasquale Verdicchio.

New York: Bordighera Press, 2016.

234 pages.

As Pasquale Verdicchio writes in "Prefacing the Preface," this is not a revision but an updated paperback edition of a book first published in 1997. His motivation for this edition has been to utilize the Italian case to expand the current dialog about rethinking nationalism, a timely issue given the contentious political climate in many countries. This edition has been enhanced with the addition of several notes that update the text, clarify how terminology has shifted, and address political and literary developments since the book's original publication.

Verdicchio's study employs the theories of Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Spivak to argue that the "feigned homogeneity" (xv) of the Italian nation is a postunification construct purchased at the price of the colonization of Southern Italy by the North with its attendant constructions of Southern Italians as "backwards" and "racially other." Interrogating this historical colonization, Verdicchio analyzes works from the Italian literary canon alongside those by emigrant Italians and by filmmaker Elvira Notari and author/filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Chapter 1, "The South as National Dissonant Subject," traces the history of Italy's unification in 1861 to demonstrate that the overthrow of foreign powers managed only to replace one oppressive colonial power with a new elite, the Northern Italian territories, and suggests that the colonization of the South had roots in the Roman Empire's expansionist program. This chapter also outlines