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“Openness” & “The Closing of the American Mind”

by Roger Kimball

On the role of ideas of “tolerance” in the intellectual decline.

This is no ordinary matter we are discussing, Glaucon, but the right conduct of life.
—Socrates, in Plato’s Republic

When we talk about Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, it is useful to begin by distinguishing between the book, on the one hand, and the phenomenon, on the other. They are different, if related, things.

Let me start with the book. What is it? In the simplest sense, it is a pedagogical autobiography, written by a fiftyish academic philosopher who was also a dedicated teacher and whose experience of university life from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s had left him disabused, mournful, and alarmed.

The book is also—let me acknowledge this at once—a curious literary artifact. It is a rich and promiscuous stew that Allan Bloom served up, part polemic, part exhortation, part exercise in cultural-intellectual history. It sometimes grabs readers by the lapels and gives them a shake; at other times it assumes a dry, professorial tone as it delineates the genealogy of freedom, discriminates among diverse meanings of equality, or parses a choice passage from Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville, or Nietzsche.

Nevertheless, if parts of the book are reminiscent of the academic lecture hall, the overall effect is nothing short of electric. For all its loose-bagginess, *The Closing of the American Mind* is a book written with commanding passion, urgency, and conviction. Bloom himself described the book as a “meditation on the state of our souls.”

Now, the audacity of a paid-up secular academic talking without irony about “souls” in 1987 was perhaps the first thing that made people nervous about the book. “How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students”—what a subtitle! It was one thing for Bloom to write that “No real teacher can doubt that his task is to assist his pupil to fulfill

human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice." We're all good liberals here, we've read John Stuart Mill, and we naturally give a decent shudder whenever words like "convention" and "prejudice" are uttered in polite company. But then Bloom went on to spoil our smug tranquility by pointing out that "strong prejudices are visions about the way things are" and asserting that "there is no real teacher who in practice does not believe in the existence of the soul, or in a magic that acts on it through speech."

Soul? Prejudice? Magic? Whatever could he mean?

It is heady stuff. Bloom confronted the future of liberal education as if he were addressing an issue of—well, not life and death, exactly, but the question of what counts as the good life, on one side, and the multitudinous counterfeits and impostures that threaten it, on the other. I confess that I found the book no less thrilling, and no less pertinent, now, twenty years on, than when I first read it in 1987.

I realize, of course, that my enthusiasm is not universally shared. The anathema brought down upon Bloom was a veritable thesaurus of politically correct epithets, partly alarming but also partly comic. Bloom was racist; he was sexist; he was elitist; he was authoritarian and—get out the crucifix and garlic—he was "Eurocentric." Bloom was accused, moreover, of stupidity, ignorance, malevolence, bad scholarship, insensitivity, and political manipulation. And that was all before breakfast. One critic compared him to Colonel Oliver North—a comparison, I hasten to explain for those who, like me, admire Colonel North, that was meant to be unflattering. Several reviewers summoned up the ghost of Senator Joseph McCarthy; one even discerned similarities between Bloom and Adolf Hitler. The cataract of calumny and vituperation continues to this day.

At the same time, the book was an astonishing success. That was another part of the phenomenon of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Indeed, I suspect that its success was a large part of what infuriated Bloom's critics. Perched at the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list week after week, the book is said to have sold more than a million copies. How could that be, when Professor X, chairwoman of the department of anti-American studies, cross-dressing, and victimology at YaleHarvard, never published a book that sold more than 5367 copies? The time is out of joint, Comrade, and we have to close ranks to set it right.

But even the success of *The Closing of the American Mind* had its oddities. One side of the oddity was summed up by a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. It shows a bemused-looking chap in a bookstore. He is standing in front of a table piled high with the book. As he leafs through a copy, a bookseller stands by beaming and confides, "I haven't read it, but it's terrific."

I have often wondered how many of those million copies sold actually found readers. Five percent? Seven? Not more, I'd wager. But the interesting thing is that it didn't matter. Poetry, T. S. Eliot said, communicates before it is understood. Similarly, books like *The Closing of the American Mind* do not have to be widely read to touch a nerve and communicate their essential message.

