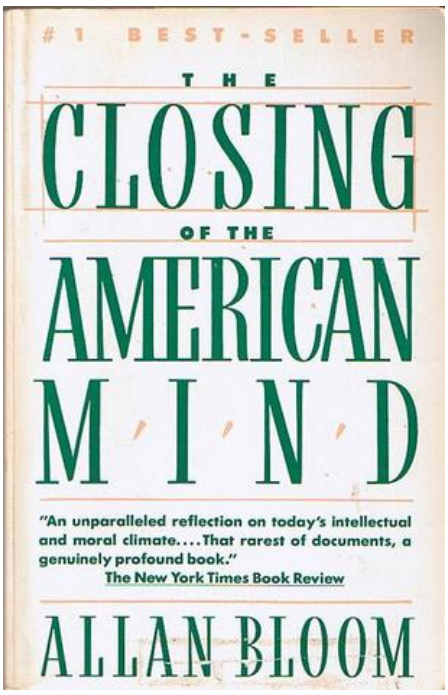

The Closing of the American Mind

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The Closing of the American Mind Allan Bloom
The Closing of the American Mind, a publishing phenomenon in hardcover, is now a paperback literary event. In this acclaimed number one national best-seller, one of our country's most distinguished political philosophers argues that the social/political crisis of 20th-century America is really an intellectual crisis. Allan Bloom's sweeping analysis is essential to understanding America today. It has fired the imagination of a public ripe for change.

The Closing of the American Mind Details

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From Reader Review The Closing of the American Mind for online ebook

Scott Rhee says

I was in eighth grade when the late Allan Bloom's 1987 seminal classic "The Closing of the American Mind" was published. I remembered it because my parents, like thousands of other parents across the country, bought it and put it on the bookshelf proudly. And there it sat, unread, for almost two decades.

I wish that I had read it before I had gone off to college, but I will be honest, I probably wouldn't have understood it. I don't pretend to completely understand everything in it now, at age 40, but the majority of Bloom's fascinating, more often than not disturbing, occasionally humorous, sadly prophetic, and incredibly enjoyable criticism of higher education really struck a chord with me.

Perhaps because I fancy myself a writer/philosopher (albeit one lacking in motivation and output, if not necessarily talent), I was heartened by Professor Bloom's clear respect, admiration, and love of the humanities (which, at one point, Bloom refers to as the "lost continent of Atlantis" of the disciplines).

Humanities are, not to put to fine a point on it, the brutally beaten and left-for-dead crippled stepchild of the academic world. In public education, humanities have all but been entirely wiped out. (During financial crises requiring budget cuts, the Art and Music Departments are always the first to go.) Colleges and universities fare no better. The two sister disciplines, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences, are doing quite well, despite not being on speaking terms. I should say "WERE" doing well, at the time that Bloom wrote the book. I hesitate to say but am fairly certain that even the Natural Sciences are on the decline. Didn't our politicians and economists recently lament the fact that we rank as one of the countries with the lowest viable mathematicians and scientists? Yeah, well, politicians and economists are certainly doing well, despite the fact. I digress...

Bloom's immensely popular book did not arrive without much controversy, much of it not entirely his fault. In the late-80s and early-90s, many of Bloom's (misinterpreted) ideas were adopted by ultra-conservatives like Lynne Cheney and William Bennett to aid in their attack on academia's "multiculturalist" movement, seen by many critics as an attempt to de-throne the timeless classics of the Canon, a.k.a. the Great Books, a.k.a. the Dead White Guys.

Poor Bloom, of course, who died of AIDS in 1992, wasn't around to defend himself. Posthumously labeled a "racist", a "sexist", and, most humorously, a "homophobe" (Bloom was openly gay), the late professor's book was much-maligned but managed to persist in the consciousness of its many fans and detractors. Thankfully, Simon and Schuster has wonderfully republished the book in a shiny new 25th Anniversary Edition, with a new Afterword by Andrew Ferguson. I just bought it, and it's already dog-eared...

Here's some disturbing statistics (as mentioned by Ferguson in his 2012 Afterword): "...[T]he Association of College Trustees and Alumni surveyed the catalogs of more than one thousand colleges and universities. Fewer than 20 percent of the schools required courses in American government, only a third required a literature survey class, and 15 percent required anything more than a beginner's level class in a foreign language. (p. 392)" He goes on to say that what most colleges call "core curriculums" are nothing more than "shams" (his word, not mine).

Rather shocking, although it's something I honestly never thought about or even noticed when I went to

college. I was rather happy to only have to take one math course (Intro to Statistics---yuck!), and I tested out of having to take a Spanish class my freshman year. In retrospect, though, those seven film courses I took my junior and senior year really haven't helped me much in the long run. (Other than to appreciate the mise-en-scene of Quentin Tarantino's "Django Unchained" or the use of sound and lighting in "The Artist".)

Bloom looks at the whole picture and blames several things for the sad state of affairs within the halls of academe. The first is Moral Relativism. I remember, quite vividly, having wonderfully erudite and pretentious debates with my fellow students over coffee and pizza at the Student Center about this very subject. In comparison to Bloom, though, we were simply monkeys shrieking and flinging verbal poo. Perhaps it was because we were Moral Relativists. If there had been an actual intelligent Moral Absolutist in our midst, we probably would have crapped our pants. "What do you mean there is such a thing as Absolute Truth? That's absurd: everyone knows there is no such thing as Truth." Such was our "enlightened" post-modernist viewpoint.

My 20-year-old self would have never understood the points Bloom was making, especially in regards to the moral relativist disgust of prejudices and true belief, which I erroneously called "open-mindedness". Bloom makes the astoundingly good point, though, that certain prejudices are useful, even necessary, for intellectual growth. We can't actually "learn" if we don't also "unlearn". Bloom states, "True openness is the accompaniment of the desire to know, hence of the awareness of ignorance. To deny the possibility of knowing good and bad is to suppress true openness. (p. 40)" My 20-year-old self would have been dumbfounded and speechless. Bloom goes on to say that the result of this openness, which he called "the openness of indifference (p. 41)", resulted in student apathy, while the true openness that results in real learning "encourages the desire that animates and makes interesting every serious student---'I want to know what is good for me, what will make me happy'---while the former stunts that desire. (p. 41)" My 20-year-old self knew everything there was to possibly know. My 40-year-old self, Thank God, knows that I am simply scratching the surface.

Another factor in the failure of higher education is aliteracy. Aliteracy---as opposed to ILLITERACY---is an off-shoot of the afore-mentioned student apathy. Students don't read anymore. And since they don't read, they will seek to find knowledge and wisdom elsewhere, and in all the wrong places: "Lack of education simply results in students' seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash, insight and propaganda. (p. 64)"

Keep in mind, too, that Bloom was writing this in '87. Long before the Internet, iPads, iPods, XBox, smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, etc. made it so much easier for young people to avoid those things called books. Any high school English teacher and college professor of English will attest: students' reading and writing skills suck. Of course, part of the problem is the curriculum being taught.

Grammar (which I remember fondly as a series of deconstructing sentences into its respective parts: nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, etc.) is a completely foreign concept to most high school kids. They no longer read Emerson and Thoreau. They may get a Poe story, or a Shakespeare play, if they are lucky, but Literature is a four-letter word to students. Can you blame them? Literature means reading (an activity that interrupts valuable HALO- or Call of Duty-playing time) and then writing a five paragraph paper about it, which is difficult when they don't understand half of what they are reading and, in some cases, don't know what a paragraph is.

Bloom gets understandably hazy and weird around the midway point in the book, with talk about people with names like Tocqueville and Robespierre, Nietzche and Heidegger. Machievelli and Kant. Occasionally, a recognizable name like Marx or Paine pops up and I'm overjoyed that I (kind of) know who and what he is

talking about.

