



Bloom on the Regime*

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Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*¹ reminds us that education is emphatically a public activity, one that always has been at the center of our national debate.

At the beginning, of course, there was the *Federalist*, and the alternative vision of America bequeathed to us by the Anti-Federalists. This particular debate was carried out in newspapers and pamphlets—then as now instruments of popular education. Its subject was the proposed federal constitution; and the aim of Federalist and Anti-Federalist alike was to educate Americans about that constitution. Further, each recognized that future Americans would be educated as citizens by whatever constitutional arrangements were adopted. This is one thing that constitutions do.²

Another kind of debate quickly followed, one that dealt even more directly with education and public life. Thomas Jefferson, for example, entered this debate in his *Report of the Commissioners for Virginia* (1818): "Some good men, and even of respectable information," he observes, think that "the learned sciences" are "useless acquirements"; others "that they do not better the condition of man"; still others "that education...should be left to private individual effort." But the legislature of Virginia took a different stand, as did Jefferson and his fellow commissioners, who together "are sensible that the advantages of

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¹New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. Subsequent references to this book are enclosed by parentheses and placed in the text.

²Plato, *Crito*, 49e-54e, in *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's "Euthyphro," "Apology," and "Crito," and Aristophanes' "Clouds,"* trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1984) 108-114. For the American case, see Ralph Lerner, "The Supreme Court as Republican Schoolmaster," *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1987) 91-136, and Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987).

well-directed education, moral, political and economical, are truly above all estimate." Further, they held that such education

generates habits of application, of order, and the love of virtue; and controls, by the force of habit, any innate obliquities in our moral organization.³

Virginia got its university, and so education and public life were joined in that state. But this debate lives on, as does the debate over our education as citizens under the Constitution and at the hands of its official interpreters.

Bloom speaks to what is at issue in these debates, as he has done before, always with spirit but now for the first time at book length and with a dazzling range of reference. He shows that these are not simply American debates but that their native intellectual context is the entire history of political philosophy, itself a structured debate about political things. Before the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom was known chiefly within academic circles and as the translator of two splendid editions of Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*. They are companion works, as is suggested by the uniform size of his editions of them; and together they elaborate the great and contending questions about virtue and freedom that he brings to his analysis of liberal education in America. Rousseau poses a question in *Emile* that can help us to understand Bloom's standpoint:

Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato's *Republic*. It is not at all a political work, as think those who judge books only by their titles. It is the most beautiful educational treatise ever written.⁴

Bloom came first to Plato; but it is as if in doing so he had heeded Rousseau's advice, for at the conclusion of *The Closing of the American Mind* he tells us that Plato's *Republic* is for him "the book on education" (381). Though not a "political work" in the obvious sense, it will give its readers "an idea of public education" and with that also a revealing perspective on everyday politics.

Bloom claims that this perspective need not distort the interpretation of American politics:

In this book I am attempting to make a contribution to understanding this generation....I am describing our present situation and do not intend any comparison with the past to be used as grounds for congratulating or

³Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 460-61. For a comment on Jefferson's *Report*, see Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 54-57. Her book is a worthy companion volume to Bloom's.

⁴Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979) 40. Bloom's edition of Plato's *Republic* was published by Basic Books in 1969. His writings on education include "The Crisis of Liberal Education," *Higher Education and Modern Democracy: The Crisis of the Few and the Many*, ed. Robert A. Goldwin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967) 121-39; "The Democratization of the University," *How Democratic Is America? Responses to the New Left Challenge*, ed. Robert A. Goldwin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971) 109-36; "The Failure of the University," *Daedalus* 103 (1974) 58-66; "Political Science and the Undergraduate," *Teaching Political Science: The Professor and the Polity*, ed. Vernon Van Dyke (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977) 117-27; "The Education of Democratic Man," *Daedalus* 107 (1978) 135-53; "Introduction" to Rousseau's *Emile*, 3-28, which is a revision of "The Education of Democratic Man"; and "Our Listless Universities," *National Review* (10 December 1982) 1537-38, 1544-48.

