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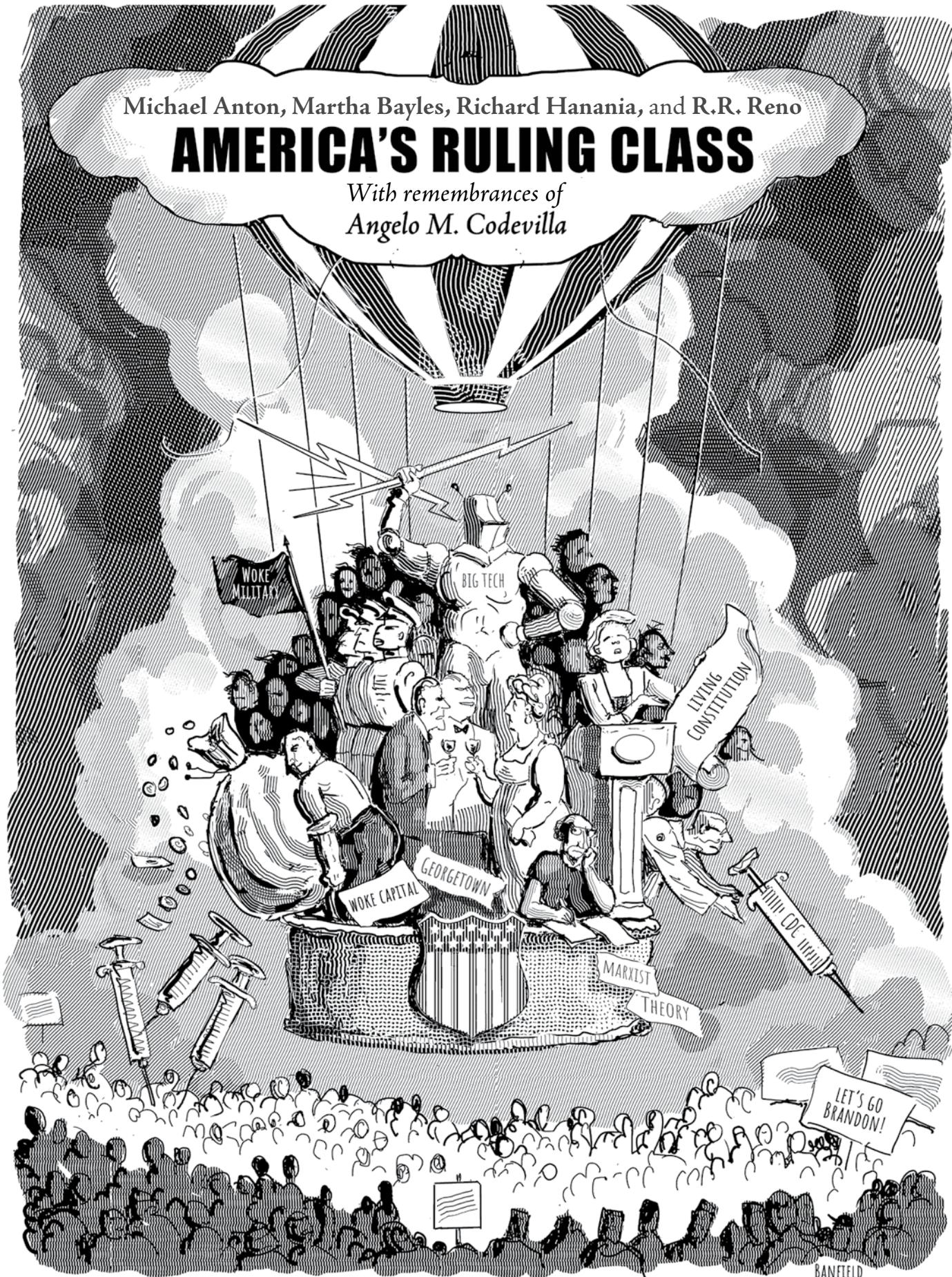
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Book Review by Joshua Mitchell

THE END OF FUSIONISM

Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds, by Michael Knowles.
Regnery Publishing, 256 pages, \$28.99



THE COLD WAR CONSERVATIVE MÉlange—what *National Review* founding contributor Frank Meyer called “fusionism”—was held together by more than its mutual commitment to fight Communism abroad and progressivism at home. It required discipline and, what’s more, relied on a prudential *politeness*—a *gentleman’s* politeness—befitting middle-class Americans who dreamed of rising above their middle-class station. Those of us old enough to remember pre-1989 conservatism knew what could and could not be said if we wished to hold the fusionist admixture together. After 1989, when Communism collapsed and progressivism morphed into identity politics, conservative discipline frayed but politeness remained—until the very-impolite Donald Trump rudely

confirmed that movement conservatism had little to say about our present crises. Familiar battle cries—“religious liberty,” “the Second Amendment,” “lower taxes”—still rang out among the old guard, but gentlemanly conservatism looked less interested in winning political skirmishes than in politely losing from the comfortable confines of think tanks and academia while America burned. Trump knew this. American citizens knew this. Both had had enough. That is why Trump won in 2016.

WE CAN ARGUE ABOUT WHAT TRUMP did or did not achieve for the country, but inside the conservative movement he clearly accomplished two things: he ended the “free market veto,” clear-

ing the ground for new thinking about how to salvage the American working class; and he finished off any illusions that democracy could be implanted in distant lands through foreign wars. In short, Trump closed the era of both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and a host of other left-leaning media outlets tell us today’s conservative movement is in disarray. But from the inside it sure doesn’t look that way. We need no longer whisper to our dearest friends that we don’t *really* believe “market efficiency” is a sound criterion for economic and social policy, or that we don’t *really* believe spending blood and treasure in distant lands is wise. The politeness that held fusionism together forced many of us to acquiesce to positions we never quite held. The great strength of fusion-

ism—its discipline and politeness—turned out to be its great weakness.