In all seriousness, Bloom does an excellent job of attempting to elicit some of the main points of these famous (and famously prolix) philosophers, and at the very least, his discussion excites me enough to want to read more of these (sadly) forgotten thinkers. He brings them up because these deep thinkers of the human soul have been replaced with MBAs and students of political science---you know, the Mitt Romneys and Paul Ryans of the world.

Liberal Education is not what it used to be. Indeed, liberal education has been usurped by the New God of Money and a curriculum that services Him. Bloom, who taught for years at Cornell, says that things started changing for the worse in the 60s, when Cornell instituted a "plan for dealing with the problem of liberal education" which "was to suppress the students' longing for liberal education by encouraging their professionalism and their avarice, providing money and all the prestige the university had available to make careerism the centerpiece of the university. (p. 340)"

According to Bloom, the "radical truth" that colleges and universities are afraid to talk about is that their idea of this new liberal education isn't enough to warrant the four to five years they expect students to stay (and have their parents drop big bucks into). He writes, "If the focus is careers, there is hardly one specialty, outside the hardest of the hard natural sciences, which requires more than two years of preparatory training prior to graduate studies. The rest is just wasted time, or a period of ripening until the students are old enough for graduate studies. (p. 340)" According to Bloom, liberal education as it exists today is nothing more than a "fraud" being perpetrated on the masses of impressionable youth.

I hesitate to agree whole-heartedly with this assessment, as I am quite happy with the liberal education I received from the medium-size Midwestern university I attended. I am perfectly happy working in the Plumbing department at my local Home Depot because of it.

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booklady says

Bloom's 1987 bestseller is still relevant today. In it he critiques the American education system for removing the Great Books from the required reading in most colleges. Booklady that I am, I couldn't agree with him more. The Great Books should be read and *in the originals*, not in watered down or abridged versions--however much modern students complain about Dickens being repetitive, etc. If they absolutely cannot force their eyes to follow the words on the page, then get the audio versions of those old books--that is the way most of those archaic texts were meant to be read anyway--ALOUD, but *not* abridged.

However, as Professor Bloom points out, it's really the educational system which did away with the Great Books in the 1960s. His comparison between what happened in the United States then and what happened in Germany in the '30's is eerie. As an insider to 'the system' I suppose he should know...

This much I *do* know . . . Bloom is spot on that we are depriving ourselves of so much when we do not read the Great Books!

Paul Rhodes says

Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* was published twenty years ago this month. Parents gave this book to their kids upon graduation from high school to warn them against the moral rot they would encounter at the modern university. I received this book from my uncle (may God rest his soul!) when I was graduated in 1986 but did not read it until after I suffered through the collegiate moral rot from which this book was supposed to rescue me.

Of course, I did not need Allan Bloom to tell me that there is moral rot at the modern university (and it has only gotten worse; read Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*), but his book did enable me to articulate my outraged victimhood at the nihilistic hands of a university intent upon grinding out good little lobotomized moral relativists. The book helped fashion me into a beetlebrowed social conservative. I must admit that I still am grateful for this, albeit only partially.

Allan Bloom's *Closing*, in fact, smoked all the cranky culture critics out of their armchairs and commenced open season upon academia. After its publication, the social conservative (and neo-conservative) critique of the university became a cottage industry.

Christian conservatives especially seemed to embrace the book. They felt vindicated for now it seemed that an accomplished intellectual from academia's own ranks was validating the jeremiads the Bible-thumping rubes had been ranting for years but no one in the Ivory Tower was taking seriously. But now the Ivory Tower had to listen because this time it was no hick talking; it was a sophisticated intellectual with a partiality for French-cut suits! Give the Christian conservatives the patina of intellectual validation and they go ga-ga (witness our embarrassing rage for the intellectual hoax of "Intelligent Design"). We Christian conservatives are such suckers.

We should have known we were had when Bloom published the sequel to *Closing*, *Love and Friendship*. What was billed as a critique of the 60s sexual revolution turned out to be a self-indulgent justification of Bloom's more limp-wristed fascinations, chief among which was his homosexual attraction to his male students. We Christian conservatives had embraced a fag, and a rather seedy one at that! To be fair, understanding the homosexual subtext of the book requires a careful reading and, perhaps, some schooling in the practice of esoteric writing. We Christian conservatives tend not to be the most careful of readers, and few of us have ever read *Persecution and the Art of Writing* by Bloom's guru, Leo Strauss.

But Christian conservatives did not need to be initiated into the mysteries of Straussianism to know that Bloom was not really on our side. If we weren't so thrilled by a true intellectual's sharing our negative critique of relativism, we might have looked at his suggested remedy, and that remedy was not a call to turn to Christ. No, it was a call to return to Plato.

Now here is where I part company with a good many of my fellow conservative Christians, primarily the evangelicals. I am Catholic, and in keeping with the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, I don't think the remedy to all moral problems is a simple return to Christ. Relativism is a philosophical problem and, hence, requires a philosophical solution. So, I am not averse to the return to Plato the Philosopher as a possible remedy to the problem of relativism. I don't thnk it will work because Plato's theory of forms actually contributed to the controversy over universals, and that begat nominalism, the philosophical underpinning of relativism. But, perhaps, the theory of forms is more resilient than the History of Philosophy has hitherto thought. So, hey, it's worth a shot.

But Bloom was not calling for a return to Plato the Philosopher, the metaphysician who gave us the theory of forms. No, Bloom was a Straussian, and Straussians don't care that much for metaphysics. No, they are only interested in politics. Bloom was calling for a return to the Plato of the Noble Lie.

Bloom tips his hand early in *Closing*. On page 29, in fact. There he kvetches about one of his professors who claimed that Washington promoted "democratic values" merely for the sake of his own crass class interests. Bloom's sole objection to this claim is that it will cause the people to despise the regime. In other words, he does not object to the claim itself, only to its rhetorical effects. The claim is dangerous to the stability of the regime and, thus, must not be said openly. It can be said, of course, within a tight circle of Straussian initiates (we know them now, of course, as the neo-cons), but the masses must be fed with the Bible, the Mcguffey Reader, and the Winthropian Myth that America is the Shining City on the Hill.

In other words, Bloom's book was nothing other than the cynicism of the notorious Voltairian quip: "I want my maid to be a Christian so she doesn't steal my silverware." And Christians embraced Bloom as their intellectual ally in the Culture Wars. The Straussians must still be laughing.

Andrew Morton says

The Closing of the American Mind is a thoughtful book, if somewhat overwrought at times. With that in mind, it's fair to say that the late professor Bloom's comments on education had some impact on reinvigorating my own interest in academics.

Professor Bloom examines the educational development taking place (then in the 1980s) taking place particularly in elite higher education in the US. While some argue that his appreciation for classical literature and education is antiquated and out of date, I think that misses the broader point. Professor Bloom is primarily concerned with the (perceived) failure of higher education to ground students in those ideas and ideals that gave rise to the modern educational institution in the first place. To the extent that this yields a skeptical view of some modern alterations to the higher education edifice, he might be perceived as conservative.

Whatever label we might attach to his views for our own convenience, Professor Bloom's views bear more than cursory glance based on personal predispositions. His critique is fundamentally about education, about how our elite institutions equip their students to be leaders in society, and about whether that education facilitates the well examined life.

While the book as prose drags somewhat in the midsection, this is interesting and thoughtful non-fiction on the nature and principles of education.

Teri says

I haven't actually read this - but it's on my list. However, I couldn't just share the review below unless I listed this book as having been read. So... here is the review that has me watering at the mouth to read this book. I got the review off Amazon. Enjoy! - - Teri
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When The Closing of The American Mind was published in 1987, it instantly ignited a firestorm of praise and condemnation. Conservatives hailed it as vindication of their long-ignored criticisms about American culture in general and higher education in particular. Liberals denounced it as elitist and intolerant, and they said Bloom wanted to keep students ignorant of other cultures so he could indoctrinate them with his.

