

Bloom on Socrates and America

ALLAN BLOOM'S *The Closing of the American Mind* is now a genuine cultural phenomenon. It's number one on the *The New York Times* hit parade and a Book of the Month Club selection. It's even sweeping Europe. Even the tackiest and trendiest exposés just don't do any better than this.

But Bloom has written a book of wonderfully high quality that will endure the test of time. It is an extraordinarily demanding, philosophically rich, and long overdue indictment of American education, particularly higher education. Its genuine enjoyment requires a sort of erudition and taste far beyond the reach of most of its readers. Why is it so popular with just about everyone with any intellectual pretensions? Even those whom the book attacks, almost all American intellectuals, seem to love to hate it. They emphasize in their counter-attacks that the book is worth reading because Bloom does make some good points.

The book is an after-the-fact description of the effect of philosophy on America, and hence on the world, because Europe no longer stands in contrast to America. It is Hegelian in its comprehensive account of the power of reason. Reason doesn't rule the world, though; the real is emphatically not rational. America and Americans are now closed to the truth about Being.

The activity of philosophers has brought philosophy to an end. Enlightenment, defined by Bloom as the project to make the world safe for philosophy, which began, although in a relatively muted form, not in the seventeenth century but with the Platonic-Socratic founding of *political* philosophy, has in fact darkened the world. Philosophers, following their desire for rational self-sufficiency, have destroyed the culture out of which philosophy must grow. The truth which philosophers neglect is that philosophy is a

flower, which dies if it is not rooted in the soil.

Bloom says he had to learn this truth (philosophy blooms) from his experience as an American. With it, he seems closer to Heidegger than Hegel, especially the "late" Heidegger. He almost revels in how ridiculous the "early" Heidegger was when he tried to do something about the world's parlous condition. Heidegger showed, and should have known, that all revolutions and all activism can do nothing but make the situation worse. The "early" Heidegger at least, according to Bloom, was not ironic enough about the perverse effects of thought on action.

At this point one suspects that the book is popular because it is an unusually and in some ways unprecedentedly sophisticated example of the characteristically American propensity for self-criticism. For the casual reader it is attractive as yet another thrashing of the superficial, self-indulgent, spiritless, heartless, narcissistic American individual. Bloom hates America, and he tells us why in an urbane and entertaining way, and we are delighted.

And yet it is excessive to say that Bloom hates America. He is too ironic for that. He seems even to complain that his irony, unlike Socrates's, is not only tolerated but applauded. Where's the moral majority with teeth to strike out against his amoral detachment, which is more blatant even than Socrates's? Americans are too prejudiced against prejudice to be prejudiced against Bloom. Would Bloom say that the enthusiastic reception accorded his book is evidence that its thesis is untrue, that the American mind is not closed after all? Or is it, properly or ironically interpreted, just more evidence for closure?

Bloom writes as a university professor, and his account of his personal experiences very rarely goes beyond those characteristic of a professor. He writes with a

bit of the admirable sense of biblical or moral and religious conviction that permeated the home and life of his grandparents. He also observes that his cousins, who are much better educated in a technical sense than his grandparents, have a much more superficial view of morality. They have lost contact with the reality of a tradition of profound belief; hence they have lost much of what is traditionally called human distinctiveness or excellence.

Bloom himself has studied the best expressions of biblical and other traditional beliefs with great care. He has a fine understanding of the arguments for them. But he does not find them really adequate. He himself, like his cousins, is not a believer. Is he, in a decisive, moral sense, really superior to his cousins? What does the closure of Bloom's soul to the experience of faith do for the openness of his mind? These are difficult questions to answer.

We never learn from this book, which claims to be and is in many respects very personal, whether or not Bloom is married, has children, or is involved in a church or synagogue. Although he writes of families, divorces, and child-rearing, these matters seem to have little to do with him personally. The same can be said, of course, of biblical faith. Neither do we learn of his political involvement, except in "campus politics," nor at least much about his political opinions. We don't know what he thinks government ought to do, if anything, about the economy or Russia. We don't know for whom he voted, or even if he votes. The only political question which moves Bloom's soul, it seems, is the future of philosophy.

