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What Allan Bloom Got Right

By Todd Gitlin | OCTOBER 08, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM



Alex Williamson for The Chronicle Review

"You can slam its young people into universities with their classrooms and laboratories, and when they come out all they can talk about is Babe Ruth. America is a hopeless country for intellectuals and thinking people." Babe Ruth is the giveaway. These words were spoken in 1923, and the speaker was Theodore Dreiser, who had dropped out of Indiana University after one year.

So it is not a new thought that American universities are nests of self-betrayal and triviality where inquiring minds trade the nobility of their tradition for cheap trinkets and the promise of pieces of silver to come. Indeed, five years before Dreiser popped off, Thorstein Veblen was denouncing "the higher learning in America" for having surrendered to business domination, ditched the pure pursuit of knowledge, cultivated "conspicuous conformity to the popular taste," and pandered to undergraduates by teaching them "ways and means of dissipation." "The conduct of universities by business men," to borrow from Veblen's subtitle, had rendered university life "mechanistic." Veblen anticipated that the academy would wallow in futility when it was not prostrating itself at the feet of the captains of finance. His original subtitle was *A Study in Total Depravity*. Veblen having dropped it, Allan Bloom should have picked it up.

Veblen thought the university had been seized by "pecuniary values." To Bloom, whose bestselling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, something much worse had happened: The university had been seized by the *absence* of values. "The university now offers no distinctive visage to the young person. He finds a democracy of the disciplines. ... This democracy is really an anarchy, because there are no recognized rules for citizenship and no legitimate titles to rule. In short there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is."

A horde of bêtes noires had stampeded through the gates, and the resulting noise had drowned out the proper study of both nature and humanity. Nihilism had conquered. Its chief forms were cultural relativism, historicism, and shopping-mall indifference, the humanities' lame attempts at a holding action that "flatters popular democratic tastes." Openness was the new closure; elitism had become the worst of all isms.

Just how this happened, however, Bloom was uncertain. He was not a stickler for historical causation. When in doubt, he pounded the table and ranted about his next talking point, dotted with references to Great Books. *Closing* read more dyspeptic than lamentational. But the lamentational note was there. Once the university had been a crucible of truth; then it had been seized by, or sold to, the utilitarians; finally, it had collapsed in the face of nihilism. (Never mind that universities were training schools before they were Platonic academies.)

Bloom, who died in 1992, pulled no punches, even those that pummeled his own argument, and the nonstop crescendo of his rant made it easy for campus leftists to dismiss the book rather casually — too casually.

For some five years after publication, *Closing* helped inspire an assault on "political correctness" and the putative left-wing takeover by "tenured radicals" that roiled the campuses and flowed into the political arena via William Bennett and Lynne Cheney, among others. Most of the assault came from the right, of course, though I, among others, contributed my own variant from the left. But coiled inside Bloom's polemic, drowned out by his own thunder, was an inconvenient truth all the more worth taking seriously 30 years later.

When it comes to most of the campus left he was all too right, if not always for the right reasons. Today's knee-jerk illiberalism exhibits many tendencies that Bloom sketched (and sometimes caricatured). Sneers at the Enlightenment as a white male imposition are, as they say on Twitter, trending. Rereading Bloom's jeremiad, I'm reminded of Theodor Adorno's backhanded defense of Freud: "In psychoanalysis, nothing is true except the exaggerations." Bloom's exaggerations undermined the case for liberal education. It must also be said that they were, at times, disconcertingly and grimly prophetic.



Allan Bloom

AP Photo

Bloom could not make a point without overkilling it. He not only shook but stirred his harangue martini, mixing in heavy infusions of nostalgia for vague but in any case bygone ages. Most of his accusations were tendentious — not always straightforwardly false but drastically incomplete. *Closing's* central flaw was identified at the time by the philosopher Robert Paul Wolff, whose puckish review (Wolff suggested that Saul Bellow had written the book under a pseudonym)

shrewdly attributed Bloom's helter-skelter declamations to a single bad idea: "a mad, hermetic conviction that larger world events are actually caused or shaped by the obscurest sub-quibbles of the Great Conversation."

On some pages, Bloom quivered at a moral sea change produced by "the presence in the United States of men and women of a great variety of nations, religions, and races, and the fact that many were badly treated because they belonged to these groups." Demographic variety undermined "the sense of superiority of the dominant majority," and minorities — non-WASPS — got uppity. Bloom might have acknowledged that the formerly dominant WASP caucus in philosophy included his nemeses, John Dewey and Richard Rorty, but his demographic determinism would have collapsed. In any case, demographic variety has proceeded apace in the last 30 years, which is a great good thing.

