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Book Review: The Closing of the American Mind

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THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

by Allan Bloom

Simon and Schuster

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Allan Bloom's book is a sustained attack on the way we live now. Its cumbersome subtitle—*How Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*—seems more like a publisher's afterthought, a misguided attempt to narrow the scope of the book and thereby focus on the topical "crisis in education." While Bloom begins with a profile of contemporary students "who populate the twenty or thirty best universities," it is clear from the outset that he is attempting nothing less than a full-scale attack on liberal democracy, which, to revise his subtitle, has failed education and impoverished practically everyone—or at least everyone who counts, since, for Bloom, education exists primarily for the small number of students who are capable of "autonomous thought." But even that minority, in Bloom's account, is hopelessly maimed by modern democratic culture before it enters the university classroom. The plebs have infected the whole system, as demonstrated by his students preferring rock music to Mozart. The young don't read any more, and "without the book even the idea of the order of the whole is lost." Things fall apart.

All of this sounds very familiar. Variations on the theme can be heard in the hallways and offices of academe or whenever and wherever teachers meet to complain about what their students don't know and don't seem to care about learning. All professors may not be as confident as Bloom is about having found the Truth or about being in tune with the natural order of things, but many share his contempt for the young and their enthusiasms. Many, like Bloom, seem to think things are getting worse. And many will perhaps feel uneasy when they reflect on how closely Bloom's

doubts about education in a democracy are echoed in their day-to-day complaints about lowered standards and their cravings for "excellence."

It would be convenient if Bloom, a professor on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, could simply be dismissed as an oddity, a crusty curmudgeon whose freewheeling blasts at everything (from affirmative action to feminist criticism) and everyone (from Margaret Mead to Woody Allen) contemporary and American indicate nothing more than a midlife malaise accompanied by a longing for a golden age of American higher education. (Bloom nominates the 1950's!) Unfortunately, he has to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than the fact that the book is a bestseller, presumably read and taken seriously by large numbers of people who share at least a portion of his anger at the way things have turned out. An irony not to be missed is that this university professor, who clearly sees himself as one of the fortunate few still capable of autonomous thought and as one who has successfully distanced himself from popular opinion, has produced a book whose position on the charts places it firmly in the mainstream of current reactionary discontent.

Bloom is trying to play Jeremiah—or perhaps Zarathustra—come down from the mountain, toting a load of "the great books" to use as clubs to chastise the unbelievers. But he simply doesn't have what it takes. Or maybe we just don't need prophets

right now. One can imagine a thoughtful questioning of bourgeois liberal pieties, an exposure of their sentimentalities, their failure to see the contradictions between opposing claims of freedom and equality. However, instead of careful analysis and argument, Bloom offers us dogmatic assertions of the authority of the classics and of democracy's failure to pay proper homage to its own antithesis.

Bloom loves the great books: "the substance of my being has been informed by the books I learned to care for." To somehow communicate this love, to show what possibilities it contains, is the formidable task of the teacher. Fine. But wait—look also at the questionable role Bloom assigns to those works in a democratic society: "In aristocracies there was also a party of the people but in a democracy there is no aristocratic party. This means that there is no protection for the opponents of the governing principles as well as no respectability for them." For Bloom, "the great books," presented as a firmly established, unchanging canon, are a substitute for an aristocratic party. What they offer is a critique of democracy. Tocqueville is seen as an authority on democracy precisely because "his judgments were informed by an experience we cannot have: his direct experience of an alternative regime and temper of soul—aristocracy. If we cannot in any way have access to something like that experience, our understanding of the range of human possibilities is impoverished and our

capacity to assess our strengths and weaknesses is diminished." Because the truth is, the great books can be and are used to maintain social distinctions that democracies have sought to dissolve. It can come as a great shock to realize that the study of the humanities does not necessarily lead to a concern for humanity; that, indeed, as practiced, it may more easily lead to a carefully nourished solicitude for what Bloom calls "the high human types" at the expense of just about everyone else.

There is in Bloom's book no evidence of his either sympathizing with or even understanding the epic project of the open university—the belief that higher education and its benefits, both educational and economic, can and should be made available to all. If one thinks, as Bloom obviously does, that modern democratic culture has nothing to offer the university, that the experiences of the majority of our citizens are irrelevant to the pursuit of knowledge, then of course it necessarily follows that open admissions policies would be seen as diluting rather than enriching the educational process.

I would suggest that the opening of the doors of the university has in fact been only an enrichment, if such things are measured by subtler instruments than SAT scores. If educators cannot be educated by the influx of the "other," the new, then that only demonstrates that there are different forms of "cultural illiteracy." When the acquisition of knowledge becomes a one-way street, passing strictly from teachers to students, teachers are in danger of prematurely ending their own education. Has anyone obtained statistics on the number of dropouts facing the class? ■

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