blaming ourselves but only for the sake of clarifying what counts for us and what is special in our situation. (22)

Cosmopolitan man though he is ("After all, as Socrates points out, all societies look pretty much the same from the heights, be they Periclean Athens or Des Moines, Iowa" [292-93]), Bloom

represents himself in this book as an American citizen, as one who is concerned with the matter of civic virtue. The Socratic perspective must somehow coincide with, though it is not identical to, the citizen perspective. Even Socrates was an Athenian, and Bloom is a Hoosier, but not simply so.⁵ All citizens, however different they may be, share in a common enterprise. The same could be said of sailors and was said by Aristotle:

the preservation of the ship in its voyage is the work of all of them, and each of the sailors strives for this. Similarly, although citizens are dissimilar, preservation of the partnership is their task, and the regime is [this] partnership; hence the virtue of the citizen must necessarily be with a view to the regime.⁶

Here we come to the core of Bloom's argument. "Always important is the political regime," he says, "which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principle" (26). In the American case, the principle involved is the principle of equal freedom, the equal freedom of American citizens as citizens, a principle embodied in the Constitution. Our history as a nation centers on controversies about this principle, never more significantly so than in the Civil War.⁷ As Bloom puts it:

Our story is the majestic and triumphant march of the principle of freedom and equality, giving meaning to all that we have done or are doing. There are almost no accidents; everything that happens among us is a consequence of one or both of our principles—a triumph over some opposition to them, a discovery of a fresh meaning in them, a dispute about which of the two has primacy, etc. (97)

However, so he argues, we have lost sight of the significance of these controversies. We are no longer able to interpret them clearly in terms of constitutional doctrine. No longer do we

know the rights doctrine; the Constitution, which embodied it; and American history, which presented and celebrated the founding of a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." (27)

He quotes here from the Declaration of Independence; and he might add that one sign of our having forgotten its articulation of the rights doctrine is our general skepticism about its promise of equality. That promise extends definitely to political equality; but since equally free citizens disagree about social and

⁵See the biographical note in Allan Bloom, "How Nietzsche Conquered America," *Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 1987) 82.

⁶Aristotle, *Politics* 1276b 26-30, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 90.

⁷See especially Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) and *Equality and Liberty: Theory and Practice in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University, 1965).

economic equality, the promise does not extend on the same terms to these forms of equality,

regrettable though we often find this fact to be. Knowing only this much about the rights doctrine would not still the controversies—about “social justice,” for example—but it would help to abate the skepticism.

Where then do citizens learn about the rights doctrine and the related matters Bloom mentions? They might learn about them from the Constitution itself, which is the practical outcome of a theoretical development. Citizens who have in effect absorbed this development understand that our public life rests on the apparently humble doctrine of rational self-interest, as calculated by each and every citizen. This is what Tocqueville recognized about us when he commented so brilliantly on the preeminent place in American life of “the principle of self-interest properly understood.”⁸ This is our legacy, bequeathed to us by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke, who formulated the modern doctrine of natural rights, which makes of all citizens the masters and mistresses of their own lives, interested advocates of their own freedom. As citizens we need agree on only this, that our freedom is the sole basis of our common life, of our life together. And we have a Constitution that aims to guarantee this freedom, our equal freedom as citizens, to us. This Constitution, however, does point toward a certain human type, to a certain kind of citizen, the one who is rational and industrious and who recognizes (as Hobbes taught) that fidelity to contracts and to the contractual basis of our public life is the chief civic virtue.⁹ But it must be observed that our Constitution leaves us, as its pupils, with an ambiguity. On the one hand, it produces and depends on that rational, industrious, and obligated citizen; on the other, it aims to guarantee the equal freedom of all citizens of whatever kind, which allows them to do with that freedom almost whatever they will. Thus the Constitution returns a complex answer to the important question of what kind of citizen and citizen body it requires, what kind is congruent with it. It gives us no simple answer if we approach it and ask, “How ought we to live?” It is our Delphic Oracle.¹⁰

Yet answer the question we must, and in fact do, with our lives. So where else can we turn for guidance in the matter? To the colleges and universities of the land? From a distance, at least some Americans might suppose that they are the keepers of a comprehensive and discriminating account of our public life. But today’s academy preserves no such account (336-82; 243-335). How could it?

