

Adding to Organized Misunderstanding

ALLAN BLOOM'S BOOK is undistinguished, yet its instant and widespread success is not surprising. With some regularity our society, or its various sub-sectors, loudly announces its indignation over something or other: Vietnam, Judge Bork, the Ayatollah, smoking, apartheid—or education. In thirty-seven years of teaching I have witnessed plenty of these artificially whipped-up scandals and also Bloom-like best sellers on the ills of classroom instruction by Rudolf Flesch, Arthur Bestor, Jacques Barzun, or Mortimer Adler. Each writer attacks the problems of education but systematically shoots at something else than the target. The result is a game or, better, the American ritual of *not* mentioning the sacred cow and its attributes.

For this very reason Bloom's book is indistinguishable from the rest. Most honest people who have entered an American classroom must be aware, even after an hour, of what is wrong. But at the same time they also enter a conspiratorial circle and swear they would never tell. Occasionally there appears a Barzun or a Bloom, that is, a professor possessing enough writing skill to beat around the bush and focus on inessential criticisms in three or four hundred pages. His indignation becomes popular because he complains about such vague things as cultural relativism, not enough intellectual courses, disoriented students. The reader does not care about these abstractions, and perhaps it is the first time he hears of them anyway. But since these charges are aimed at nothing and nobody in particular, he closes the book, satisfied that all of this can be cured. "Let's make students work harder!" he exclaims; "let us pay our teachers better"; "let us introduce those Great Books that Bloom so heartily recom-

mends." In short, you put in the ingredients (like the tiger in the tank) and at the end of the production line the "educational excellence" will come out.

What goes unmentioned by readers, critics, and Bloom himself is that our society is geared to do business and to turn other matters, from sin to sainthood, into a business enterprise. What is business? A transaction between two contractants. This is the nature of the relationship in America between teacher and student, school and public. "I pay, you teach me, and you owe me a diploma." The sacredness of the teaching/learning process is never mentioned in the pertinent documents, reports, or best sellers; yet without it the entire process is a sham exercise, not to say a fake, primarily for the young since everything around them tells the same story: in the public wasteland nothing is sacred, everything is negotiable on the basis of pluralism, and education is a mere certification through which a young person proves he is 14 or 18 or 22 years of age. He cannot prove any knowledge and nobody expects him to.

All this has nothing to do, as Bloom comfortably charges, with "cultural relativism," which at least assumes that the student—and the teacher—knows what culture is. The matter is much more basic, and it has everything to do with the trivialization of education at all levels: futile class-discussions about "problems" where the personal is put on the same level as the world-historical; the scrapbook approach where students take a course on Rome, another on the oil crisis, and still another on nuclear war/peace; the term-paper ritual which permits lazy professors to pile useless and listless work on Johnny. One prefers the pharaoh whose slaves

piled stone on stone, and ended up with a pyramid. But the pyramids of old term papers on faculty room shelves only gather dust; they do not attract the eye.

In spite of all these evidences, Bloom goes dutifully through the ritual of assigning blame on supposedly derailed cultural habits. True to the postulates of educational fetishists, he assumes that all youths are educable, that mass-schools and mass-universities are places of learning, that there are miracle cures such as the Great Books. None of this is true in a society where the value of learning is low on the totem pole, unless it is the latest fad: Let's catch up with the Sputnik (in the fifties); or let's learn Swahili (in the sixties); or let's make revolution (in the seventies); or let's be competent in computer science (in the eighties). American education is a subclass of other interests: business, politics, world-improvement, or simply one of "getting a job." This is not a temporary situation, but a deeply and ineradicably encrusted ideology which despises knowledge other than that of the practical and the here-and-now. My students at the City University of New York are normally in a state of stupor; I have never, in decades, heard any of them express the slightest curiosity. My students at Yale University, most of them very intelligent, simply admit: "Why should we study? We come from rich and influential families, our career in law, politics, or government is guaranteed. We shall be ambassadors, business lawyers, high officials. Why bother?" This is the same reaction that a Santayana, who knew his Harvard, described, and before him a Tocqueville. The highest ideal for our youth, wrote Santayana, is a business career. Society does not raise its eyes above it.

Under these circumstances the Great Books are a kind of obscene monument, like some Hindu temples to Western eyes. They appear like a business venture, hardly different from the college textbook heavyweights on "abnormal psychology" or "business administration." They come with directions supplied for their use and are advertised as containing all knowl-

edge plus some more, the way Renaissance calendars were publicized at markets, robbing the credulous peasant of his last coins. The whole manner of their presentation is commercial hard sale: Here is culture capsulated, you read (and buy) the collection, and immediately you will be educated. The result, however, is only this: The uniform bulks on the shelves scare away the normal let alone the sensitive, human mind in quest not of *omnibus rebus* but only of some *scribilia*—picking up frayed volumes at antiquaries, without risking at the next earthquake burial under ziggurats of hardbounds. Don't Bloom, Adler, Hutchins understand that, thus packaged and pushed, the classics lose their "cultural" aura, and that students, like the proverbial officer, reach for their revolver when the words "great books" are mentioned like a battery of vitamin bottles?

