

Twenty-five Years Later

Liberating *The Closing of the American Mind*

Ki Young Kim

When Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind*, he did not anticipate that it would be called “the first shot in the culture wars” between liberals and conservatives. But despite Bloom’s original intentions, there are reasons why the book continues to be condemned by liberals and praised by conservatives, even 25 years after its original publication. For even though Bloom claims in the introduction that he is not advocating a return to the past, *Closing* has an unmistakable sense of nostalgia which appealed to the conservative movement, even though the appeal was without much substance. In his 1988 speech at Harvard, Bloom explicitly rejected that his book was conservative and declared that “[a]ny superficial reading of my book will show how I differ from both theoretical and practical conservative positions.”

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Thus what Bloom’s liberal detractors and conservative admirers have in common is that they have misinterpreted his book to be a political text. But I am not concerned about the book’s misuse in the culture wars. Rather, I am concerned that because the book has been misused by the culture wars, students, for whom the book was written, have lost the opportunity to use its lessons about the degradation of the four most important years of their lives and contemplate what it means to be a true student of the liberal arts. For too long, we have been tricked out of this opportunity because we have been told by both liberals and conservatives that the book’s primary function is a partisan one. So 25 years after its original publications, it is time to take back *The Closing of the American Mind*, and all of its

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER



witticisms, flaws, and lessons, to where it was intended to be and where it most belongs: the minds of American university students.

Bloom claims that American students have been taught above all that they should never critique and always tolerate—that truth is always relative to time and place and perspective, and thus they cannot judge views that differ from their own. This relativism has entered into American society and culture and universities, with disastrous effects. For Bloom, when students are taught that they ought not judge but only accept, they lose their ability to distinguish between true and false, good and bad. Thus, they also lose their ability to seek and find any kind of meaning in their lives.

The argument continues that the results of this loss of meaning have been disastrous for students and their university lives. For one, Great Books cannot be great, since for a book to be great implies that a different book is not great or is even bad, and students of relativism cannot possibly make such judgments. Thus students in universities can no longer be truly inspired by and learn from books or texts, which has led to the degradation of the American religious and political heritages. The Bible, which used to be a source of spiritual richness in the most materially poorest homes, is at best a relic and at worse a dangerous source of religious con-

trol. Students have also lost their ability to be in truly meaningful relationships with each other, particularly since they can no longer see the family as the source of good and natural social bonds.

This is probably the part of the book that conservatives are most likely to latch onto, and also the part that liberals are likely to detest. But the reader should be cautious of claims such as: "People of future civilizations will wonder at [contemporary music] and find it as incomprehensible as we do the caste system, witch-burning, harems, cannibalism and gladiatorial combats." Such strong claims make reading all the more hazardous, and more vulnerable to misinterpretation. Despite such exaggerated claims, we must realize that Bloom's aim is not (just) to complain about how morally and intellectually destitute students have become. Instead, what he stresses is relativism's underlying but crucial role in such corruption.

In part two, "Nihilism, American Style," Bloom traces the history of this relativism, from where it originated to how it came to American shores in the early 20th century, and how it became integrated into America. In order to show how relativism came to be, Bloom gives a long survey of European philosophy, particularly philosophy of the Continent in the 19th century. Strangely, it turns out that the European philosophical origin of relativism is neither Bloom's most important point in part two nor what worries him the most about relativism. Rather, he is most disturbed by how relativism, powerfully debated in European universities, not only went uncontested but was even greeted warmly by American society and culture. Bloom argues that even if 19th-century philosophers, such as Nietzsche, gave birth to relativism, they did so within the philosophic tradition, meaning that they questioned and critiqued it. Although Weber was undeniably influenced by Nietzsche, he "saw that all that we care for was threatened by [Nietzsche's] insight and that we were without intellectual or moral resources to govern the outcome." By contrast, American society and culture accepted and integrated relativism with little to no questioning.

Of course, this account of relativism encourages us to ask: Why did Americans keel over so quickly and readily to relativism? Why did we not have the intellectual and philosophical fortitude of Weber? Bloom has two answers for us. First, he considers our liberal democracy's nat-

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

ural susceptibility to relativism. He argues that a democracy, because it is committed to equality, must be open to a multiplicity of beliefs. If this openness permits not just a multitude of beliefs, but all beliefs with no judgment whatsoever, the democracy becomes a democracy of relativism. And since the more open a democracy is, the freer it is judged to be, it has a tendency to slide inadvertently towards relativism.

