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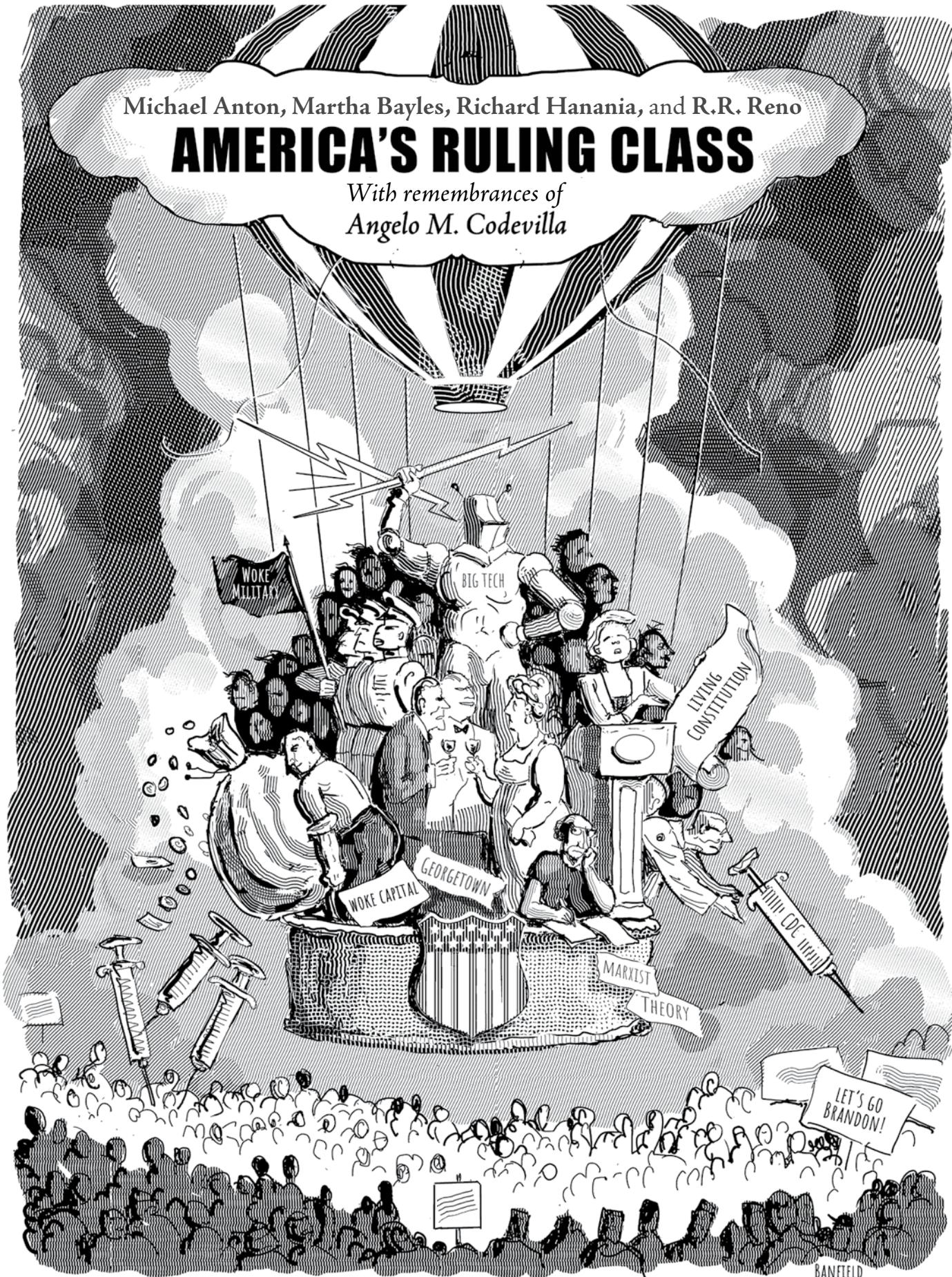
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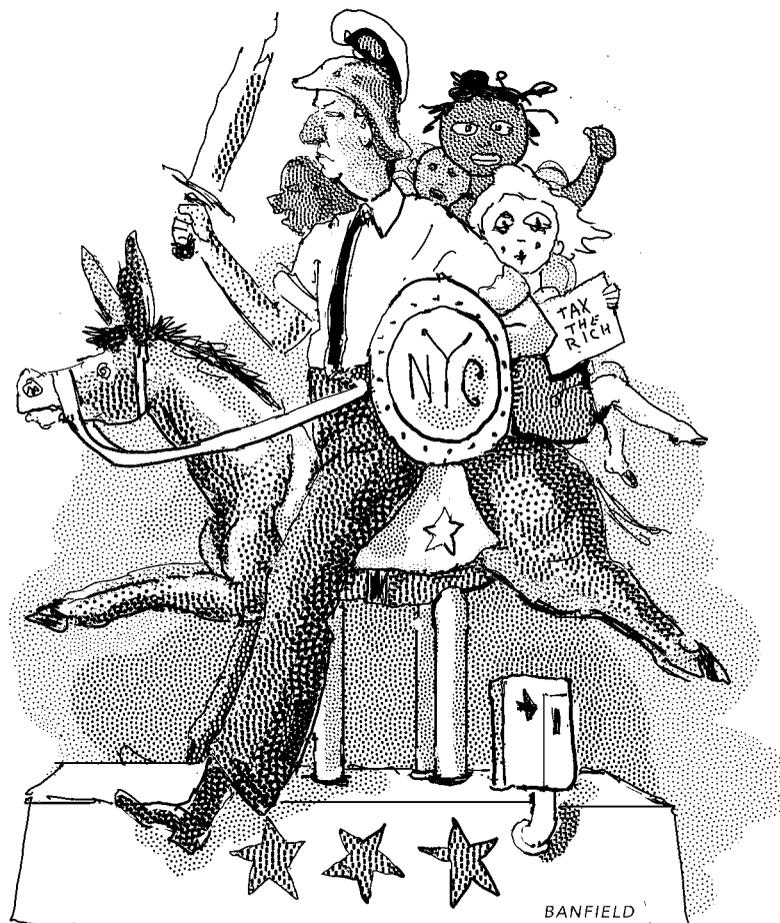