At his most persuasive, Bloom argued that the university's original sin was to downgrade philosophy and discard the Great Books. The practice of substituting breadth for depth ushered in "trendiness, mere popularization and lack of substantive rigor." He lamented that one-from-column-A-one-from-column-B composite courses failed to "provide the student with independent means to pursue permanent questions independently, as, for example, the study of Aristotle or Kant as wholes once did." (I must have missed that golden age when Aristotle and Kant were served up whole.) Bloom was right that evangelism for the Great Books can "engender a spurious intimacy with greatness." But he was also right, more importantly so, that "programs based upon judicious use of great texts provide the royal road to students' hearts."

I relish teaching in Columbia's core curriculum, which requires undergraduates to read Great Books for (1) orientation, (2) comprehension of what some very smart people have meant in various different times and places, and (3) why they argued as they did. Sections of Bloom's royal road are indeed well traveled, and deservedly. Many a campus could use a major overhaul in intellectual infrastructure and a resounding call to elementary thought à la the Greeks. Teaching the Great Tradition offers no guarantee of awakening reverence for reason, for what universities offer is not (or at least ought not to be) a curriculum in brainwashing. But it is an excellent start.

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So it is with some sympathy that I share Bloom's passionate insistence "that there be an unpopular institution in our midst that sets clarity above well-being or compassion, that resists our powerful urges and temptations, that is free of all snobbism but has standards" and "maintains the permanent questions front and center." The

university, he went on, "must be contemptuous of public opinion because it has within it the source of autonomy — the quest for and even discovery of the truth according to nature. It must concentrate on philosophy, theology, the literary classics, and on those scientists like Newton, Descartes, and Leibniz who have the most comprehensive scientific vision and a

sense of the relation of what they do to the order of the whole of things. ... The university must resist the temptation to try to do everything for society." Amen. And credit to Bloom for having the breadth of animus to take off after not only the social sciences but business degree programs.

But this is where Bloom's animus misled him. The tumult of his diatribe masked a grave problem of historical explanation. Many of the students in the '60s Bloom deplored, the ones who participated in the "dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry as had the German university in the thirties," were schooled on precisely those Great Books that were supposed to curb cultural relativism. Mario Savio, the leader of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement in 1964, was a philosophy major who knew his Plato cold. You can rightly chastise the late-'60s rebels for getting their means-ends calculus wrong, but it wouldn't be because their teachers failed to warn them against moral absolutism, or because the New Left was "a Nietzscheanized-Heidegger-ianized Left" that unthinkingly hated "bourgeois society." By the way, *Being and Time* wasn't even available in an English translation until 1962, rather too late to be turned into a manual for occupying university buildings. Heidegger had zero significance for the New Left (the movement did, however, gravitate to his onetime student Herbert Marcuse).

In his *Götterdämmerung* chapter, entitled (what else?) "The Sixties," Bloom raged that the Cornell students he taught had learned all too well the "modern democratic thought" that they "absolutized and radicalized." He absolutized in his own way. Alluding to the events of April 1969, which culminated in a group of armed black students occupying Cornell's student union, he did not stoop to mention the burning cross outside the black women's co-op at 3 a.m., nor the white-black student clash that followed. His central theme was that the faculty had gone wimpy. But his omission of the burning cross suggests his tone-deafness to unpleasant realities of American life. "When students talk about one another," he wrote, "one almost never hears them saying things that divide others into groups or kinds." Perhaps this was true at the University of Chicago in the '80s, though I doubt it.

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In Bloom's eyes, the students had been betrayed, "almost inevitably," by "generations of teaching that the most instinctive of all questions — What is good? — has no place in the university." Passion had seized them and annihilated reason. A parade of horrors followed: the overthrow of *in loco parentis*, the legitimization of drugs,

the overturning of all sexual restrictions (which ones would Bloom have preserved?), grade inflation.

Bloom was so wildly and promiscuously drawn to the thrill of apocalypse as to sound like the spiritual father of the reigning prince of nihilism, Steve Bannon, with his vision of "American carnage" that is wrecking the West because Judeo-Christian "will" has collapsed. The barbaric uprisings of yesteryear inspired Bloom's most barbed outrage and incoherent

though operatic denunciations. His most original explanation for the student revolt was that democracy itself discourages legitimate paths to glory. One might have thought that the Vietnam War had something to do with the rebellion and its excesses, but about that assault on the higher values of Western civilization Bloom has barely a word to say. Instead, there's this: "It is very difficult to distinguish oneself in America, and in order to do so the students substituted conspicuous compassion for their parents' conspicuous consumption."

Enter the campus demagogue in a misguided lunge toward glory, leaping onstage to cultivate "the exquisite thrills of egalitarian vanity." Sober scholars were ignored — those who clung to intellectual values when they "seriously studied sexual differentiation or who raised questions about the educational value of business or who considered the possibility of limited nuclear war." If only those damned Harvard kids had bowed to Henry Kissinger when they had the chance!