It is worth stressing that Bloom was not the doctrinaire conservative caricatured by his enemies. He regarded liberal education, properly conceived, less as a preparation for than as an alternative to commercial bourgeois culture. Libertarianism he disparaged as "the right-wing form of the Left, in favor of everybody's living as he pleases." His chief concern in this book was actually quite narrow. His topic was not higher education *tout court*, but only a sliver of it—the "best liberal arts students" at the "twenty or thirty" best colleges in the country. They were the students Bloom cared about, and they were the ones most imperiled by the changes that had beset the academy.

Nevertheless, conservatives were right to champion Bloom, just as left-wingers were right to regard him with fear and loathing. Not only was *The Closing of the American Mind* a powerful indictment of intellectual and moral corruption in the academy, it was also, if incidentally, an indictment that might make the public sit up and take notice. Jobs, tenure, academic institutes, and college curricula might finally be subject to open scrutiny. Alumni might wonder why they should subsidize institutions devoted to repudiating the founding intellectual and political values of the United States. Legislators might wonder if all was well in the ivory towers that taxpayers had so munificently endowed and accoutered. Parents might wonder why their children were battened on nihilistic word games and taught to regard traditional morality as a contemptible expression of narrow-mindedness and bigotry. In September, they send John or Joan and a large check off to a prestigious college or university and by June the money is spent and John or Joan—so eager and pleasant a few months ago—return having jettisoned every moral, religious, social, and political scruple that they had been brought up to believe. Why should parents fund the moral de-civilization of their children at the hands of tenured antinomians?

Indeed, those with a stake in politicizing intellectual life in the academy had much to fear from the publicity accorded to Bloom's book. If, alas, their fears proved largely groundless—if it's still politically correct business as usual in most of our colleges and universities—Bloom's book at least helped remind us that there were alternatives and that forceful criticism could make reform possible, if not certain.

In the preface to a collection of essays called Giants and Dwarfs, Bloom insisted that "the essence of education is the experience of greatness." Almost everything that he wrote about the university flowed from this fundamental conviction. And it was this, of course, that branded him an "elitist." In fact, Bloom's commitment to greatness was profoundly democratic. But this is not to say that it was egalitarian. The true democrat wishes to share the great works of culture with all who are able to appreciate them; the egalitarian, recognizing that genuine excellence is rare, declares greatness a fraud and sets about obliterating distinctions.

As Bloom recognized, the fruits of egalitarianism are ignorance, the habit of intellectual conformity, and the systematic subjection of cultural achievement to political criteria. In the university, this means classes devoted to pop novels, rock videos, and third-rate works chosen simply because their authors are members of the requisite sex, ethnic group, or social minority. It means students who graduate not having read Milton or Dante or Shakespeare—or, what is in

some ways even worse, who have been taught to regard the works of such authors chiefly as hunting grounds for examples of patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism, etc. It means faculty and students who regard education as an exercise in disillusionment and who look to the past only to corroborate their sense of superiority and self-satisfaction.

The other side of Bloom's commitment to greatness was his criticism of popular culture—more precisely, his criticism of the deliberate confusion of popular culture and high art. Among the many things that incensed Bloom's enemies, perhaps none so enraged them as his condemnation of rock music. "Rock music," he wrote, "provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with which it is allied. It artificially produces the exaltation naturally attached to the completion of the greatest endeavors—victory in a just war, consummated love, artistic creation, religious devotion and discovery of the truth."

Bloom's point was difficult to credit even for some people who were otherwise sympathetic to his argument. How could rock be such a bad thing? Hasn't it become just one more middle-class entertainment, enjoyed by kids everywhere? To be sure it has. But the fact that rock has been domesticated and commercialized, that it is now big business and mass entertainment, does not change its essential character. Its appeal is the appeal of the Dionysian: rock is anti-order, anti-verbal, anti-intellect. It is about unconstrained sexuality and polymorphous gratification. That is why its main enthusiasts are adolescents, old as well as young. They are right that rock music is a liberation: it is a liberation or vacation from civilization. In the deepest sense it is a liberation from music, whose essence is order.