Neither side had it right. The Closing of The American Mind is, as Bloom put it in his preface, "a meditation on the state of our souls."

Both sides were wrong about the book because they didn't read it carefully enough. Liberals read Bloom's argument for philosophy as an attempt to purge non-white, non-European writers from the cannon on grounds of cultural purity. Conservatives read his plea as an attempt to run all the liberal professors out of academia and replace them with conservatives. But a careful reading of Bloom would quickly prove both of these interpretations false.

Bloom believed Plato's cave was culture, whether that culture was western or not (after all, it was Plato's description of his own culture that created the idea of the cave). Bloom's argument was that students should be forced to read the works of the great philosophers because those writers are the only ones who dealt with the fundamental question of life: what is man. Bloom believed it was the university's mission to equip students with the tools that would enable them to seek the answer to this question and to lead a philosophical life. Only the great philosophers were capable of introducing students to the deepest and most profound life, and without this introduction, students would forever remain in their respective caves.

Bloom never was a conservative, nor was he one who wished to impose his "culture" on others. Simply put, he was a scholar who wished to make his students think - to truly think - about the nature of their existence and of society. The goal of Bloom's book was to show how Americans of all political persuasions, social backgrounds and economic conditions are debating within a narrow modern world-view and have simply accepted as fact a mushy blend of modern theory that repeatedly contradicts itself and stands in sharp contrast to an almost entirely forgotten world of opposing thought: that of the ancients.

In other words, Americans are incapable of true self-examination and self-understanding because they are ignorant of ancient philosophy, which poses the only alternative to the modern concept of man. What Bloom does with The Closing of The American Mind is expose the great Oz by asking him life's deepest questions. Bloom asks the same questions of today's professors and students that the ancient philosophers asked of themselves and their students. He finds that not only does no one have an answer, but no one even understands the questions.

Bloom's confrontation exposes the modern American university for what it really is: one big self-esteem seminar where students are taught self-validation instead of self-examination. Professors are not forcing students to confront the most serious questions of life, but rather are handing them scrolls of paper certifying that the university has bestowed on them qualities which, in fact, they already possessed, those being "openness" and "tolerance."

Of students, Bloom writes, "The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it. They have all been equipped with this framework early on, and it is the modern replacement for the inalienable and natural rights that used to be the traditional grounds for a free society."

The university, he shows, does nothing to contest this belief, but feeds it instead. The end result is that there can be no more truth or goodness and no need or even ability to make tough choices. Where the purpose of higher education once was to enable the student to find truth, the modern university teaches that there is no truth, only "lifestyle."

There exist in the world polar opposites. Bloom lists "reason-revelation, freedom-necessity, democracy-aristocracy, good-evil, body-soul, self-other, city-man, eternity-time, being-nothing." Serious thought

requires recognition of the existence of these opposites and the choice of one over the other. "A serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear," Bloom says.

He argues persuasively that the modern university does not force students to confront these alternatives at all, much less seriously think about them. Therefore, the modern university fails in its purpose, which is to create students aware of the vast array of possibilities that life offers and capable of choosing the good life.

Bloom has been harshly, and is still continually, accused of trying to force his own ideology on his students. But even a cursory reading of The Closing of The American Mind will disprove this silly accusation. Bloom simply wanted to make students think, to make them understand that there are different ideas of what man is and that they must confront these ideas if they wish to lead a meaningful life. This, he believed, was the university's purpose because it is there and only there that students would be exposed to alternatives to the prevailing intellectual trends. Life will happen to the students, he said, they don't need the university to provide it for them. They need the university to equip them for making the choices that will lead them to the best, most fulfilling life - the philosophical life. It is precisely for this reason that universities exist, and it is precisely this task that they now fail to accomplish.

Bloom's book remains important a decade after its publication because of the depth of Bloom's intellect and the thoroughness of his analysis. Only the last third of The Closing of The American Mind focuses on the modern university. Bloom spends the first two-thirds of the book explaining the modern mind-set and contrasting it with the ancient and the enlightened. He demonstrates the shallowness of the modern mind by repeatedly beating it about the head with Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Hobbes, Locke, Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. With this tactic, Bloom tears apart the vapid pop psychology that passes as deep thought and holds up the shreds for the reader to see their thinness.

But Bloom's attack is also instruction. Through it he takes the reader on an intellectual history tour in which he tracks the evolution of modern thought. Focusing on key words in today's usage, such as "lifestyle," "relationship" and "commitment," he retraces them through history to discover their origins and their true meanings. He then contrasts these words with the ones they replaced, such as "duty," "honor," "love." The depth and complexity of the ancient concepts overpowers the shallow convenience of the modern ones. Bloom tells how, when he showed this contrast to his students, they didn't care. Worse, they recoiled at the very thought of being bound by duty or honor or love as opposed to being committed to relationships via contract.

This contrast is at the heart of Bloom's book: whether humans are truth-seeking creatures who live for the purpose of pleasing God and discovering the good, or whether they are truth-creating creatures who live only for the purpose of satisfying their animal needs and preventing the bad. Bloom believes the former, modernity the latter. Bloom knew that his book would not solve the question or ennoble America. But it would reintroduce the question, which is all that he wanted the university to do. It is tragic that, as he predicted, the universities would cast him out as a heretic instead of making themselves his disciples.

Gerard says

One of the most influential books I've read in the last five years. The presentation of a brilliant mind. From a man that is an atheist, homosexual, and conservative. Not conservative in the Ronald Reagan sense.

Conservative in that he admires Nietzsche and longs for ancient Athens. A very brilliant analysis of modern culture.

Joshuacitrak says

Allan Bloom is a hysterical, raving, reactionary lunatic. he and his academia ilk are exactly the reason why education teaches kids nothing, because they know absolutely zero about the children they're supposed to teach. mostly, this book is little more than a "get off my lawn" diatribe against any and all (race, sex, drugs, rock music) youth fascinations, blaming each of them in turn for the "Closing of the American Mind."

Bloom continually condescends in the most irritating manner of the American intellectual elite; yammering on and on yearning for some lost set of ideals that never existed; kids who didn't slack off. Americans who knew their place. Businessmen who were kind and good, not greedy, because they'd read French poets in school. Quoting Socrates, Plato, Tocqueville to bolster arguments that are pointless and stupid, Bloom completely fails to engage and communicate anything meaningful, which of course may be the real reason his own Ivy League students seem so disengaged. That thought, of course, would never enter the author's mind in a million years. With guys like this, it's everyone else's fault you know.

Built on a false notion, this book can never succeed. However, that doesn't stop the author from telling us all the ways in which we're so stupid and he's so fucking smart. Bloom's problems? Liberalism. Integration. Equality. Without a class and caste system, youth have no set place! No reason or need to struggle! No reason to look up to the "elite" class! Kids these days, they accept everybody without prejudice! That's wrong! Because, because now we have women thinking they can learn stuff! Make decisions about things old men like me have already decided. And ask men out on dates and nobody blinks an eye! And black people! Right there! On campus! The horrors!

Ben Crosby says

On balance, this book is a disappointment. It is an important idea (a still much needed polemic against the American aversion to real learning), but it seems deployed with a level of arbitrariness. I was with Bloom for the first few chapters. I applauded his frankness when discussing race in the academy, and how the culture studies ideology is poisonous. I responded with appropriate indignation when he decried the disappearance of a reading culture and the emergence of professional "training." I even underlined a number of memorable excerpts that will hopefully serve to motivate me to better intellectual habits in the future. But the curtain was lifted when I read his chapter on music. It was specious at best, and much of the rest of what I read began to take on a suspiciously arbitrary feel. Nevertheless, Bloom's book is perhaps the best we have of its kind. We need people to remind us to lead lives of learning, and why. Bloom's willingness alone to make a serious effort merits the third star.