He presents himself as too Socratic for much serious practical involvement. (He does like and dislike various types of music, sees their importance for shaping the soul, but doesn't know much about them.) Like Socrates, more or less, Bloom is not essentially a good citizen or a good family man. If he has any familial or political ties or duties, they do not say anything (much) about what he truly is.

Bloom lives the life of the mind. His friends are the great thinkers embodied in the great books, his fellow professors (not many) who share his love of wisdom, and his students. His primary source of knowledge about America today, he says, is his discussions with the students at America's best universities he has taught over the last thirty years.

Clearly, Bloom is unusually attached to his students, and it is easy to see why they would like him. But he had a difficult time at Cornell in the late sixties when, for a time, some of the best and brightest came to hate him or at least that for which he stands. For Bloom nothing good came out of this animosity, and the sixties as a whole were worse than worthless.

Today, his complaint is that students are too "nice." They neither love Bloom and his teaching nor hate them. They are polite about them. They are neither erotic enough to love Socratic-Platonic ideas nor spirited enough to hate them. Because they are passively "open" to all ideas, they have no opinions. They do not attempt to distinguish between truth and falsity or between good and evil.

Today's students are the products of the thought that all human beings should live like Socrates. They are caricatures of Socrates. They have his detachment from practice without his devotion to theory. They are incapable of living passionate, serious, truly human lives. They just are. All the essence has been sucked out of their existence.

From the point of view of the open mind, it turns out, the sixties seem to have been better than the eighties. Thoughtless indignation—and Heidegger, after all, was open to it—is surely superior to no thought and no indignation. The sixties were worse than worthless because their failure paved the way for the eighties.

There's no truth, for Bloom, in Reagan-revivalism. He agrees with, say, Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., that the eighties are destined to be a blank page in American history, especially in the history of American thought. It is now clear why Bloom's line of thought is not that dis-

agreeable to most liberals. They might amend it by saying that some good came out of the sixties, such as civil rights legislation. Because Bloom does praise the original, conservative intent of the civil rights movement, he would agree to the amendment, dissenting only on affirmative action.

From the perspective of those called conservatives today, especially populist "moral majoritarians" and refined "cultural conservatives," there may actually be less to like about Bloom's argument. His affirmation of the moral profundity of the Great Tradition and his endorsement of Great Books education, in the context of his denigration of the hopelessly spiritless and deracinated present, are too reactionary to be conservative. There is, as he presents America, little or no philosophy, religion, morality, culture, politics, or anything else worth conserving. His vision of America undermines the conservative activism of the eighties just as much as the liberal-radical activism of the sixties, which is why, to emphasize an already obvious point, liberals are just beginning to find it extremely useful. Bloom's pessimism comes largely from the characteristic error of the professor, whether liberal or conservative. He tends to believe that America *is* its most prestigious universities.

Bloom's modern hero is Nietzsche, who was contemptuous of those who called themselves liberals, conservatives, or radicals. None of them is radical enough. Nietzsche discovered what really ailed the modern world: too much Socrates and, as a result, not enough courage and not enough faith. Nietzsche questioned Socrates as radically as he could, and it

was perhaps the first time the man had received such a cross-examination. Nietzsche also did everything else he could to undermine his perhaps fatally enervating influence on human life. A world too friendly to Socrates is not even good for Socrates, because it is too prejudiced against prejudice to permit the genuine questioning of prejudice or opinion.

But, according to Bloom, Nietzsche's attempts at a cure only intensified the disease. He succeeded in "relativizing" Socrates's "thing," the pursuit of wisdom, without overcoming Socrates's rational destruction of the credibility of every other human pursuit. The result is the thoughtless moral relativism affirmed by most educated Americans today. Nietzsche, in Bloom's eyes, cannot be blamed for his attempt at the impossible.

Bloom himself is too Socratic or at least too ironic to strike out against Socrates. He cannot tell morally, spiritually, and politically serious human beings today, including perhaps even his friends and students, what to do. He is given to suggesting falsely that such persons do not even exist in significant numbers. According to Bloom's teacher, Leo Strauss, the secret to the reinvigoration of the West today may be the rediscovery of the credibility of the case for revelation, which was always part of the theoretical and practical vitality of the Great Tradition. For Bloom, as far as I can tell, the possibility of the truth of revelation is not a real one. But he has explained as well as anyone the price that has been paid for the dogmatic denial of that possibility.

—Peter Augustine Lawler