Not only that, but rock music "ruin[ed] the imagination of young people and [made] it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education." Perhaps because "sexual adventurers like Margaret Mead" commanded students to "loosen up," or because feminism came along to suppress modesty, acting as a "depressant on the Bacchanalian mood of the sexual revolution," while "male sexual passion has become sinful again because it culminates in sexism." Perhaps because science lost its pride of place in the curriculum, or because it abandoned Aristotle and Newton in favor of specialties and technique, or because "reason is unable to establish its unity," or because 20th-century social science abolished the common good. Perhaps most of all because of the Nietzsche invasion — though one might have thought that particular problem had reached its acme at Bloom's beloved University of Chicago in 1924, when Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb concluded that Nietzsche had licensed them to become *Übermenschen* by murdering a 14-year-old boy.

Sometimes Bloom seemed to argue that it was a mistake to have let the riffraff into the sacred groves in the first place. Sometimes he grudgingly acknowledged that liberal democracy was "the best of the modern regimes." (Thus his lame subtitle, *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*.) In this mood, he deplored the university's surrender to the smorgasbord of mindless relativism for having jeopardized what ought to have been its foundational role in democracy. But mainly Bloom insisted that the Enlightenment needed to be protected *from* democracy. He declared darkly that "of the truly great philosophers since the French Revolution, only Kant was a friend of liberal democracy." But sad to say, democracy had become entrenched. Then what was left to be done? Under unfavorable conditions, the university's mission "for the sake of democracy" was now to train Enlightenment holdouts to resist the siren song of "egalitarian resentment," "this peculiar democratic blindness." How? Presumably a Koch-funded Academy would have to partner with the next Socrates to found the new temple of reason on the hill.

Allan Bloom damned the campus left for its hostility to the university mission, and on that score he was within his rights — partly prophetic, partly overwrought. But his attempt to resurrect classical Greece on campus, while touching, offers little guidance in the present. If he was right to argue that the spirit of equality was itself the root of illiberalism, then all he could counsel was an energetic despair.

For him, the gun-toting black students at Cornell in 1969 constituted a barbarian goon squad with a bad pedigree, and moved the campus further along in its long-running decline and fall. Since then, of course, relativism of various stripes has flourished, along with cheap and selective hostility to the Enlightenment. Bloom would not be surprised to see segments of the campus left — students not even born in 1969, and indeed whose parents might not have been born then — proudly declare today: "NO FREE SPEECH." The mob attack on Charles Murray at Middlebury College, along with various lesser uproars against unpopular views, revealed the force of a continuing revolt against reason.

Bloom would be horrified but again unsurprised by the claim that the identity of a person making an argument is more important than the strength or weakness of the argument, and the insistence in certain quarters that science has been illegitimately dominated by straight white men. He would view squeamishness about "microaggressions" (as when the University of California's office of the president singled out for opprobrium such examples as "There is only one race, the human race" and "America is a melting pot") as a triumph of the herd mentality. He might well say "I told you so" at the contemporary insistence on trigger warnings. All these developments would have struck Bloom as predictable products of the university's failure to go about its righteous business and teach students what they are there for.

Ordinary politics do not seem to have interested Bloom much at all, so he would probably not have dwelled on the irony that these campus maneuvers have painted the actual left and its values into a corner. Intoxicated by in-group identity, the enclaves of the campus left have conquered ground here and there in the university but left the institutions of national government in the hands of ignoramuses who assault reason. Obsessed by the powers of insult, availing themselves of campus liberties to conduct rituals of purification, activists too often offend liberals, avoid hard questions of how to formulate and work toward majority coalitions, and skirt the onslaught of right-wing politics.

Students obsessed with parsing relative privilege while thinking they have thought their way out of identity silos by brandishing a hazy concept of "intersectionality" are not devoting their energies to preserve the voting rights that are under assault. Activists convinced that electoral politics are a tweedledum-tweedledee game leave uncontested the flagrant inequalities of American life.

The erosion of reason does no favors for the campus or the left. Much of the history of the last century goes to show that equality, freedom, and reason rise and fall together. But Bloom's barrages of contempt, however viscerally launched, do not point the way toward an educational system that might serve democracy in crisis. In a world that mocks reason and, day by day, debases democratic potential, the American mind surely needs no further

triviality, no further nihilism, no further closure. What it needs is an opening to our better angels. What it needs is the joy that comes when human beings reason our way through our troubles toward light.

Todd Gitlin is a professor of journalism and sociology and chair of the Ph.D. program in communications at Columbia University.

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1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
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