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The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students

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THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND: HOW HIGHER EDUCATION HAS FAILED DEMOCRACY AND IMPOVERISHED THE SOULS OF TODAY'S STUDENTS. By *Allan Bloom*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1987. Pp. 392. \$18.95.

Bacon, Descartes, T.S. Eliot, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Machiavelli, Jacques Maritain, Christopher Marlowe, Montesquieu, Newton, Rousseau, Socrates, and Voltaire . . . Readers should be forewarned that they will encounter the teachings of such great thinkers when they pick up Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.¹ In fact, they will encounter all of these on one page, 292. And this is not an atypical page — except for the omission of Nietzsche, whose influence permeates the book.²

If American education has really reached the depths Bloom depicts, such a difficult book should have no audience. After all, a reader needs a good foundation in both Greek literature and European — especially German — philosophy in order to appreciate Bloom's insights. Yet the book has stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for many months. Can Bloom be mistaken about the lack of culture in America? How has the book found so many readers?

Perhaps the answer is that it appeals to several audiences for different reasons. Although the circle of Bloom's soulmates may be growing older and narrower daily, there are many others who will read — or at least buy — his book:

1. Bloom, the author of critiques of Rousseau and Shakespeare, is a professor of social thought at the University of Chicago.

2. Nietzsche's influence is typified in this quote:

At the very best, it is clear to me now that nature needs the cooperation of convention, just as man's art is needed to found the political order that is the condition of his natural completeness. At worst, I fear that spiritual entropy or an evaporation of the soul's boiling blood is taking place, a fear that Nietzsche thought justified and made the center of all his thought. He argued that the spirit's bow was being unbent and risked being permanently unstrung. Its activity, he believed, comes from culture, and the decay of culture meant not only the decay of man in this culture but the decay of man simply. This is the crisis he tried to face resolutely: the very existence of man as man, as a noble being, depended on him and on men like him — so he thought. He may not have been right, but his case looks stronger all the time.

P. 51. Other notable names omitted from page 292 that dot the pages elsewhere in the book are Woody Allen, Aristotle, Freud, Hegel, Heidegger, Plato, Shakespeare, Swift, and Tocqueville.

* College administrators and faculty leaders who see the subtitle and feel compelled to read it in order to keep abreast of the latest attacks on their livelihood.

* Feminists who have heard that Bloom calls feminism “[t]he latest enemy of the vitality of the classic texts” (p. 65) and says that women no longer need the National Organization for Women (p. 107).

* Would-be censors of music and other diversions of the youth culture who can bolster their arguments with passages such as this:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike, electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy. [pp. 74-75]

* Those who yearn for a kind of erudition they lack but who can fantasize that they are members of a dying elite while they turn page after page with little comprehension.

* Name-droppers who will read just enough of the first third of the book³ to impress people at cocktail parties.

* Ostentatious social climbers who frankly have no intention of reading the book but who like to decorate their coffee tables with the most impressive ornaments from the best-seller lists.

Those who actually read *The Closing of the American Mind* will find it by turns stimulating, erudite, provocative, quotable, dated, simplistic, and boring. Bloom has taught for nearly three decades in some of the “best” colleges in this country as well as abroad,⁴ and he has observed students closely. The book’s strongest section is the first, where he describes the students he has seen over the years. Part 2, *Nihilism, American Style*, is the most demanding and will probably find the fewest readers. Part 3 is entitled *The University*; its final two chapters (*The Sixties* and *The Student and the University*) are also

3. Part 1, *Students*, covers pages 47-137 and is by far the most concrete — and therefore readable — section.

4. Many of the references are to Bloom’s experiences at Cornell, where he taught during the 1969 student takeover. This incident appears to have had a profound effect on Bloom that pervades his writings. He has also taught at Yale and at the University of Chicago — where he is currently codirector of the John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy — as well as at the University of Toronto, the University of Paris, and Tel Aviv University.

closely tied to Bloom's experiences, and their concreteness makes them readable. Those who merely want to learn what is wrong with American colleges may be unprepared for a seminar in European philosophy before they can discover the answer. If they are unwilling to plod through the lengthy middle section, they may just skip to the last two chapters.