Mark says

They say you should write about something you know. Mr. Bloom knows more about closed minds than

most, but I think he should have kept it to himself.

Shane says

One hundred pages into the book, I picked up a penand began a serious dialogue with this book. I especially found the parts on Nietzsche and Freud important in regard to their impact on American culture. At one point Bloom made the statement that Freud pulled the rug out from under our feet and the elevator plunged bottomlessly down into the psyche. I think this is really apparent in a lot of postmodern and contemporary literature where there is a lot of soul searching and digging through the family tree towards the roots. Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Sam Shepard's Buried Child are but two examples which illustrate this preoccupation. Bloom really brought me to thinking about literature and its underlying philosophical base especially in regard to our contemporary culture. The Road by McCarthy an be read as an allegorical representation of Plato's Cave where the detritus of culture cannot be communicated effectively from generation to generation. Obviously, Bloom gives a critique of higher education and I have mixed feelings seeing that multiculturalism won out in higher education.

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sologdin says

was expecting this to be a more charming version of Kimball's awful *Tenured Radicals*, but it is rather much more rigorous and thoughtful. that said, am still reading it as 'wrong.'

author reveals his major malfunction late in the text, which occurred during a campus altercation wherein certain left activists occupied university buildings and apparently took hostages of university personnel. this event, and university's failure to discipline, soured author on entire left project in the '60s, if indeed he was ever sympathetic.

worth reading however as author is certainly intelligent and deliberative. he is also a proponent of liberal education in the classical sense, and does not like it when campus lefties allegedly shut everything down through their allegedly dogmatic political praxis. i for one am not interested in allowing race or sex discrimination in the name of openness, so am not sure if there is any common ground to be found with author (not that he advocates for discrimination, of course).

Munema says

After reading this book, I was inspired to write the following:

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On Graduating

I have been wondering for a while now what I have gained from the past four years at University. When I refused a practical, career-driven Accounting program at [University] for the sake of studying Cognitive Science at [my University], I thought I was making the right choice. I wanted to be educated. Cognitive Science promised something beyond rote office learning, manmade laws to accommodate white collar

workers' deficiencies, the dulling rule of pragmatism that normally propels our decisions.

What was it that attracted me to Cognitive Science? Looking back, it was the promise of true knowledge. Naive 17 year-old Munema yearned to know what consciousness was, if she had free will, how her psychology worked so that she could exploit it. Cognitive Science - the science of studying cognition, of thoughts, of what enables us to do what we do and why we are what we are. It was a seductive dream: to study what makes me me with the noble scientific method! Not alone, but with my peers, equally driven by a desire to know and understand.

I entered University to be educated. It has now become clear to me, after four years, that that has not happened.

In my first year, I was primarily occupied with the state of cafeteria food (for the record: not that bad) and making friends. In my second year, a bit more settled in, I was obsessed with my apartment and hosting dinner parties, while taking advantage of multiple choice exams to pass classes. My third year was the first time I was truly challenged. I failed that challenge, because I did not expect it. The ease of the first two years had made me lethargic and lazy. But that was only one class - the rest were fine - and I barely noticed the dip in my GPA. Third year was a breeze, and I decided what career I wished to pursue (the dream over, so soon!). It was not until my last year, when I decided to take some seminar classes, that I was rewarded by actually learning something worth knowing. Perhaps I even became slightly more adept at conversing, formulating my thoughts, researching.

Over these four years, it has become increasingly clear to me that a University does not aim to educate you. Street smart students know this already and do not expect to learn anything beyond applied science. They study computer science, engineering - the usual useful fields - do well, and get jobs.

Those of us who come to University with only vague longings and a sense of incompleteness, however, receive no guidance. There is no general education given to us. We choose most of our courses ourselves, patching together a degree based off of ignorance and ratemyprofs.com. Rather than being a community of people who seek to reflect upon the most beautiful, most useless, most profound truths of life together, we cannot even speak the same language. A Rosetta Stone is denied to us because a liberal education is not provided.

What did I end up learning at University? I learned that I should find out who I am - not as in the Delphic "Know thyself!", but to satisfy my infinite insatiable desires that make me "true to myself". I learned that I am not primarily a reasonable being, but rather a sectarian being; that the Muslim Student Association did more for me than any seminar class I ever took. I learned that there are people with different cultures and communities and views, but I did not learn what to do with this unintentional assault on my own beliefs, and I shrunk back to relativism as a refuge. I developed a basic class consciousness, a self-hatred that I believe inconspicuously runs through every middle-class person cognizant of their privilege to be at University. My assumptions were questioned, but not in the classroom, nor even amongst my classmates, but by the great city of [__]. How fortunate I am that [my University] happens to be seated in a hub of cultural activity!

But I did not enter University to find a "home" or to gain an "experience", to make "memories" that I could recount to my children. Surely all of these things I could have found elsewhere - an amusement park, marriage, experimenting with drugs, travelling. I entered it because it held promises of being an ivory tower. Along the way, I met excellent people - people who showed me that with the right passion and dedication, you can do anything. You can save the world, you can cure cancer, you can end world hunger. But, with all due respect, I did not aim so high. At my more modest request of knowing wisdom, University failed me.

I should have known this would be the case from my first Psychology class at [my University]. The professor informed us sombrely, "This class does not give you licence to diagnose yourself or others." It should have been clear to me from that moment that I would not be learning anything relevant to my hopes in the program.

But at least I was provided with a warning of the danger of applying the information in Psychology. It showed a respect for the field, a trust that it holds serious power and can influence a person at least potentially. No such cautiousness was to be found before Philosophy classes. So confident are the professors in the impotence of the work they do that they did not feel the need to guide us. It seems that for questions of being and nature as a whole, we are all creators. And, since traditional answers have already been thrust aside as silly, ancient knowers and figures studied more or less as mummified curiosities, we are creators ex nihilo.

The problem, of course, is that despite studying in an interdisciplinary faculty, I have no indication that what I studied has any relation to what the other 20,000 undergraduates at [my University] study. There is no sense of a greater whole. There is no purpose greater than the individual. The applied sciences hold more esteem than those that mothered them. Although each field if pursued to its limit points beyond itself, the structure of faculties indicating a relation between their majors, and conferences assuring us of the importance of shared knowledge, this is easily forgotten in the daily grind of study. And, once forgotten, it lays dormant and is not resuscitated even on convocation day, when the different faculties gather on different days to celebrate their vastly different achievements.

It seems, then, that University is not serious about educating the men and women who enter its gates. Instead of refining the souls of its students, it cultivates their skills. Everybody knows, after all, that an essay can be written in a day (a night with the right kind of pill), but lab skills require weeks to perfect. Why not focus on the latter then? A University encounters, every Fall, malleable young minds ready to be moulded into whatever shape they can be. Why mould them into cynics?

Perhaps it was my own fault. Maybe I did not take the right classes, choose the right major, or read the right books. Maybe I was too slow to realise that classes are not where most of the learning happens. Maybe I ought to have spent more time in the library. Maybe my expectations were misplaced to begin with. I don’t know.

This is not to say that University has been a waste of time. I have made wonderful friends and changed in a lot of ways, hopefully for the better. But it certainly was not the institution dedicated to intellectual pursuits that I had hoped it would be. And, at the end of four years, I can’t be sure that I wouldn’t have been better off studying Accounting after all.

When choosing which graduation photo to make as my Facebook profile photo, I was torn. There was one where the photographer placed a rolled-up scroll in my hand, placed a cap on my head, and had me smile charmingly at the camera. At first I was about to choose this captivating photo of a university student graduating from four years of pursuing knowledge holding a scroll to symbolize the seriousness and the honour of having been a University student. But it seemed wrong. It was wrong. I have not been a student of knowledge; at least, not any knowledge worth knowing. Nor can I claim to be worthy of that parchment which should mean so much. Nor the Oxford cap, with its long history. Nor the ceremonial robes, indicating the dignity of a scholar.