Bloom came down hard on rock because, like Plato, he understood the power of music to educate our emotions at the most basic level. Rock is an education for chaos and narcissism. There are, of course, many competing claims for a child's emotional allegiance; rock music is only one of a host of attractions besieging young people for attention. But because "the first sensuous experiences are decisive in determining the taste for the whole of life," Bloom was right to call attention to the dark, seductive side of rock music. "Nihilism," he observed, is often "revealed not so much in the firm lack of beliefs, but in the chaos of the instincts or passions."

Bloom's criticism of rock music was part of a larger attack on the 1960s, the decade that epitomized the radically egalitarian, liberationist ethos that wreaked such havoc on the university and on society at large. While he acknowledged and paid homage to the triumph of the civil rights movement, he regarded the 1960s as "an unmitigated disaster" for intellectual and moral life in academia. This, too, won him the vitriol of the cultural Left, for whom the 1960s was a political Golden Age. Having lived through the student demonstrations at Cornell in 1969, when black activists brandished guns and held university administrators hostage, Bloom knew otherwise. The Siege of Cornell was a defining experience for Bloom. American society did not quite come apart at the seams, but Bloom was correct in seeing parallels between the American university in the 1960s and the German university in the 1930s. "The fact that in Germany the politics were of the Right and in the United States of the Left should not mislead us," he noted.

> In both places the universities gave way under the pressure of mass movements, and did so in large measure because they thought those movements possessed a moral truth superior to any the university could provide. Commitment was understood to be profounder than science, passion than reason, history than nature, the young than the old. . . . The unthinking hatred of "bourgeois society" was exactly the same in both places. A distinguished professor of political science proved this when he read to his radical students some speeches about what was to be done. They were enthusiastic until he informed them that the speeches were by Mussolini.

Looking back on this episode from the relatively quiescent time of the 1980s, Bloom pointed out that in many ways the student revolutionaries had won the battle. Buildings were no longer in flames, guns were no longer brandished, but that was because on the central intellectual and moral issues the universities had capitulated. It was no longer a case of activists holding teachers and administrators hostage: now teachers and administrators held their students hostage—hostage to the emancipationist pabulum of their cherished 1960s ideology. Radical feminism, multiculturalism, political correctness: some of the names were new, but the phenomena were born and bred in the Sixties. "When the dust had settled," Bloom wrote near the end of *The Closing of the American Mind*, "it could be seen that the very distinction between educated and uneducated in America had been leveled. . . . Freedom had been restricted in the most effective way—by the impoverishment of alternatives."

The word "alternatives," in fact, is one of the master words of The Closing of the American Mind. It crops up again and again at strategic points, signalling that amplitude of spiritual possibility that Bloom sought to cultivate. "A serious life," he wrote in one typical passage, "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."

Consider, for example, alternative political regimes. While Bloom believes that "the United States is one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature," he also, like many commentators, underscores the extent to which the United States has been "a great stage" upon which various ideas about freedom and equality have played out, often in demotic form. ("All significant political disputes," he notes, "have been about the meaning of freedom and equality, not about their rightness.") Bloom challenges us to look beyond our taken-for-granted notions about political rectitude and ask, "for example, whether men are really equal or whether that opinion is merely a democratic prejudice."

Bloom regarded liberal education in its highest form as a conversation across the centuries that revolved around the perennially fresh question "What is the good life?" He championed what he called "the good old great books" because they are the prime repositories of thoughtful alternative answers to that question. A liberal arts education for Bloom centrally involved a meditation on those books and the "permanent questions" they posed in themselves and, above all, in relation to one another. As such a liberal arts education was "a resource against the ephemeral" and prophylactic against nihilism and spuriousness.