So who is to blame for the failure of higher education? The usual suspects are the faculty, the students, and society, and Bloom distributes blame among all three. The faculty, for example, shamed itself in the sixties by capitulating to demands for relevance and by letting militant students run the schools.⁵ But he devotes more time to analyzing the failures of the students and the society that has spawned them.

His summation of today's students may strike many readers as apt: Students these days are, in general, nice. I choose the word carefully. They are not particularly moral or noble. Such niceness is a facet of democratic character when times are good. Neither war nor tyranny nor want has hardened them or made demands on them. The wounds and rivalries caused by class distinction have disappeared along with any strong sense of class (as it once existed in universities in America and as it still does, poisonously, in England). Students are free of most constraints, and their families make sacrifices for them without asking for much in the way of obedience or respect. . . . The drugs and the sex once thought to be forbidden are available in the quantities required for sensible use. A few radical feminists still feel the old-time religion, but most of the women are comfortably assured that not much stands in the way of their careers. . . . Students these days are pleasant, friendly and, if not great-souled, at least not particularly mean-spirited. Their primary preoccupation is themselves, understood in the narrowest sense. [pp. 82-83]

Students come to college with no values, have no sense of right and wrong, view everything as relative, and feel no urge to judge others. They come to college sexually sated, with no innocence.⁶ They are self-centered and self-satisfied. Indeed, "the self is the modern substitute for the soul" (p. 173). Their self-satisfaction extends to their country. "The longing for Europe has been all but extinguished in the young" (p. 320), according to Bloom. Students are the products of their society, a society destroyed by the effects of feminism, divorce, two-career families, a polluted language, and a retreat from the liberal arts in favor of professional training.⁷

5. For Bloom, the late sixties were the Dark Ages of education, and universities have yet to recover. P. 319.

6. Bloom's favorite students are the few remaining virgins:

I believe that the most interesting students are those who have not settled the sexual problem, who are still young, even look young for their age, who think there is much to look forward to and much they must yet grow up to, fresh and naive, excited by the mysteries to which they have not yet been fully initiated.

P. 134.

7. Bloom's discussion of many of these problems can be found in sections entitled "Divorce" and "Love" that span pages 118 to 132.

Bloom finds students disappointing because they are bland, homogenized, without "cultural baggage" (p. 89), prejudices, or any real fears.⁸ Are these really the typical students of 1987? Perhaps Bloom's exposure has been limited to the sons and daughters of the rich. Had he taught in some less elite institutions, he might have seen students with real prejudices, real fears. Even at the top universities today, these seem to be resurfacing. Racial unrest is reappearing, and the sexual revolution has met with at least a temporary obstacle in the AIDS crisis.⁹ Perhaps Bloom is unaware of some of these changes because, as codirector of the John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy at the University of Chicago, he has fewer chances to get to know undergraduates than he once had.

When these nice but dull students reach the university, what awaits them? Not, Bloom regrets, the cultural storehouses to which students of the forties and fifties were exposed.¹⁰ Instead, "[t]he humanists are old maid librarians" (p. 136), and preprofessionalism has taken over the campus. Particularly heinous examples, in Bloom's eyes, are the MBA programs:

[A] great disaster has occurred. It is the establishment during the last decade or so of the MBA as the moral equivalent of the MD or the law degree, meaning a way of insuring a lucrative living by the mere fact of a diploma that is not a mark of scholarly achievement. It is a general rule that the students who have any chance of getting a liberal education are those who do not have a fixed career goal, or at least those for whom the university is not merely a training ground for a profession. . . . The effect of the MBA is to corral a horde of students who want to get into business school and to put the blinders on them, to legislate an illiberal, officially approved undergraduate program for them at the outset, like premeds who usually disappear into their required courses and are never heard from again.¹¹

8. He pooh-poohs the suggestion that today's students fear nuclear war. *See* p. 83.

9. A single footnote on page 106 acknowledges this fear: "It remains to be seen what effect AIDS will have. The wave of publicity about herpes a couple of years ago had almost no discernible psychological fallout."