Bloom's second and far more important reason for America's willing acceptance of relativism is the failure of the American universities. According to Bloom, universities, and particularly philosophy departments within universities, were supposed to be democracy's line of defense against relativism. Unlike democracies, universities traditionally do not have to be equal or open. This means that they are less likely to slide towards relativism. And even more importantly, since universities are also able to question and critique democracy's commitment to equality and openness, they can contemplate the controversial ideas that are unacceptable topics of debate in democracies.

Bloom used his experiences as a professor at Cornell University in the 1960s to claim that universities failed miserably in this duty to guard against relativism. Through numerous anecdotes and personal stories, he argues that when the (literal) guns and radical student groups of relativism demanded that universities institute the same kind of openness without judgment that had already begun to infiltrate American society and culture, there remained far too few professors and students who were willing to protect the integrity of universities by asking the tough questions. Bloom accuses faculty, especially in the humanities, of seeking safety and social acceptance from radical student groups and thus abandoning their intellectual duties.

In fact, Bloom reserves his most devastating criticism for these university professors. He seeks to obliterate what he considers their false sense of having become enlightened and freed from the oppression of traditional liberal arts. He is far more vindictive in this part of the book than when he was discussing the failures of American society and culture. And so what initially might have seemed to be a failure of American culture or society turns out to be a failure of the American universities. This is why *The Closing of the American Mind* is not a book about conservative or liberal politics, but rather a book about univer-

sities, written so that students may know not only the history of universities, but also their roles, particularly within a democratic society.

Democracies accept and encourage universities partially because of the enormous practical benefits (particularly from natural sciences), but also because democracies are sympathetic to the principle of academic and intellectual freedom.



But within this relationship, Bloom reveals a serious tension. For democracies want universities to have access to academic freedom, but only to a certain extent. What if a professor, whose freedom of speech is guaranteed by democracy, wants to question the validity of that democracy itself? or make claims that would be considered elitist, sexist, or racist (all three of which are rejected by democracy)? Or, perhaps even more cynically, what if said professor wanted to make

claims that are not necessarily opposed to the fundamental principles of democracy, but rather merely unpopular with the majority at that time? Universities could and certainly should operate within the blessings of a democracy. But when universities are no longer willing or able to question democracy, they become oppressed by their very own benefactors.

But in such a scenario, it is not only universities that lose. Since a democracy needs its universities to ask uncomfortable questions about equality and openness to defend it against relativism, if it suppresses such questions, it suppresses and thus loses its own defense against relativism. Hence, while universities find their most hospitable home within democracies, they should not stop questioning the fundamental principles of democracy, for their own sake

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

but also for the sake of democracy itself. But according to Bloom, in the 1960s American universities buckled under the weight of the relativism of the student movement, which demanded that universities be radically democratized and share the openness of relativism.

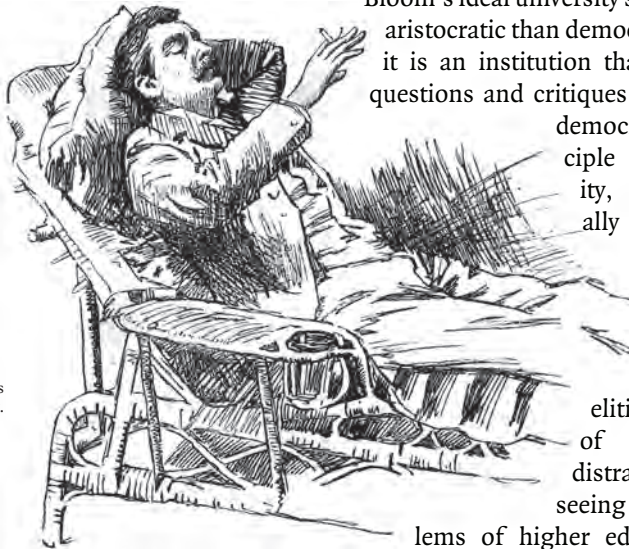
This is Bloom's history of American universities, and if it were all that comprised his account of what universities ought to be, *The Closing of the American Mind* would not be as controversial as it is in academic circles. But infamously, Bloom has more to add.

It turns out that the true purpose of universities is not to defend democracy against relativism, but to foster a passion and love of philosophy and contemplation among an elite group of students. Bloom seems to indicate that while being a defense for democracies against relativism is a good goal for universities, their true telos is to take the best student, who is gifted by nature with both the appetite and ability for philosophy, and turn him into "Aristotle's great-souled man, who loves beautiful and useless things," but "is not a democratic type."

Bloom's ideal university seems more aristocratic than democratic. Thus it is an institution that not only questions and critiques the crucial democratic principle of equality, but actually opposes it.