So instead, I chose what is my current photo: an uncapped uninitiated girl donning as little regalia as possible, gazing hopefully into the distance - beyond academic advisors and GPAs, beyond Rez and cafeteria

food, beyond campus politics and elections, beyond University itself, to a land where there is wisdom and where there is truth.

Angela says

I steadily read this book a few pages, sometimes even a few paragraphs, at a time for about two months. On page 160, I decided to give it up.

Mr. Bloom's politics and mine are totally incompatible.

At the risk of oversimplifying his thesis, I fail to see how short skirts, rock & roll, and encouraging college students to have open minds has (to quote the subtitle) "...Failed Democracy And Impoverished The Souls Of Today's Students." I believe one of the purposes of a liberal arts education is to inform students of alternate value systems, and invite them to question their own received values, not necessarily for the purpose of changing those values, but to promote a deeper understanding of them and be able to defend them with something other than "Daddy [or the Bible, or my teacher, or insert authority figure of your choice here] said it, I believe it, and that settles it." While I mostly agree with Mr. Bloom's condemnation of moral relativism, I don't agree that *all* issues are black and white issues. This is a shades-of-gray world, and we must be prepared to compromise upon occasion and in some areas. Each person's threshold of leniency will be different.

But then again, I'm a product of the education system the author so decries. I guess the brain-washing worked after all.

Matt says

It is as if Bloom believes he has divined the totality of meaning in the last 200 years and he alone has the right to judge where the world is failing. He comes across as a grumpy old man who is angry at his students and refuses to believe things he does not like have any value.

Wayne says

Perhaps this book deserves five stars -- it did, after all, shake me up a bit, the way the best books do. Bloom is rightly concerned with a problem I see in my own classrooms: the assumption that, since all views are to be tolerated in our modern liberal democracy, all views are equally valuable; furthermore, since all ideas are equally worthy of consideration, none of them are worthy of consideration. It is difficult to say anything of real importance about poetry, literature, art, religion, philosophy, etc., because the arts and humanities have become matters of personal taste, which we regard as sacrosanct. This problem is exacerbated by a tepid vocabulary pervading our discourse: instead of "love," for example, one is more likely to speak of "commitment;" instead of ideal "virtues" we have arbitrary "values." Bloom argues that these words, and others like them, result from an impotence of ideas, issued from a university system that cannot articulate its own worth, or the worth of its subjects in the humanities. So, instead of the tolerant "openness" we assume to be good, we have "a great closing":

> Openness used to be the virtue permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power. The unrestrained and thoughtless pursuit of openness, without recognizing the inherent political, social, and cultural problem of openness as the goal of nature, has rendered openness meaningless.

It's easy to see why, as any Google search or Amazon review is likely to tell you, this book was popular with conservatives when it was published in 1987. Unfortunately, a critique of the liberal position that "accepts everything" sounds like the beginning of the type of socially conservative rant that blames, say, homosexuality or immigration or atheism for the endemic ills of our country -- a rant that ends, inevitably, with a call to “traditional values,” in particular those alleged to have been held by our Founders in their supposed intent to establish, above all other considerations, a Christian nation. A personal confession: it was impossible for me to read this book without hearing the echo of conservative and evangelical voices that would find legitimacy for their doctrine in Bloom’s argument.

But this book cannot be conservative in the sense that we understand conservatism today. Yes, Bloom treats with disdain the sort of openness that questions nothing, the sort of openness that, by default, must regard reason as the enemy of choice, disregarding how any individual choice relates to the good. But Bloom explicitly desires and calls for a different kind of openness, an intellectually honest openness, an openness grounded in reason and real engagement with the tension between complex ideas. This tension is more important than any settled conclusion one might ultimately draw from the ideas that created it:

> Equality for us seems to culminate in the unwillingness and incapacity to make claims of superiority, particularly in the domains in which such claims have always been made—art, religion, and philosophy. When Weber found that he could not choose between certain high opposites—reason vs. revelation, Buddha vs. Jesus—he did not conclude that all things are equally good, that the distinction between high and low disappears. As a matter of fact he intended to revitalize the consideration of these great alternatives in showing the gravity and danger involved in choosing among them; they were to be heightened in contrast to the trivial considerations of modern life that threatened to overgrow and render indistinguishable the profound problems the confrontation with which makes the bow of the soul taut. The serious intellectual life was for him the battleground of the great decisions, all of which are spiritual or “value” choices. *One can no longer present this or that particular view of the educated or civilized man as authoritative; therefore one must say that education consists in knowing, really knowing, the small number of such views in their integrity*. [Italics mine]

The religious right and conservatism in its most popular and perverse form fail, as much as relativistic forms of liberalism, to establish anything like tension or tautness within the soul of man: it’s all ideology (which Bloom dismisses as mere “prejudice”), an invasion of the spiritual and the religious by “quacks, adventures, cranks and fanatics.” If Bloom finds the post-Enlightenment retreat from Christianity troubling, it is not because he regards Christianity as an expression of ultimate truth, but because the retreat from religion into the embrace of the natural sciences was so complete that matters of the soul, the good, the ideal were vanquished. The Bible, in Bloom’s conception, is not a good book because it is Right, or because it conclusively presents an ultimate and indisputable Truth, but because people once

> found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duty in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past... When [graduates from modern universities] talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing by cliches, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished.

It seems to me that a good deal of conservative/religious discourse these days neglects a "respect for real learning" and consists instead of "superficialities" no better than those uttered in the name of liberal openness. All of this to say: the sort of conservatism from which Bloom argues leads *away* from what we might call contemporary conservatism—a system in which all of history and scripture serve merely to confirm one's own prejudices, which are themselves unable to answer the problems of the soul, nature, and the good.

Meanwhile, it feels old-fashioned to read such words and phrases: *soul, virtue, eros, the good,* etc. And yet one fears that without them, something in academic studies, particularly within the humanities, is missing. My own graduate school experience was, at times, a long descent into theory: we were to understand literature and poetry as expressions of, say, Lacanian psychoanalysis. There were many post-modernists in our group, an earnest handful of historicists, deconstructionists, and post-feminists, each asking a set of very particular questions. We were trained to become specialists within the field of literature, and though our pursuits were too narrow to have very much in common, there was one question we all considered anathema to serious literary studies: *what did the author intend?* No surprise, then, that Bloom considers it the most important question:

> The effort to read books as their writers intended them to be read has been made into a crime, ever since the "intentional fallacy" was instituted. There are endless debates about methods -- among Freudian criticism, Marxist criticism, New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstructionism, and many others, all of which have in common the premise that what Plato or Dante had to say about reality is unimportant. These schools of criticism make the writers plants in a garden planned by a modern scholar, while their own garden-planning vocation is denied them. The writers ought to plant, or even bury, the scholar.

Though Bloom's book was a bestseller in 1987, the state of the humanities does not appear much improved – just this weekend I read about "the growing field of digital humanities," in which students search massive databases of literary texts to find patterns in language. It may no longer be necessary to actually *read* literature, to understand how writers spoke to the big questions, and to each other, or what they actually had to say: now, students can use "computational methods to zero in on the places in 'Paradise Lost' where John Milton is alluding to the Latin of Virgil's 'Aeneid.'" Elsewhere in the university, the field of neuroaesthetics -- a combination of literary and neurology studies -- uses literature to map the brain, to discover which "underlying mental processes are activated when we read." The author is dead, the text is dead, and what the

university now values in literature or philosophy is not anything so quaint as ideas or reason or even imagination, but the measurement of electrical impulses in our own brains. Self-knowledge begins with the neuron, not the soul. The natural sciences, Bloom might say, with regret but not surprise, have triumphed utterly over the humanities.

