

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2021/2022

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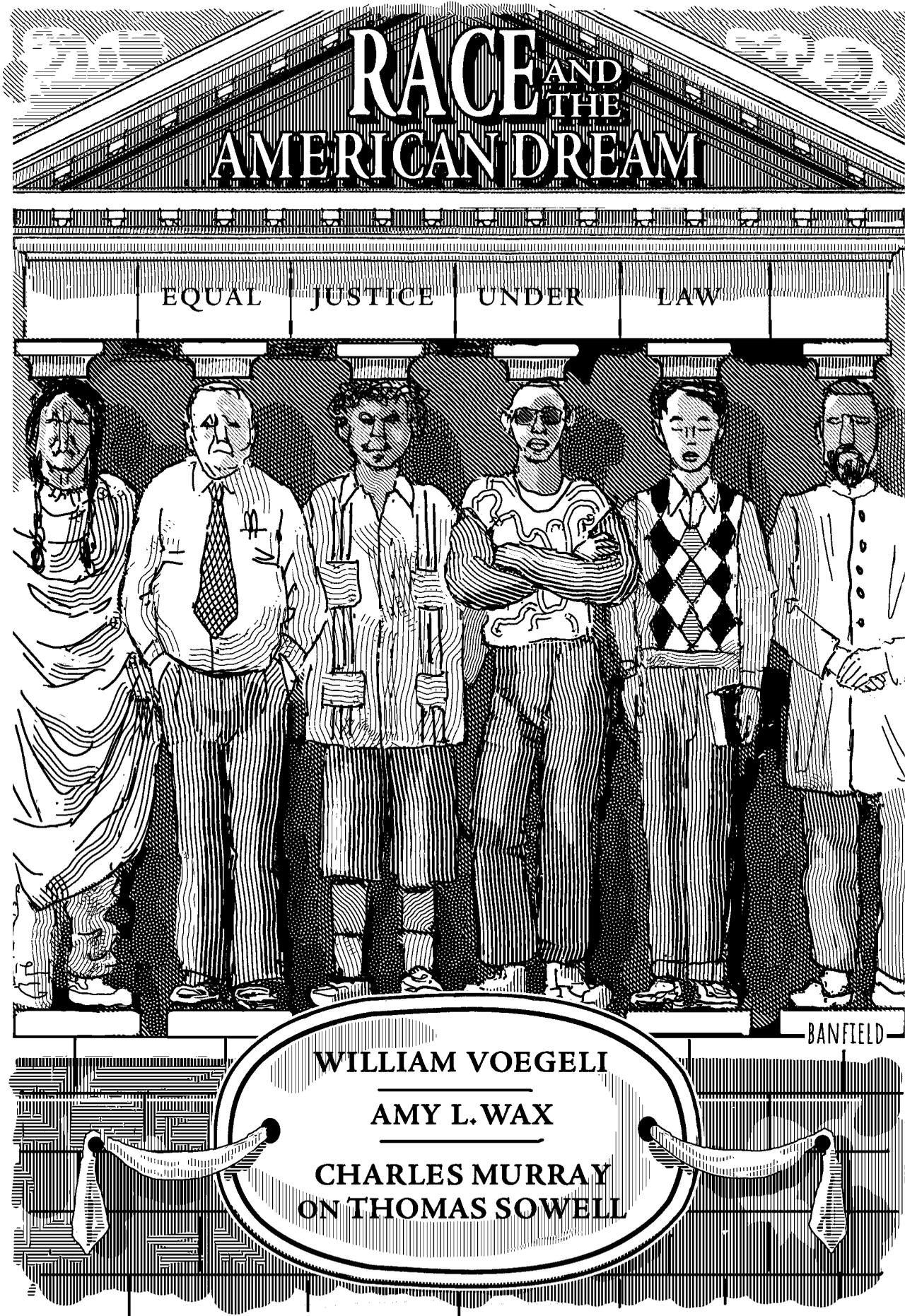
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## THE POWER OF NO

*The Authoritarian Moment: How the Left Weaponized America's Institutions Against Dissent*, by Ben Shapiro.  
Broadside Books, 288 pages, \$28.99

**I**N *THE AUTHORITARIAN MOMENT*, PROLIFIC author, commentator, and podcaster Ben Shapiro contends that Americans are primarily divided not by race or class but by culture. One side accepts neutral institutions and the freedom to disagree about politics and the good life. The other rejects neutrality, anathemizing any worldview but its own. Shapiro explores how the latter orientation prevailed in higher education, the scientific establishment, corporations, the entertainment industry, the media, and Big Tech. He outlines the reach of left-wing authoritarianism, characterized by revolutionary aggression, top-down censorship, and anti-conventionalism. Across these institutions, nonconformity is punished with suspension, termination, defamation, hostility, verbal abuse, and even physical violence. Though conservatives are the main targets, liberals aren't safe either. Just ask J.K. Rowling, Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, or Matthew Yglesias. There's a reason a 2020 Cato national survey found that 77% of conservatives, 64% of moderates, and 52% of liberals are afraid to say what they think.