Still, we should not let Bloom's elitist account of universities distract us from seeing the problems of higher education he

does diagnose well. For I believe he is right in arguing that the problem with democratic higher education is that everyone expects to do well; the principle of politi-



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believe he is right in arguing that the problem with democratic higher education is that everyone expects to do well; the principle of politi-

cal equality is extended into academic equality. Thus, we see problems such as grade inflation, which is a botched way of validating more students in universities, not by helping them become better students, but rather lowering the standards across the board. We may not agree with Bloom's solution to these problems of creating an elite academy; but that does not mean that we should refuse to see that problems do exist.



No, Leopold.

Perhaps the other point on which Bloom is most criticized is his defense of the Great Books.

For Bloom, when we begin to include in the curriculum non-traditional (in the Western sense) texts and disciplines, there is the danger of making ourselves vulnerable to relativism.

But even if such a danger exists, surely there is a way to question the Great Books method without falling into the trap of relativism's 'openness without judgment.' First, we should question the Great Books because such questioning in itself is a philosophic activity. For in asking questions about the Great Books method, we would inevitably want to know what is worth learning about, what knowledge is conducive to a higher life, and thus by extension what is 'good.' Thus, if we ignore and deny even the possibility that a liberal education could at least include texts that fall outside the Western canon, then we are neglecting more than just an administrative question about what texts are chosen for core classes; we are neglecting a philosophical activity. And it seems that this particular philosophical inquiry, which asks what is good and worth knowing and studying and contemplating as a human being, is important because, in a sense, it forms the foundation for how we approach other questions of what is good.

If we fail to engage in this philosophical inquiry, then how can we justify our support of the Great Books? We cannot accept tradition

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

as justification. Mere historical significance is not enough. We know that Bloom's own position is the same, through his anecdote about a student who, unaware of the more than 2,000 years separating the two of them, called Aristotle 'Mr. Aristotle.' In this anecdote, the student shows no respect for Aristotle whatsoever because of tradition; indeed, he is not even aware that Aristotle is part of any tradition at all. Instead, what he receives from Aristotle is a desire to engage and discuss philosophy. Such a desire is not based on tradition, but rather on being inspired by the depth and significance of Aristotle's philosophy.

If non-Western texts can provide the same kind of depth and significance, then why must we only study the Great Books? Bloom claims, "[o]nly in the Western nations, i.e., those influenced by Greek philosophy, is there some willingness to doubt the identification of the good with one's own way." But as Martha Nussbaum pointed out 25 years ago in her celebrated critique of Bloom, Bloom ignores other traditions that do indeed doubt and question their own goodness, such as the Indian and Chinese traditions of philosophy. What prevents them from at the very least making a part of a liberal education, even if the liberal education remained made up primarily of the Western Great Books?

A reply could be that there are inevitable difficulties of Western students studying non-Western texts and disciplines. And these are indeed pertinent—there are problems of translation and cultural and historical references that students would neither notice nor understand, and perhaps Western students would not identify with the problems and controversies presented in non-Western texts. But these difficulties are not enough to dismiss non-Western texts and disciplines, for such difficulties exist in the Great Books method as well. There is no uniform language of Western philosophy. It is true that knowing Classical Greek would help a lot, but most American students do not know Greek, and translations of Greek texts are problematic too (one of the reasons why Bloom translated Plato's *Republic*). Additionally, Western students (especially undergraduates) studying the Great Books can face challenges that are actually greater than when they study non-Western texts, since words and concepts that seem familiar to them can be used quite differently in the texts (the use of the word "liberality,"

for example), which can lead to confusion and mistaken readings.

In fact, any claim that we can *never* include non-Western texts and disciplines in the curriculum without falling into relativism is based merely on an affection for the West with no particular rational justification. We must reject such an affection when we are building the textual foundations for a liberal arts education, especially when non-Western texts have been successfully included in the curriculum (as in the University of Chicago's Readings in World Literature humanities sequence). If a text can inspire students to enter into meaningful philosophical conversations and debates, there are no rational grounds for excluding it entirely from the curriculum.

Twenty-five years after its publication, *The Closing of the American Mind* continues to point out the most serious problems of American universities. Although Bloom's solutions to these problems often do not satisfy us or fit into our democratic framework, without a doubt his book must be a crucial part of our understanding of a liberal education and its troubles in the last 50 years. I would only suggest that we scrutinize Bloom's own arguments as he would ask us to scrutinize relativism and its insistence on openness in a manner that he would consider worthy of true students of a liberal education.



It was
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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

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