This seems like so much intellectual and spiritual gloom and doom, but reading *The Closing of the American Mind* was, for me, invigorating, partly because Bloom makes such a compelling case for reading, or rereading, classic works by their own lights -- I found myself tossing titles by Rousseau, Tocqueville, Locke, Plato, Aristophanes and others onto my Amazon wish list -- and partly because his concerns are likely to inform how I teach my own literature classes.

(Parenthetically: I deducted one star from this review because a good number of pages in Bloom's argument are devoted to the idea that an academic misreading of Nietzsche contributed to an academic misunderstanding of Plato and Aristotle, resulting in a relativism of the humanities that was exported to the culture at large. This was hard to follow, and my paraphrase may be mangled, but I suspect that, even if I had understood its nuances, this line of thinking is not the argumentative keystone Bloom seems to think is it.)

Ahmad Abdul Rahim says

Buku ini teramatlah payah untuk dibaca. Aku harus mengakui bahawa aku tidak memahami kebanyakan perkara yg disebutkan pengarang. Tentang Nietzsche-sasi, Heideggernisasi; minda-budaya Jerman yang telah menerobos masuk ke dalam kesedaran universiti2 di Amerika; signifikasi zaman 60-an kepada kelangsungan universiti sebagai pendukung kersarjanaan ilmu di Amerika. Jarak topik yang disentuh penulis begitu luas. Setiap satunya pula mempunyai medan makna dan sejarah yang tersendiri. Buku ini dikatakan antara best-seller tahun 87 dengan jualan melebihi 1 juta naskhah di Amerika. Selepas membacanya, Aku ragu2 samada jumlah org yg benar2 membacanya adalah sama ramai dengan yang membeli.

First of all apakah kategori yg sesuai bagi buku ini? Untuk menjawab persoalan yg paling asas itupun pembaca bakal menghadapi dilema. Penulis tampaknya -bagi aku- meniatkan penulisannya ini sebagai satu kritikan sosial. Tetapi kritikan sosialnya ini berbentuk interogatif bukan preskriptif; that is, penulis tak menawarkan sebarang solusi di akhir (sounds familiar?). Cara interogatif yg dibawakan penulis ini membenarkan dia meneroka persoalan2 utamanya (bahawa Amerika sedang melalui detik keruduman, yg mana puncanya bukanlah politik atau sosial atau ekonomi sebaliknya intelektual) dengan lensa yg pelbagai. Justeru ada kalanya beliau membawa ke hadapan hasil pemerhatian beliau terhadap anak2 muda di universiti Amerika yg mana beliau mempunyai pengalaman hampir 40 tahun mengajar; ada waktunya Bloom cuba untuk menjejak kembali sisa2 sejarah terhadap fenomena2 tersebut dan hal ini menyebabkan terdapat sisi 'intelectual history' dalam buku tersebut.

Mana sisi2 dan kaedah analisis yg pembaca perhatikan dalam buku ini, aku fikir mereka2 yg menyelak lembaran buku The closing of American mind ini tidak dapat tidak akan menyedari bahawa isu2 yg disebutkan penulis adalah maha penting. Penulis sendiri bukan orang sebarangan untuk diketepikan pandangannya. Beliau merupakan penterjemah dari Greek kepada Inggeris karya Plato, The Republic dan karya intelektual Perancia Rosseau, Emile. Dari kenyataan2 dan lontaran pendapat berani beliau (tidak sikit boleh didapati dalam penulisannya) jelas sekali Bloom adalah seorang tradisional/konservatif dalam pendirian beliau: that is he believes there are eternal truths thay can be found throughout the writings of the thinkera and founders of the western civilization. Allan bloom juga menempelak fenomena "cultural relativism" yg marak dalam kalangan anak muda. Terdapat kontinuum dalam pendapat2 beliau ini di mana

beliau mahu menegaskan eternal truths tersebut tak boleh direndahkan martabatnya dgn daya relativism yg cuba merendahkan aristotle dgn berkata aristotle tidak mengiktiraf keupayaan berfikir kaum hawa, atau amalan demokrasi di Athens hanya terhad kepada gol2 aristokrat iaitu sekitar 30% shj dari jumlah rakyat ketika itu, atau bahawa Jefferson salah seorang founding fathers of America yg menegaskan setiap manusia adalah saksama dalam Deklarasi Kemerdekaan AmerikA sendiri mengamalkan perhambaan.

Analisis2 tajam Bloom mungkin sukar diterima oleh ramai org. Aku kira hampir semua kritikan beliau tiada sandaran data atau statistik (yakni tidak kuantitatif) oleh itu ramai pembaca akan tergoda utk menyifatkan pendapat beliau sebagai satu pendapat yg subjektif. Namun utk pembaca2 serius, mereka pasti kan sedar nilai kebenaran yg terkandung dlm andaian2 dan asumpsi beliau.

Bloom mengatakan antaranya bahawa generasi anak muda kini adalah optimistik dan naif. Mereka adalah generasi2 terawal yg menikmati keamanan, kesejahteraan dan kekayaan dgn percuma dari org2 terdahulu. Justeru mereka tiada keghairahan atau suatu rasa romantis terhadap sejarah, terhadap idea kebebasan, terhadap menilai apa itu kebaikan dan keburukan - indeed Bloom nampaknya mengisyaratkan bahawa the whole discourse on freedom, rights widespread in our age right now is no more than lip service or mere repetitions of old ideas.

Selain itu antara part kegemaran aku adalah sewaktu Bloom menyentuh fenomena relativism di mana kanak2 sekolah menengah sekarang dgn selambanya menciplak sisa2 hikmah Socrates dgn mengatakn "Kebenaran itu relatif" sedangkan Socrates mengucapkan kata2 tersebut ("apa yg aku tahu dgn yakin adalah bahawasanya aku tidak tahu apa2") di akhir kehidupan beliau selepas bertahun2 beliau berdialog dgn Sufastaiyyah di Greece ketika itu dan juga dialog bersama org kenamaan dan rakyat marhaen. Itupun Socrates bukanlah menafikan kebenaran mutlak sebetulnya (the real meaning of that Socratis wisdom is very convoluted and you need to know some historical context to really grasp it).

Buku ini adalah suatu buku yg sangat unik walaupun sekali pandang ia merupakan tajuknya (american mind) yg tiada kaitan dgn aku. Tetapi aku dapati mesej2 dalam buku ini begitu berkuasa dan berbekas. Aku tidak pastmti samada aku mampu menjumpai buku yg sebegini pada masa akan datang.

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blakeR says

This is the best argument for conservatism I've ever read. To be fair, it's also the only one I've ever read, outside of the occasional David Brooks column. And let's be honest: Bloom is about as elitist and conservative as you can get. But he makes the position seem very enticing with his brilliant argumentation and his penetrating logic as he delves into the state of the late 20th century American citizen. It doesn't hurt that he has a staggering breadth of knowledge on just about every single Western philosopher ever.

Even though it probably woulda sailed over my head, I wish I had read this book before going to college because I might have gotten a lot more out of my education if I had some clue as to where to start. As it is, I recognized myself in most of Bloom's descriptions about the students who were seeking some sort of higher life-altering experience of knowledge and subsequently being left high and dry by university administrators and faculty.

I found myself agreeing with Bloom's main thesis on the importance of the humanities (i.e. the "Great Books" and authors) in the liberal education, and their catastrophic decline in the modern university canon. I even agree that maybe college shouldn't be considered for everyone as merely a *de facto* extension of the

factory schooling technique that has turned our high schools into wastelands of learning. In fact, Bloom's writing is so engaging throughout, and his depth of knowledge so impressive, that I found myself forgiving his obvious political slant and occasional inconsistencies. There were several, however, that merit mention:

At his worst, Bloom comes off as a lonely, bitter, out-of-touch old codger. This is evident in the ways that he talks down about his naive students and their quaint notions of "commitment" in the age of free love. He clearly despises the hippie movement and has done a good job of developing a logical justification. It left me with a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum. Which came first, the logical sociological insight against the ravenous hippies, or his personal distaste?