I want to stress the interrogatory aspect of Bloom's teaching. In his view, a liberal education did not aim to equip students with answers. On the contrary, it endeavored to develop in them a thoughtful, indeed a passionate, disposition to entertain those deep questions, questions that are fulfilled not in "results" or declarative formulae—not in better test scores or technical know-how—but only by being continually renewed in conversation with the past. This aspect of Bloom's teaching has not pleased everyone. Even some conservative commentators, though sympathetic to Bloom's criticisms of the academy, are impatient with what they regard as his indefiniteness and lack of a positive doctrine. Wilfred M. McClay, for example, in a thoughtful article for the *Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 2007), wonders whether Bloom really has "anything solid to offer in place of the follies he describes." In the end, McClay suggests, Bloom's position is not much different from "the languid pragmatism of Richard Rorty."

McClay is right that Bloom does not offer anything "solid" in place of the follies he describes. But his model is not the chummy nihilism of Richard Rorty but the probing inquisitiveness of Socrates. There is a big difference. Rorty denies that anything like the truth exists; Socrates wonders whether he has managed to grasp the truth but is unwavering in his acknowledgment of its claims. "Man," as G. K. Chesterton put it, "was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth." For Bloom, liberal education in its highest vocation consists primarily in stoking the fires of this interrogatory attitude. It is an invitation to serious questioning, not a form of catechism. Who are we, not in relation to our low and common needs, but in relation to our highest aspirations? That, for Bloom, is the permanent, ever recurring question that fires liberal education. There are answers to this question, but they do not necessarily emerge in definite precepts and prescriptions. "A liberal education," he writes, "means precisely helping students to pose this question to themselves, to become aware that the answer is neither obvious nor simply unavailable, and that

there is no serious life in which this question is not a continuous concern." The diminishment, as Bloom puts it in the subtitle to his book, affects not only students but also democracy itself, which requires models of excellence if its commitment to equality is not to degenerate into a squalid egalitarianism.

Does it matter? Should we really care about preserving institutions where the liberal arts in this high sense are nurtured? It is part of Bloom's brief in The Closing of the American Mind to argue that the health of the liberal arts betokens not only the health of the university but also the spiritual vibrancy and purpose of society at large. But it fulfills this purpose in a curious way. After all, conceived as Bloom conceives it, liberal education is ostentatiously impractical. One may learn certain skills incidentally, but the basic impetus is contemplative, not utilitarian. It is also unabashedly elitist, by nature appealing to a small subset of students.

> Most students will be content with what our present considers relevant; others will have a spirit of enthusiasm that subsides as family and ambition provide them with other objects of interest; a small number will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous. It is for these last, especially, that liberal education exists. They become the models for the use of the noblest human faculties and hence are benefactors to all of us, more for what they are than for what they do. Without their presence (and, one should add, without their being respectable), no society—no matter how rich or comfortable, no matter how technically adept or full of tender sentiments—can be called civilized.

I described *The Closing of the American Mind* as a kind of "pedagogical autobiography." It is above all a teacher's book: for and about the pedagogical vocation, which, as Bloom put it, is ultimately about the care and nurturing of souls. Behind all his criticism is a horror of encroaching homogenization and moral impoverishment. Liberal education as Bloom conceived it is a spiritual quest. It requires passion, yearning, and tenacious intellectual engagement.

When he looked around him, Bloom saw a faculty that had abdicated its responsibility to cultivate that yearning and, correspondingly, students who were "nice," "spiritually detumescent," and

intellectually unambitious. One sign of this was the common indifference to the great monuments of culture, especially great books, among college students. Competing with television, rock music, and movies, high culture no longer cast its enchanting spell. At a deeper level, what students lacked was the invigorating passion that links sexual longing to intellectual aspiration and ultimately brings liberal education itself under the aegis of eros. More and more, Bloom thought, they resembled the timid, narcissistic creature described by Nietzsche in his devastating portrait of The Last Man:

> "'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' thus asks the last man, and he blinks. . . .
>
> "'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.
>
> "Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. . . . A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death. . . .
>
> "No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse. . . ."