With or without great books, our educational system is fraudulent, not because of what is not taught, but because the teaching/learning process takes place in an atmosphere of make-believe. By the time the college student comes into contact with Bloom's "cultural relativism," he had been exposed in grade school to the following: a bit of English composition, science, and numerous visits to the neighborhood bank, the supermarket, and the firehouse in order to "study" them in operation. His young mind draws the conclusion that nothing has value, that nothing is real, that the big words in the catalogue are hypocrisy and pretence. In sum, the root cause of cultural relativism and of shabby teaching is not to be sought in an academic preference for the nihilist Nietzsche rather than for the *dīvus* Plato, but in the fact that the curriculum mirrors an ubiquitously enforced pluralism. How could it be otherwise when our overarching educational principle prescribes a "real-life" course of studies—and when real life itself rewards pluralism/relativism, ostracizing convictions? Teaching degenerates into an ideological enterprise—this is at least what I have always experienced in classrooms and faculty

meetings.

Habent sua fata libelli. What will be the ultimate fate of Bloom's book in this country and in Europe, where it has also hit the best-seller list and the book-award circles? In America the book most likely will be forgotten in proportion as "public indignation about what Bloom reveals" diminishes. Indignations have a limited life time, for the next campaign of indignation is waiting, impatiently, around the corner. As Montesquieu said, democracies always lead crusades against something. Who knows, Bloom's book, in the company of Bestor's and Barzun's books, will be collected as the nucleus of a new Great Books series for students in the next century. Perhaps it is safe to predict that it is a book that will cause endless debate, eventually even the setting up of presidential commissions, and then even more debates and reports. But the system will remain unaffected.

It seems that each time America sneezes the Europeans draw metaphysical conclusions. This time it is not different. I read in *Le Monde* that American "lycées" seem to have failed in teaching the "humanities." But how gently this is phrased! The reason is that while *Le Monde* is leftist and anti-American, it also knows that its readers are snobs who buy in New York everything from their shampoo to a Harvard Business School education for their sons. Clearly, America can do no wrong, its culture is Periclean, its schools outclass the Sorbonne (which is not so difficult these days). Bloom's book will not be believed in Europe, although there are some who read it with *Schadenfreude*: "Ah, the Americans also fail on occasion!" This is, of course beside the point; it has nothing to do with education in the United States, either its Bloomian diagnosis or its real failures.

I do not mean to say that Bloom's book is useless simply because it has joined the American ritual of indignation, relief, or restored optimism. I say that it does not touch the substratum where our ideology shapes the social, therefore also the educational, presuppositions. Moreover,

the author implicitly deplores the vast lacunae in America's intellectualization; he would like to see more professors, more students, more courses, more Great Books. I find a diminishing return in such a relentlessly, and one might say mercilessly, pursued educational enterprise, a step towards not the liberation but the mechanization and disbraining of society. It is not that Bloom or anyone else could arrest this process or even slow it down. It is, however, the task of pedagogues to point it out and to warn youths against the general conditions of the jailing of their intelligence. The American mind has not been "closed" as Bloom claims; educationally it has never been opened since an ideology has shaped our schools, and the schools pass it on with the complicity of professors, the textbook industry, teachers' certification methods, Great Books, an overwhelming business structure, and the ever-present trivia. Each Bloom-like volume adds to the thick layer of organized misunderstanding.

It is unreasonable to expect students and teachers to overcome the social-ideological pressure to which schools at all levels are subjected. What our society's business orientation may leave culturally unleveled, pluralist ideology is sure to liquefy. In every society or nation there are taboos to be avoided in writing and in speech; the powerful always influence the content and the style of what is taught, discussed, published. Usually, however, power is concentrated in one or more institutions and the taboo is rather clearly identified. Yet, stylistic and terminological tricks circumvent it, as in the "Aesopian-language" current under Party rule. In a pluralism erected into religious dogma, taboos are many and they multiply: One day Shakespeare is forbidden in classroom English because he lived under an absolutist and thus a fascist monarch, or because he drew the figure of Shylock; the next day Uncle Tom and Huckleberry Finn are censored, and next week's grammar imposes he/she, him/her so as not to offend feminists; a little later the Our Father is unsexed. The consequence is more than

confusion; it is loss of integrity and the desire for excellence.

How could Johnny, who is never allowed intellectually to grow up, venture on the high seas of culture when at every turn he meets such "opinionated" and "judgmental" figures as Dante and Machiavelli, Rabelais and Hobbes, Napoleon and Kierkegaard, each of whom questioned the views of what are today immensely powerful interest groups in a pluralist society?

This is why our students are "flat-souled," and not because, as Allan Bloom claims with tortured arguments, German philosophy invaded our shores a hundred years ago, or because the impassioned Romantics reacted to Enlightenment rationalism. How far can one go to fetch causes, one must ask, in order not to see those at hand?

—Thomas Molnar

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