⁸Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 525-28.

⁹Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968) 223-39.

¹⁰The foregoing remarks on the Constitution depend on the developed sense of the term “regime,” which is cardinal in both Aristotle’s political science and Bloom’s critique of American education. The term refers to two matters: first, to the factual distribution of offices and the honors attached to them, hence to what we ordinarily call a “constitution”; second, and more importantly, to a “way of life,” to the kind of activity most characteristic of the citizen body or its dominant and most respectable part, the activity and the citizens who engage in it having a decisive influence on the ordinary conduct of government, on the constitution. Much depends, then, on the congruence between “constitution” and “way of life.” For an analysis, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 130-43, and *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964) 45-49. See also Robert P. Kraynak, “Tocqueville’s Constitutionalism,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987) 1175-95.

It has been overwhelmed by careerism, by the political causes of the moment, and by a democracy among the learned disciplines that caters indiscriminately to cause and careerism

alike. The effect of these developments has been to disable students from even knowing that a case can be made for American constitutional democracy, much less what the rudiments of that case are. Instead of making that case in its complexity, academics tend to simplify the regime question. They tend to advocate the kind of democracy that is “held to be most particularly democratic,” in which, however, what they advocate “is the opposite of what is advantageous,” to quote Aristotle. Not advantageous, he goes on, because such advocates of democracy

define freedom badly. For there are two things by which democracy is held to be defined: the majority having authority, and freedom. Justice is held to be something equal; equality requires that whatever the multitude resolves is authoritative, and freedom and equality involve doing whatever one wants. So in democracies of this sort everyone lives as he wants and “toward whatever [end he happens] to crave,” as Euripides says. But this is a poor thing. To live with a view to the regime should not be supposed to be slavery, but preservation.¹¹

To apply Aristotle’s argument in the American case, we have only to observe again in passing the close connection between the modern doctrine of natural rights, American constitutional democracy, and those citizens who are rationally self-interested, industrious, and obligated. They constitute our “middle class,” also known pejoratively and especially so to the college-bred as “bourgeois,” a term that as Bloom reminds us

originally meant a diminished, egotistical, materialistic being without grandeur or beauty of soul, and it has maintained that negative sense—best known to Americans because of Marx—up to our day. (157)

A more balanced account of American public life is available, though it be neglected. Aristotle’s political science is again a good starting point for finding our way to both it and Bloom’s argument for liberal education. In the course of his celebrated analysis of revolution in Book 5 of the *Politics*, Aristotle remarks that

the greatest of all the things that have been mentioned with a view to making regimes lasting—though it is now slighted by all—is education relative to the regime.

He continues by saying that “to be educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that...those who want democracy enjoy,” but rather the things that contribute to the health and stability of democratic regimes, for “many of the things that are held to be characteristically popular overturn democracies.” In his judgment, then, the remedy for the defects of democracy is not always more democracy. Aristotle’s humble example is the snub nose, itself a deviation “from the straightness that is most beautiful”: if an artist were somehow fascinated by the deviation of the snub nose and took that deviation to its limit the result would be no nose at all. In the case of democracy, then, “education

¹¹Aristotle, *Politics* 1310a 27-35, quoted from the translation by C. Lord, p. 167.

relative to the regime” is education that corrects the characteristic defect of democracy, education that is the opposite of popular.¹²

This is essentially Bloom’s argument and why he says that liberal education exists especially for those few students who “will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous”:

They become the models for the use of the noblest human faculties and hence are benefactors to all of us, more for what they are than for what they do. (21)