More puzzling is Bloom's glib dismissal of the family as anything other than a societal convention. While granting that the mother-child bond is "perhaps the only undeniable natural social bond," (p.115) he dismisses the father out of hand as having no conceivable reason to care for his child other than some abstract desire to attain eternity through his progeny. This is, frankly, stunning. I admire cool intellectual detachment as much as most intellectuals, but to deny that there is a lasting value to human emotions such as paternal love, or even to ignore the biology of the family situation seems wildly out of character for an otherwise rational discussion. It's all the more curious given Bloom's apparent sympathy for the Nietzchian anti-rational position. If Bloom is recognizing the value of revelation and passion in our pursuit of knowledge, how can he deny such an irrational impulse as fatherly love? And a few pages later (129), arrogantly scoffing at their capacity to "care"?

The next problem I had, on p. 248, was perhaps a minor point but illustrative of either Bloom's ingenuousness or his deceitful argumentation. Comparing the old (faith-based) to modern (reason-based) political regimes, Bloom actually manages to lament the disappearance of the aristocracy, because, "This means that there is no protection for the opponents of the governing principles [democracy:] as well as no respectability for them." Incredibly, Bloom completely ignores the fact that the corporations -- it's by no means a stretch to say that they form a modern aristocracy -- both oppose democratic governing principles and wield far more power than the supposed mob of "the people," the rule of which apparently haunts Bloom's nightmares but otherwise has little relation to reality.

Another disturbing part is Bloom's persistent characterization of the 60s radicalization of the universities with Nazi Germany. Okay, I'll admit there are parallels. But Bloom, writing in the 80s, seemed to be predicting a catastrophe that -- had "the movement" really been as similar to Nazi Germany in the first place as he insinuates -- should have already occurred a decade before. The fact that it still hasn't occurred a quarter century later makes the claim all the more outlandish. There's also the fact that Bloom excuses Heidegger's support of the Nazis because he supposedly did it "ironically." While this may be true, it is a complete abdication of academic responsibility to ignore (and excuse, in Bloom´s case) what an ironic statement of support for a cruel dictatorship might cause in practical results, i.e. in reality. Both Heidegger's and Bloom's apologetics strike me as weasel-words at best.

Then comes Bloom's glib statement (p. 320) that "You don't replace something with nothing." Talking about the criticism of the university curriculum in the 60s, he says, "The criticism of the old is of no value if there is no prospect for the new." While this may be true for the universities, to issue a blanket statement on the matter is quite simply wrong. Bloom, an apparent sympathizer of Nietzche's nihilism, should know better. Just from the example he gave of Hitler several pages before, I can say that the Nazi regime is an example of something that would have been better replaced by anything. . . yes, even nothing.

Another minor problem I have is what seems to be a misuse of Socrates. I don't pretend to know more about Plato's writings than Mr. Bloom, but I thought it was pretty accepted that as Plato matured, his writings

became less about accurately documenting Socrates' dialogues and more about using his mentor as a mouthpiece for Plato's own ideas. This makes the Republic, Bloom's favorite book, distinctly Platonic, and not Socratic, although he seems to worship Socrates based on the ideas there. This is pretty well explained and criticized in Karl Popper's The Open Society and its Enemies (see my reviews of Vol. I and Vol. II), of which Bloom had to have been aware when he wrote this.

The following problems I have are more major. First, Bloom displays a strange ideological inconsistency throughout the book. I've already mentioned his hypocrisy when it comes to nihilism. But there's another point where he pointedly praises Goethe for bringing the active life to the forefront for the first time. Bloom celebrates Goethe's claim that DOING is superior to CONTEMPLATING, but he does this in the midst of one long, contemplative tome that has little to do with action. For that matter, every philosopher falls before this definition of superiority, a fact that Bloom ignores. How does Goethe's stance fit in with the rest of the Socratic philosophers that thought nothing was higher than thinking about truth and values?

The inconsistency continues with respect to Bloom's praise of the creative and the creators, the artists, which he defines in Part Two as something truly rare. He clearly detests the fact that the word is so overused these days to describe what is unquestionably NOT creation. (This is during a diatribe on "language pollution" which I actually liked and agreed with.) During this section he casually disdains the scholars who merely study what other men created. Of course, he doesn't mention that he's doing the same thing: critiquing instead of creating. What exactly is he creating here? Same problem as the Goethe passage.

Perhaps the thing that most bothered me about the book is that Bloom actually conflates the meaning of openness and closedness when elaborating on the title of his book. Try this passage from the introduction:

> If openness means to "go with the flow," it is necessarily an accomodation to the present. That present is so closed to doubt about so many things impeding the progress of its principles that unqualified openness to it would mean forgetting the despised alternatives to it, knowledge of which makes us aware of what is doubtful in it. **True openness means closedness to all the charms that make us comfortable with the present.**(p.42, my emphasis)

This quite miraculously turns what most objective bystanders would call Bloom's closed-minded conservatism into "openness." It's a rather neat trick, and even convincing unless you stop to think about it. Then you just think, "Wait a minute, that's not right at all." A more flagrant passage occurs toward the end of the book:

> In a democracy (the university) risks less by opposing the emergent, the changing and the ephemeral than by embracing them, because the society is already open to them, without monitoring what it accepts or sufficiently respecting the old. There the university risks less by having intransigently high standards than by trying to be too inclusive, because the society tends to blur standards in the name of equality. It also risks less by concentrating on the heroic than by looking to the commonplace, because the society levels. (p.253)

Let me paraphrase since his lingo is a little difficult to follow: A truly open university must oppose everything progressive while upholding tradition and should only concern itself with the most brilliant students while ignoring mediocrity. (He is also claiming that universities are somehow behind the curve on what society accepts, which is ridiculous in its own right.) This is a very convenient position for a conservative elitist to take -- it amazingly reinforces with iron-clad logic every reactionary idea he stands for.

That leads to the final problem I had with this book. Bloom adopts the Nietzchian angle that rationalists can't ultimately sustain their position, because all reason is fundamentally drawn from the irrational. At one point

he says something to the effect of, "Reason is nothing more than an excuse for one's irrational desires/passions," so all rationalist positions are ultimately self-serving. Yet here he has presented us with a very reasoned argument for why conservatism needs to rule our universities. One must presume that he's aware of the logical implications -- that his own argument falls into the rationalist trap and is really nothing more than masturbatory self-congratulation -- but if he is, he never lets on.

I wanted to rate this book lower just because I disagree with the author a fair amount of the time, but the book was so enjoyable that I couldn't help myself. And it definitely made me think, which I always value.

Cross-posted at Not Bad Movie and Book Reviews.
@blakerosser1

John David says

Unless you were attending a university when this book was published, or have a special interest in the general ongoing dialogue we call the culture wars, "The Closing of the American Mind" may not be on your radar. When it first came out in 1987, it caused quite a fracas and became, I'm sure to everyone's (including Allan Bloom's) surprise, a bestseller. It's difficult for me to imagine a book by an unprepossessing University of Chicago professor on the debilitating effects of Heidegger and Nietzsche on higher education becoming a bestseller today. This may only serve to bolster Bloom's case that the "liberal" attitude of openness has gone a few steps too far.