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Book Review by Vincent J. Cannato

DIZZONER

The Last Days of New York: A Reporter's True Tale, by Seth Barron.
Humanix Books, 304 pages, \$27.99



IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD YOU 25 YEARS AGO that a socialist/ex-hippie from Brooklyn via Vermont would come within inches of securing the Democratic nomination for president, that the radical child of Weather Underground terrorists would become District Attorney of San Francisco, and that a red-diaper baby who proclaimed “there’s plenty of money in the city—it’s just in the wrong hands” would become mayor of New York, you would have thought that prophesier crazy.

But we are living in a different political world today. In New York City, after eight years of Republican Rudy Giuliani and 12 years of neo-liberal technocrat Mike Bloomberg, voters put left-wing Democrat Bill de Blasio in City Hall. Under Giuliani and Bloomberg, New York witnessed a historic transformation as crime plummeted, tourists returned, and the city’s population grew by more than 800,000 between 1990 and 2010.

Concerns about gentrification, economic inequality, and police brutality had increased by the end of Bloomberg’s last term, but overall de Blasio inherited a well-run, functioning city.

IN *THE LAST DAYS OF NEW YORK*, SETH BARRON provides a grim, unsparing chronicle of Bill de Blasio’s eight years as mayor. A reporter who has written for the *New York Post* and *City Journal*, and is now managing editor of the *American Mind*, Barron pulls no punches as he details the de Blasio Administration’s poor leadership, corruption, and radical agenda.

De Blasio is a classic child of Communist parents. The FBI had his mother, Maria, under surveillance during World War II when she worked in New York for the Office of War Information’s Italian division, labeling her one of the leaders of the office’s Communist cabal. After the war, Maria de Blasio ended up at *Time* working for Whittaker Chambers,

who apparently had his doubts about her loyalties. Both Maria and her husband, Warren Wilhelm, came under suspicion as Communist sympathizers in the 1950s.

Their son was born Warren Wilhelm, Jr., in 1961. He changed his name a number of times over the years, finally settling on Bill de Blasio, in honor of his mother and likely with an eye toward a run for political office where an Italian-American surname might boost his fortunes. An admirer of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, de Blasio spent most of his formative years as a political operative, working for Mayor David Dinkins, running Bill Clinton’s 1996 presidential campaign in New York, working for Andrew Cuomo at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and running Hillary Clinton’s New York senatorial campaign in 2000. He was elected to the City Council in 2001, representing a Brooklyn district, and won election



to a higher rung on the ladder in 2009 when he became public advocate, a city-wide position with few actual duties. He seems never to have had a job outside of politics.