As for the rest, “most students will be content with what our present considers relevant,” while still “others will have a spirit of enthusiasm that subsides as family and ambition provide them with other objects of interest” (21). For all such students as these, in Bloom’s argument, the college years involve little more than a rite of passage that brings some but no drastic changes in its initiates, perhaps only the exchange of old prejudices for the second-hand opinions of the professoriate, an exchange sometimes confused with education. But whatever political postures they adopt, these students seem fated to be illiberal in the sense of remaining slaves to conventional opinion of one kind or another. An uninspired business indeed. Bloom conjures up a memorable picture of “a teen-ager leaving home for the first time, off to the adventure of a liberal education”:

He has four years of freedom to discover himself—a space between the intellectual wasteland he has left behind and the inevitable dreary professional training that awaits him after the baccalaureate. In this short time he must learn that there is a great world beyond the little one he knows, experience the exhilaration of it and digest enough of it to sustain himself in the intellectual deserts he is destined to traverse. He must do this, that is, if he is to have any hope of a higher life. These are the charmed years when he...has the opportunity to survey his alternatives, not merely those current in his time or provided by careers, but those available to him as a human being. (336)

That hope is likely to be dashed, even or especially at “a first-rank college or university” (336), because the academy has become the home of the doctrine of moral relativism, which claims to prove that the search for the best way of life is in principle futile (25-43, 194-216). If that doctrine were true, the student could never learn to see the American regime for what it is, to recognize both its virtues and its defects, even though our Constitution indirectly presses this inquiry on the student and indeed on all reflective citizens.

Bloom’s hope, however, is that the spirit of inquiry will survive; even under the unpromising circumstances of life in the modern academy, “that the embers do not die out” (380). He entertains this hope because of what he sees in the eyes of his students (20), always a starting point for a teacher:

¹²Aristotle, *Politics* 1310a 11-12; 1309b 19-20, 23-24, quoted from translation by C. Lord, pp. 166, 167. Compare Jefferson’s remarks in his letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813, in *Writings*, ed. Peterson, pp. 1304-10. Their correspondence on education, including this letter, is in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (2 vols.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1959). Allan Bloom is in good company; he is not the first

Despite all the efforts to pervert it...the question that every young person asks, “Who am I?,” the powerful urge to follow the Delphic command, “Know thyself,” which is born in each of us, means in the first place “What is man?” And in our chronic lack of certainty, this comes down to knowing the alternative answers and thinking about them. Liberal education provides access to those alternatives, many of which go against the grain of our nature or our times. (21)

Consider again that teen-ager trekking off to school. He, or his sister, may attend a university. And “the university as we know it, in its content and its aim, is the product of the Enlightenment” (256), which is to say that it is secular (256-59). Bloom’s complex and “idiosyncratic history of the university” (312) is itself an Enlightenment product, for it goes from the time of Socrates and his circle to the time of the modern university and does not stop in between. This is one thing that makes Bloom’s history idiosyncratic, as he knows. Given this interpretation of the university as the modern bearer of liberal education, it must be said that there are indeed “alternatives” that “go against the grain of...our times,” if not “of our nature,” that do not have an institutional home in the modern university. They are the alternatives articulated within the Christian church, alternatives once integral to the structure of the university and still integral to the structure of liberal education, to the question “What is man?”

Still essential to liberal education, because of its very definition, are the permanent questions and “the alternative answers” to them. By this definition, which is its own, *The Closing of the American Mind* defends a part but not the whole of liberal education. Bloom is an heir of the tradition that brings these questions and answers to us, but he acknowledges the importance of only some of its property. For example, he recommends Aristotle’s *Ethics* and its analysis of human goodness to “any normal person who wants to lead a serious life” (373). That person could learn the cardinal virtues of prudence, moderation, courage, and justice from Aristotle; but of course not the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. These latter virtues are also constituents of our tradition, to say the least; yet they scarcely reach the surface of Bloom’s pages. A more comprehensive form of liberal education, also capable of speaking responsibly about American public life, would give life to them and thus to the questions and answers he so carefully avoids.