Or it might be the direct effect of Bloom's "voice" - which is, despite what any of his intellectual confreres say, by turns elitist, rankly unegalitarian, and possibly anti-democratic in content; in tone, he often comes off as the curmudgeonly old grandfather shaking his newspaper at you and telling you to get off of his lawn. I personally have no problem with the elitism or anti-democratic attitudes when it comes to teaching. There are, quite simply, some books that are better than others, and some ideas that are better than others, and having to pretend otherwise is simply to play the ostrich's game of sticking our heads in the sand. The better books should be taught for the moral education of the student body while inferior books should be set aside (surely to be picked up by many people who, after graduating from university and having been introduced to the greats, choose to eschew them and read pulp instead.) I, like Bloom, regret that recent American culture has lost the sense of education as a kind of moral training. Bloom's critics, however, also do him the grave disservice of hitching his tone onto the wagon that is the content of his intellectual argument. Who's going to take this cranky old man seriously - who sees an uncontrollable sexual release in a young teenage boy unashamedly gyrating his hips to rock 'n' roll, who unabashedly and unashamedly blames affirmative action as one of the contributing factors in the decadence of the contemporary American university, and whose explanation of the breakdown of the American family (if there indeed has been such a thing) is, quite charitably, described as "old-fashioned."

Bloom's argument is large and multifaceted; no review of a few hundred words could deal with it in all its complexity. What it claims at its base, though, is that certain attitudes popular in the sixties and seventies - universal acceptance, universal tolerance, the slow erosion of critical faculties - which eventually came to shape the minds of university students and even how university are administered. He claims, after Nietzsche, that we live in a time "beyond good and evil" - that is, where we have ceased not only looking for the differences in good versus bad (he archly points out that we describe nothing as "evil" anymore), but that we don't even know how to discern those differences. For Bloom, the moral education must consist of "a vision

of the moral universe, reward for good, punishment for evil, and the drama of moral choices." That is, at the very least, an education in critical moral discernment. He argues that this is all but gone.

He claims - dubiously, I think - that he noticed a steep drop in the number of students who were interested in the "Great Books" from the time when he first started teaching in the United States in the early sixties to the time of writing this book. At many stages in his argument, Bloom seems to have counterfactually reimagined a world in which students walked into the university already well-versed in Plato, Homer, Stendahl, and Hegel, Aristotle, eager to be filled to the brim with The Wisdom Of The Masters. I think everyone was exposed to Homer in high school, but how many of us took it "seriously" - what Bloom would call seriously? Were they familiar with the importance of “xenia” and the “oikos” in Homer? (And no, you don’t get translations of those words.) I can speak from personal experience that many of teachers themselves didn't have the intellectual background to teach Homer this rigorously.

Richard Heffner, one of Bloom’s interlocutors following the popular press cavalcade after the release of the book, suggested during his interview with the professor that being an elitist might mean “thinking some questions are better answered by Hegel than by Joyce Brothers.” By that measure, I would imagine the vast majority of intelligent people are in fact elitists. Knowledge properly used and appropriately fostered quite simply makes you a better person. I think even the most obnoxious paladins of popular culture would admit that there is intellectual territory that Oprah’s Book Club hasn’t yet broached.

You may vehemently disagree with much of what Bloom has to say, or at least how he says it (it would put you in good company), but this comes highly suggested for anyone who thinks that answers to life’s “higher and deeper” questions deserve our most serious consideration. It serves as an honest refutation against the idea a few easy shibboleths of our times: that all answers are equally good, all educations are equally fulfilling and worthy, and all truths are equally valid.

Trevor says

I know nothing about American Universities and so when Bloom says things about the lowering of standards to accommodate black students who have been admitted without the requisite standard of education to succeed I just assume this is standard racist crap. But I’m really not in any position to argue one way or the other.

He certainly doesn’t waste time supporting any of his arguments with facts, mostly just vitriol. In fact, this book is so full of bile that after a while the need to spit becomes part of the amusement that gets you through.

The stuff about rock music being symptomatic of America’s decline at the start was quite amusing. He does tend to seriously over state his case and this distracts from some of the often very insightful things he has to say.

His critique of love among American youth is a case in point. The thesis runs a bit like this. The woman’s movement has taken away the ground for ‘possessing’ a woman. Divorce and the ‘high turn over rates’ of sexual partners devalue sex to the point where it is no longer able to sustain ‘love’. Because people do not feel it is appropriate to possess another they feel it would be wrong to feel jealous if their partner had sex with someone else – but if this is the case then love itself is impossible, as we have no means of valuing our partners at all – you can only feel nothing over the infidelity of your partner if you feel nothing for your partner. No fault divorce and the women’s movement are the great villains here as they have removed the

fairytale and thus removed all capacity to love.

Bloom, however, does not appear to be asking for a return to traditional family values – this seems to be gone forever and not even something he would want. He offers no solutions here, just feels that all he needs to do is identify the problem and the solution should be obvious. It wasn't obvious for me, so, if he is offering a solution to this problem, I missed it.

Clearly, he has also overstated the problem – divorce and the women's movement probably are guilty of ending lots of relationships that in the past would have grinded on to death – in a kind of living death – but I'm struggling here with the negative implication of that. I think his critique of lovelessness is less relevant to the young, when one is more likely to confuse love with sex anyway, as it might be to those in mid-life who find themselves questioning the value or even possibility of meaningful sexual relationships or of relationships generally that can be places where both people are able to grow and not whither in the dark shadows they cast upon each other.

The stuff on Nietzsche – particularly Nietzsche's attraction for the left – is something I've been more or less arguing for years. I've always been surprised at how readily the left have adopted Friedrich as one of their own, when he is anything but. The injection of irrationalism into the left that Nietzsche represented is precisely the kind of dreadful error that has made the left the near complete irrelevance that it has become today, perhaps when we need it most.

The most abhorrent aspects of Nietzsche are not the little lines he drops in to shock – "Are you visiting woman, bring your whip" – but the obsessive focus on the individual and the adolescent, masturbatory gaze he casts over 'the artist' as the creator of new values.

And how teenage boys just love this crap – all of whom know their 'will to power' and that their proper place is supermen.

I figured before I started reading this I would disagree with much of it – in the end I was surprised by some of the things I ended up agreeing with. I don't think rock music is really just 'the rhythm of sex' or needs be as blandly crap as Bloom makes out – but much of it is crap. I've no idea how many American kids read books – there certainly do seem to be a lot of Americans on this site, but I guess that could just be an aberration.

I was talking to a friend of mine about this book the other day and told him some of the themes and tried to explain Bloom's tone – he was appalled and told me off for bothering to read such rubbish. And that is the problem, this stuff is written with such hysteria that it is likely to alienate people immediately. I believe this is a book that is adored by the rightwing in America – but I'm not totally sure why they would feel they get such comfort from it. I did not get the impression that this book was calling for a return to traditional values – just complaining about where the loss of these values (and there loss forever) has so far brought us.

I hadn't realised that Allan was a different person to Harold, although, in so far as they both believe in the importance of 'the canon' and reading 'great books' I guess they might as well be the same person. It would certainly save time if they were…

Mehrsa says

Bloom was so sure a few decades that we fixed racism and sexism that people were complaining for no reason. College campuses are segregated, he says, and it's not at all the fault of white students. Women are also still bitching even though every door is opened to them and we got rid of sexual harassment. I believe he spoke too soon. Still, reading this made we nostalgic for Bloom's sober and curmudgenly conservatism--so sure were they that the left would destroy American civilization that they forgot to watch out for the threat on the right that would eventually lead to the closing of the America mind, the sealing the lid and throwing away the key.

Bloom is absolutely right in his view of the problem--we need to read more books and engage more with absolute truth. We need to teach classic philosophy in schools. We need to have free, open, and intelligent debate. But he thinks the problem is basically the Civil Rights and the womens rights movement. I think the 60s were a confusing time--a terrifying one for the upholders of tradition, but I don't think the culprit was who he thought it was. Partly because I don't think there was ever a golden era of intellectualism. I think the past was just as stupid as the present.

Instead of this, I'd recommend Fantasyland (recent) or Anti-Illectualism in American life (older)