DURING HIS YEARS WORKING IN Democratic politics, de Blasio failed to impress most people, laziness being the most common criticism. Barron's best line comes from one of de Blasio's Italian aunts: the future mayor was an hour-and-a-half late to his own wedding, prompting his aunt to tell another, "Bill was an asshole when he was a kid and he's still an asshole." In a city where the New York Yankees rule the sports world, de Blasio proudly roots for the hated Boston Red Sox.

Thanks largely to a campaign ad featuring his biracial teenage son, de Blasio was elected mayor in 2013, winning 40.8% of the vote in the crowded Democratic primary, barely exceeding the 40% minimum that obviated a runoff. Campaigning on a theme that New York had become "Two Cities," de Blasio promised a vigorous progressive administration that would shrink economic inequality in New York.

In the first couple of years as mayor, he pushed through a costly universal pre-kindergarten program, fulfilling a campaign pledge. He also appointed Bill Bratton, Rudy Giuliani's first police commissioner, as his own. Crime continued the decline that had started 20 years before de Blasio's election; he was unwilling to mess around with law enforcement, at first.

But then he decriminalized minor crimes, "reformed" bail, and demoralized the New York Police Department in what Barron calls a "progressive war on safety." Black Lives Matter and the broader "racial reckoning" shifted the city from a policy aimed at reducing crime to one obsessed with police brutality and alleged inequities in law enforcement and incarceration.

Barron makes clear that New York's problems are not solely the fault of Mayor de Blasio, who is a "useful target because he's so pee-

vish, ineffectual, and addicted to displays of self-righteous grandiosity." He symbolizes a deeper left-wing politics that has grown more powerful in recent years. The real culprit, according to Barron, is "an equity-oriented social ideology yoked to a big-city political machine, fueled by contributions from the real estate industry and public-sector unions recirculating tax revenue, funneled through a corrosive consultant class and supporting an unelected but hugely powerful nonprofit advocacy apparatus."

THE BOOK GOES ON TO LAY OUT THE brief against de Blasio and his allies, members of what Barron calls "The Prog." The city spends \$1.5 billion each year on homeless services, providing shelter for almost 60,000 individuals; yet the city's public spaces are teeming with larger and larger numbers of homeless people. Similarly, de Blasio pulled back from the Giuliani and Bloomberg education reforms, which had emphasized accountability, assessment, and giving families the opportunity to choose from a large number of charter schools. Despite spending about \$25,000 per pupil, city schools continue to underperform: only about a third of black and Latino students are proficient in math and reading. Under de Blasio, Barron argues, city schools have promoted equity over excellence.

One task this mayor was not lazy about was raising campaign funds from wealthy businessmen who had interests with the city. "De Blasio ran City Hall like a financial pass-through entity to facilitate his donors' business and keep his high-laced consultant friends happy." Real-estate interests and labor unions poured money into the operation, which was laundered through left-wing political consultants who then helped other left-wing candidates win office. Even de Blasio's laughable and short-lived 2020 presidential campaign was largely designed to keep the money flowing into this political machine. Not surprisingly, such a system breeds corruption. When some of his donors were con-

victed of bribery, de Blasio miraculously managed to evade prosecution. Barron blames this on the city's one-party rule: the Manhattan district attorney was connected to some of de Blasio's left-wing consultants and partially owed his political position to them.

IT IS HARD TO SEE WHERE OPPOSITION to these left-wing forces will come from. New York, where Republicans were competitive throughout the 20th century, has become one of the country's bluest states. De Blasio's first Republican opponent won 24% of the vote; the second increased that to almost 28% in 2017. Even moderate Democrats are a dying breed. The conventional wisdom holds that the current Democratic nominee and almost certainly the next mayor, a black former police officer named Eric Adams, is a tough-on-crime "moderate," but Barron is skeptical of such claims. Whatever his own political preferences, Adams would still be governing a city dominated by left-wing activists, a left-wing city council, and a left-wing comptroller.

Declinism is all the rage these days and *The Last Days of New York* fits that model. It should also be noted that liberals have their own narratives of decline. Books like Jeremiah Moss's *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost its Soul* (2017) and Kevin Baker's *The Fall of a Great American City: New York and the Urban Crisis of Affluence* (2019) mostly focus on gentrification and economic inequality. But read together with Barron's book, this cross-ideological dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs is striking.

I retain too much optimism to believe that these are "the last days of New York." But it is hard to argue with Seth Barron about the damage progressives have inflicted on the city since 2013.

Vincent J. Cannato is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Boston and is the author of The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and his Struggle to Save New York (Basic Books).

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