WE ARE LIVING IN A NEW DAY. A younger generation of thinkers, less polite and much more spirited, has joined the movement. They have endured the culture wars without the insulation think tanks and tenure provide. Impatient with a movement that has ceded ground for the past half-century, and emboldened by Trump's refusal to cower, they are eager to fight.

"[A defense of 'choice'] will not suffice to save the Western mind. Dithering conservatives must make choices themselves...[to] defend the cultural tradition that the revolutionaries ruthlessly and relentlessly criticize." So writes podcast host and political analyst Michael Knowles in *Speechless: Controlling Worlds, Controlling Minds*. Intended or not, the title carries a double meaning: (1) conservatives defend the right to free speech but have nothing to say about its necessary limits; (2) the author is incredulous, *speechless*, that a conservative movement that purportedly defends so much has done so little. The book's 16 often witty, sometimes frightening chapters provide a historical run-through of the Left's success in altering the linguistic terms of American political engagement. The methods and persons responsible for cultural Marxism receive special attention. The picture Knowles paints is of a Left that seriously intends to shape society in its own image and has a ground game for doing so. Its more immediate goals may wander—first Marxism, now transgenderism—but its ultimate goal has always been clear: in Marx's words, "the abolition of the current state of things."

The discerning reader will observe the deeper question with which Knowles wrestles through his investigation of political correctness: if the conservative movement is to recapture lost ground, to what should it recur—the ancient wisdom of an Aristotle, on the basis of which politics must be concerned with human flourishing, or the modern strain of thought traceable through John Locke, Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, and others, which elevates human choice, sometimes as an ultimate good? For those who hew to ancient wisdom, the political correctness debate reveals the impotence of the argument for

"choice" for its own sake. As a substitute for the Left's substantive—if malignant—vision, the Right's defense of "choice" is thin gruel. The conservative movement has been to this extent ill-served by its classical liberal fellow-travelers. In this respect, *Speechless* is well within the emerging conservative consensus that no longer gives libertarians the "free market veto" over other considerations that must be brought to bear for a polity to flourish—like retaining a healthy working class, even if it's not market efficient, or with having vibrant institutions, even if they're costly to nourish.

KNOWLES DOESN'T RESOLVE THE DEEPER question he knows he's addressing. Nor, in fairness, does he profess to do so, though his concluding pages warrant a careful read. The question he poses is inscribed into the conservative movement itself, by virtue of several of its odd-couple founding constituents. In the 1980s, during the glow of Reagan's two-term presidency, conservative foundations were pouring money into Richard Epstein's "Law and Economics" program on one side of the University of Chicago to promote free markets, and giving just as much to Allan Bloom and the conservatives who resided in Foster Hall at the other end of campus who detested pop culture. A sustained conversation between Bloom and Epstein would have been almost inconceivable. But gentlemen do not fight, and they were gentlemen. Those two factions are still with us.

Speechless reflects the new emerging balance of power within the conservative movement, a movement shifting its focus from process—choice—toward substantive ends. In light of this shift, Knowles offers us Aristotle as a worthy guide. No doubt he is right. Aristotle is without equal if we are searching for a philosophical account of who man is and how he may flourish. Yet though many of us are drawn to the substantive grounding he provides, I cannot resist putting in a good word for liberal caution. Our insight about the good is often clouded by pride, and so we set up a regime in which citizen choices offset one another and together play out in unpredictable ways, not because the consequences of citizen choice are always good, but because the alternative—top-down determinations—is often worse.

FINALLY, SOMETHING SHOULD BE SAID about our current dilemma, which I shall call "identity politics." *Speechless* shows in exquisite detail the tireless labor of the Left to penetrate and alter American institutions and ideas. The chapters on Herbert Marcuse, how feminism began to dismantle the category of sex, and the grim origins of the transgender movement are especially revealing—and leave one wondering if conservatives ever understood what they have been dealing with since the 1960s. Unlike Marxism, which never quite took hold on the American Left, identity politics has raced through the country like a firestorm in only a few short years. Rather than being *resisted*, the remarkable thing about it is that it has been routinely *invited in*. Far from pushing back, our educational institutions and corporations have been desperate to demonstrate their identity politics bona fides.

Identity politics brings something new to the table—the feeling of *guilt* and the desperate need to be free if it—that neither libertarians nor cultural conservatives address. Neither Smith nor Aristotle can guide us in this matter. Identity politics goes well beyond political correctness. It tells us we bear guilt that cannot be lifted—for slavery in America, for colonialism and two world wars in Europe—and that to atone for that guilt, *all* the accomplishments of Western Civilization must be destroyed: renounce the nation-state, capitalism, your heteronormative families, your homophobic church, your "dirty" fossil fuels, and then you will receive absolution.

Christianity once offered man a way for his stains to be washed free. Christianity is in decline in the West—but man's guilt remains. The sick brilliance of identity politics is that it focuses incessantly on that guilt and promises citizens a reprieve if they tear down everything their civilization has created. That is why it is racing through America like a firestorm. It offers American citizens something neither libertarians nor cultural conservatives can offer—absolution.

Joshua Mitchell is professor of political theory at Georgetown University, a fellow of the Claremont Institute's Center for the American Way of Life, and the author, most recently, of American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time (Encounter Books).

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