Demands from a small yet very loud, radical group of authoritarian leftists grew in frequency and magnitude until they reached a decisive point—"renormalization" as Shapiro calls it. Institution leaders surrendered to progressives to protect their jobs and reputations while others stood idly by. The result: Coca-Cola trained over 80,000 employees to be "less white"—that is, "less arrogant, less certain, less defensive, less ignorant, and more humble"—and Google training suggested to its employees that listening to Ben Shapiro is a step on the road to genocide.

Why did this happen? To start with, the authoritarians are in the minority, so they *must* bully others in order to get their way. Conservatives are also complicit. Shapiro calls it the "cordiality principle"—a desire for keeping the peace through decency, politeness, and toleration. Better to shut your mouth than to say what you really think. Shapiro's solution: just say no!

Had this recommendation been followed, Donald McNeil, Jr., might still be employed as a science reporter for the *New York Times*. On a student trip organized by the *Times*, McNeil was asked if a 12-year-old should be canceled for saying the n-word. In his answer, he used the word to explain different possible scenari-

os. Some students complained, more than 150 woke *Times* staffers demanded punishment, and McNeil lost his job. But there were 1,200 *Times* employees in McNeil's union, and *Vanity Fair* reported that McNeil was "not without sympathy or support, both inside the *Times* and out." What if those people spoke out in support of McNeil? "What if," Shapiro asks, "employees banded together and simply refused to go along with the latest cancellations, or the latest demand for 'diversity training,' or the latest Maoist struggle session?"

**S**HAPIRO UNDERESTIMATES, HOWEVER, the power of government. Politics is not simply "downstream of culture," as Andrew Breitbart had it. The influence flows both ways. School segregation was outlawed in 1954, but integration wasn't favored by most Americans until ten years later. Culture followed law. Similarly, interracial marriage was legalized in 1967, despite most people disapproving of it. Three decades later, the vast majority of Americans supported such marriages. Again, culture followed law.

So too with today's woke takeover of the institutions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed overt discrimination based on race and gender. The Supreme Court in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* (1971) went further, ruling that neutral policies could be struck down if they disproportionately affected a protected group, regardless of intent. In 2019, for example, Dollar General was forced to pay \$6 million for conducting criminal background checks because doing so decreased the proportion of blacks hired. Paired with policies imposing affirmative action on private organizations that accept government funding, civil rights law provided an incentive structure that transformed institutions.

Civil rights law also produced the idea of the "hostile work environment." Intended to protect workers against discrimination and sexual harassment, it ended up suppressing political speech. The overbroad and vague concept draws no distinction between, say, an offensive slur and religious commentary. Because employers are held responsible for their employees' speech, they have an incentive to police *anything* that might be construed as offensive to people in protected classes. The desire to reduce workplace harassment was laudable; the

government's message that all speech offensive to protected groups should be silenced was not.

**T**HE *AUTHORITARIAN MOMENT* PROVIDES an insightful account of the cultural side of the Left's institutional takeover but underestimates how law created and continues to create the conditions for wokeness to thrive. Shapiro fails to draw the pertinent conclusion from his own argument: if authoritarian leftist dominance is about power, not persuasion, then persuasion alone won't turn the tide. Even if conservatives could overcome their disadvantage (data suggest they're too well-adjusted to devote their lives to political causes), government would still have its thumb on the scale in favor of wokeness. This creates the conservative dilemma: either use governmental power to influence institutions in your preferred direction or match the intensity and commitment of the cultural Left. The latter requires a sacrifice of time and resources previously devoted to making a living, raising a family, or pursuing hobbies. The former requires emboldening the state with more power, risking the possibility that it will be used *against* conservatives once power changes hands. Doing neither consigns conservatives to a perpetual state of losing the culture.

Though persuasion is preferable to coercion, government power is justified when government policy contributes to the problem. Therefore, in addition to Shapiro's recommendations—which include lawsuits for discriminatory diversity training, making political ideology a protected category, and creating alternative institutions—lawmakers must reverse the policies that enabled and encouraged the authoritarian culture. They can scrap disparate impact, replacing it with requirements for evidence of intentional discrimination, and more clearly define concepts like "hostile work environment" so as not to punish political or religious speech. These alone won't win back the institutions, but they can help level the playing field. And if conservatives want any chance of wresting control of the culture from the authoritarian Left, they need to get comfortable flexing some legal muscle of their own.

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