Having absorbed the multiculturalist doctrine espoused by their teachers and the larger society, such students were reflexively "non-judgmental" about everything but their own intellectual poverty and sense of moral superiority. Thus it is that the great liberal virtue of openness degenerated into flaccid indifference and anchorless relativism. And hence the melancholy irony of the situation Bloom dissected: "Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power." So here's the rub: What had been proclaimed a magnificent opening turned out to be a great closing.

I suspect that Bloom's discussion of the perversions of openness was one of the chief things that made The Closing of the American Mind a bestseller. As a liberal, democratic society, we are

committed to that constellation of virtues named by openness, tolerance, diversity, and the like. But we are also a society that has witnessed what happens when those virtues are absolutized.

As Bloom saw, the "sensitivity" of the multiculturalist is an index not of moral refinement but of moral vacuousness. Multiculturalism is a paralyzing intoxicant; its thrill centers around the emotion of superior virtue; its hangover subsists on a diet of ignorance and blighted "good intentions." The crucial thing to understand is that, notwithstanding the emancipationist rhetoric that accompanies the term, "multiculturalism" is not about recognizing genuine cultural diversity or encouraging pluralism. It is about undermining the priority of Western liberal values in our educational system and in society at large. In essence, as the political scientist Samuel Huntington has pointed out, multiculturalism is "anti-European civilization. . . . It is basically an anti-Western ideology." The multiculturalists claim to be fostering a progressive cultural cosmopolitanism distinguished by superior sensitivity to the downtrodden and dispossessed. In fact, they encourage an orgy of self-flagellating liberal guilt as impotent as it is insatiable.

Our colleges and universities have been preaching the creed of openness and multiculturalism for the last few decades. Politicians, pundits, and the so-called cultural elite have assiduously absorbed that dogma, which they accept less as an argument about the way the world should be than as an affirmation of the essential virtue of their own feelings. We are now beginning to reap the fruit of that liberal experiment with multiculturalism. The chief existential symptom is moral paralysis, expressed, for example, in the inability to discriminate effectively between good and evil.

As the philosopher David Stove pointed out, the large issue here is one that has bedeviled liberal societies ever since there were liberal societies: namely, that in attempting to create the maximally tolerant society, we also give scope to those who would prefer to create the maximally intolerant society. It is a curious phenomenon. Liberalism implies openness to other points of view, even (it would seem) those points of view whose success would destroy liberalism. Extending tolerance to those points of view is a prescription for suicide. But intolerance betrays the fundamental premise of liberalism, namely, openness. As Robert Frost once put it, a liberal is someone who refuses to take his own part in an argument.

The escape from this disease of liberalism lies in understanding that "tolerance" and "openness" must be limited by positive values if they are not to be vacuous. American democracy, for example, affords its citizens great latitude, but great latitude is not synonymous with the proposition that "anything goes." "The fact," as Bloom notes, "that there have been different opinions about good and bad in different times and places in no way proves that none is true or superior to others." Our society, like every society, is founded on particular positive values—the rule of law, for example, respect for the individual, religious freedom, the separation of church and state. Or think of the robust liberalism expressed by Sir Charles Napier, the British commander in India in the early nineteenth century. Told that immolating widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands was a cherished local custom, Napier said "Very well. We also have a custom: when men burn a woman alive, we tie a rope around their necks and we hang them. Build

your funeral pyre; beside it, my carpenters will build a gallows. You may follow your custom. And then we will follow ours." The next time Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wants to speak at Columbia University, President Lee Bollinger might ask himself what Sir Charles would have done in his shoes.

The point is that the "openness" that liberal society rightly cherishes is not a vacuous openness to all points of view: it is not "value neutral." It need not, indeed it cannot, say Yes to all comers, to the Islamofascist who after all has his point of view, just as much as the soccer mom has hers. Western democratic society is rooted in a particular vision of what Bloom, following Aristotle, called "the good for man." The question is: Do we, as a society, still have confidence in the animating values of the vision? Do we possess the requisite will to defend them? Or was the French philosopher Jean-François Revel right when he said that "Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is trying to destroy it"? The jury is still out on those questions. How they are answered will determine the future not only of Western universities but also of that astonishing spiritual-political experiment that is Western democratic liberalism.

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