10. Bloom, who was an undergraduate in the 1940s and 1950s, may be striking a nostalgic note when he says,

As I reflect on it, the last fertile moment when student and university made a match was the fling with Freud during the forties and fifties. He advertised a real psychology, a version of the age-old investigation of the soul's phenomena adjusted to the palate of modern man. Today one can hardly imagine the excitement. What a thrill it was when my first college girlfriend told me that the university's bell tower was a phallic symbol. This was a real mix of my secret obsessions and the high seriousness I expected to get from the university. High school was never like this. It was hard to tell whether the meaning of it all was that I was about to lose my virginity or to penetrate the mysteries of being.

P. 136.

11. Pp. 369-70. He is less critical of prelaw programs: "Prelaw students are more visible in a variety of liberal courses because law schools are less fixed in their prerequisites; they are only seeking bright students." P. 370. In general, Bloom fails to acknowledge that students are being forced into professional and preprofessional programs by an inability to earn a living commensurate with the costs of an undergraduate program otherwise.

Such an institution is not well-equipped to accomplish what Bloom sees as its main task: "always to maintain the permanent questions front and center" (p. 252).

Surprisingly, Bloom does not give up in despair at this point. After a lengthy discussion of Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, he comes to the unexpected conclusion that there is hope for the future. "For the first time in four hundred years, it seems possible and imperative to begin all over again, to try to figure out what Plato was talking about, because it might be the best thing available" (p. 310). Only if we reassess the university's vocation, returning it to its traditional role, can we avoid a repetition of the destruction of the universities that occurred in Germany in the thirties, according to Bloom (p. 312).

Anyone with influence in the universities who reads Bloom for answers to the question "What should we do to save higher education?" will probably be disappointed. His solutions are difficult to find and hard to swallow. They boil down to a Great Books approach designed for the few students making up the intellectual elite. The university must

intervene most vigorously in the education of those few who come to the university with a strong urge for *un je ne sais quoi*, who fear that they may fail to discover it, and that the cultivation of their minds is required for the success of their quest. We are long past the age when a whole tradition could be stored up in all students, to be fruitfully used later by some. Only those who are willing to take risks and are ready to believe the implausible are now fit for a bookish adventure. The desire must come from within. [pp. 64-65]

Bloom acknowledges the objections to a Great Books curriculum¹² but still concludes that making these readings the core studies will once again excite students. They will recognize and appreciate the unique experience the university is providing for them. Students will rediscover a respect for study as an end in itself (p. 344). He does not appear to acknowledge that one reason for this success is the self-selection process that matches students with such a curriculum.

Although Bloom's treatise may turn out to be the "bible of a whole class of righteous intellectuals,"¹³ it is unlikely that many changes will occur in the universities because of it. The "back to basics" movement

12. He admits to agreeing with these objections:

It is amateurish; it encourages an autodidact's self-assurance without competence; one cannot read all of the Great Books carefully; if one only reads Great Books, one can never know what a great, as opposed to an ordinary, book is; there is no way of determining who is to decide what a Great Book or what the canon is; books are made the ends and not the means; the whole movement has a certain coarse evangelistic tone that is the opposite of good taste; it engenders a spurious intimacy with greatness; and so forth.

P. 344.

13. Pattison, *On the Finn Syndrome and the Shakespeare Paradox*, 244 THE NATION 710, 714 (1987).

may find some fuel in its pages, and a few more committees may be appointed to decide what should be done to insure balanced graduation requirements. A handful of schools may reinstitute a foreign language requirement, spurred on by Bloom's enthusiasm for European culture. A few readers may be stimulated by *The Closing of the American Mind* and may decide to reread the classics Bloom mentions — or to read them for the first time.¹⁴ But few readers are likely to be inspired, and many copies of the book will perhaps gather dust on coffee tables until the best-seller list produces some equally impressive tome. Will Bloom care?

Bloom is primarily a teacher, and he frequently draws analogies to the role of a teacher. At various times he describes the teacher as both pimp and midwife (p. 20), ministering to the needs of the students who lust for knowledge. In the past, the teacher's "joy was in hearing the ecstatic 'Oh, yes!' as he dished up Shakespeare and Hegel to minister to their need. Pimp and midwife really described him well" (p. 136). Perhaps, like the pimp and midwife, Bloom can perform his service and then move on. Perhaps the sales that have driven Bloom's book to the top of the charts are now providing him an ecstatic "Oh, yes!"

— Maureen P. Taylor

14. This task could easily occupy most of a lifetime, as the authors he reveres could fill a library.