

THE  
CLOSING  
OF THE  
AMERICAN  
MIND

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Allan Bloom

SIMON AND SCHUSTER NEW YORK



*How Higher Education Has  
Failed Democracy and  
Impoverished the Souls of  
Today's Students*

THE  
CLOSING  
OF THE  
AMERICAN  
MIND

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(2)

*To My Students*

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## Foreword

Professor Bloom has his own way of doing things. Writing about the higher education in America, he does not observe the forms, manners and ceremonies of what is called (usually by itself) the community of scholars. Yet his credentials are irreproachable. He is the author of an excellent book on Shakespeare's politics, and has translated Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*. It will be difficult for nettled colleagues to wave him away, and many will want to do just that, for he is shrewd and mettlesome, as well as learned, and a great observer of what Mencken would call, when he was being mean, "the higher learning."

But Professor Bloom is neither a debunker nor a satirist, and his conception of seriousness carries him far beyond the positions of academia. He is not addressing himself primarily to the professors. They are welcome to listen—and they will listen because they come under heavy fire—but he places himself in a larger community, invoking Socrates, Plato, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Kant more often than he does our contemporaries: "The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers . . . of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact, this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good. . . . They were absolutely one soul as they looked at the problem. This, according to Plato, is the only real friendship, the only real common good. It is here that the contact people so desperately

seek is to be found. . . . This is the meaning of the riddle of the improbable philosopher-kings. They have a true community that is exemplary for all the other communities."

A style of this sort will seem to modern readers marred by classical stiffness—"Truth," "Knowers," "the Good," "Man"—but we can by no means deny that behind our objection to such language is a guilty consciousness of the flimsiness, and not infrequently the trashiness, of our modern talk about "values."

The sentences above are taken from the conclusion of Bloom's book. Parting from his readers, he is at his most earnest. He writes in a different vein when he is discussing the power of professional economists, the separation of modern science from the "natural philosophy" that preceded it, the phenomenon called "cultural relativism," or the real, the bottom-line, significance of an M.B.A. degree. He often flashes out provocatively and wickedly. Speaking of the place of the humanities in the universities, he calls them a "submerged old Atlantis," to which we turn again to try to "find ourselves now that everybody else has given up." "The humanities are like the great old Paris Flea Market where, amidst masses of junk, people with a good eye found cast away treasures. . . ." Or else, "They are like a refugee camp where all the geniuses driven out of their jobs and countries by unfriendly regimes are idling. . . . The other two divisions of the university have no use for the past . . ." When he is not busy with the nature of the Good, he can hit, with the best (or should I say the worst) of them, very hard. As a scholar he intends to enlighten us, and as a writer he has learned from Aristophanes and other models that enlightenment should also be enjoyable. To me, this is not the book of a professor, but that of a thinker who is willing to take the risks more frequently taken by writers. It is risky in a book of ideas to speak in one's own voice, but it reminds us that the sources of the truest truths are inevitably profoundly personal. Bloom tells us: "Throughout this book I have referred to Plato's *Republic*, which is for me *the* book on education, because it really explains to me what I experience as a man and a teacher." Academics, even those describing themselves as existentialists, very seldom offer themselves publicly and frankly as individuals, as persons. So Professor Bloom is a front-line fighter in the mental wars of our times, and as such, singularly congenial to me. (If he can be personal, I see no reason why I should remain the anonymous commentator.)

In his concluding pages, Bloom tells of a student who, after a reading of the *Symposium*, said that it was hard today to imagine the magic Athenian atmosphere, "in which friendly men, educated, lively, on a footing of equality, civilized but natural, came together and told wonderful stories about the meaning of their longing. But [adds Bloom] such experiences are always accessible. Actually, this playful discussion took place in the midst of a terrible war that Athens was destined to lose, and Aristophanes and Socrates at least could foresee that this meant the decline of Greek civilization. But they were not given to culture despair, and in these terrible political circumstances, their abandon to the joy of nature proved the viability of what is best in man, independent of accidents, of circumstance. We feel ourselves too dependent on history and culture. . . . What is essential about . . . any of the Platonic dialogues is reproducible in almost all times and places. . . . This thinking might be what it is all for. That's where we are beginning to fail. But it is right under our noses, improbable but always present."

I take this statement very seriously and am greatly moved by it, seeing in it the seed from which my life grew. For as a Midwesterner, the son of immigrant parents, I recognized at an early age that I was called upon to decide for myself to what extent my Jewish origins, my surroundings (the accidental circumstances of Chicago), my schooling, were to be allowed to determine the course of my life. I did not intend to be wholly dependent on history and culture. Full dependency must mean that I was done for. The commonest teaching of the civilized world in our time can be stated simply: "Tell me where you come from and I will tell you what you are." There was not a chance in the world that Chicago, with the agreement of my eagerly Americanizing extended family, would make me in its image. Before I was capable of thinking clearly, my resistance to its material weight took the form of obstinacy. I couldn't say why I would not allow myself to become the product of an environment. But gainfulness, utility, prudence, business, had no hold on me. My mother wanted me to be a fiddler or, failing that, a rabbi. I had my choice between playing dinner music at the Palmer House or presiding over a synagogue. In traditional orthodox families small boys were taught to translate *Genesis* and *Exodus*, so I might easily have gone on to the rabbinate if the great world, the world of the streets, had not been so seductive. Besides, a life of pious observance was not for me. Anyway, I had begun at an early age



to read widely, and I was quickly carried away from the ancient religion. Reluctantly, my father allowed me at seventeen to enter the university, where I was an enthusiastic (wildly excited) but erratic and contrary student. If I signed up for Economics 201, I was sure to spend all my time reading Ibsen and Shaw. Registering for a poetry course, I was soon bored by meters and stanzas, and shifted my attention to Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* and Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* My tastes and habits were those of a writer. I preferred to read poetry on my own without the benefit of lectures on the caesura. To rest my book-strained eyes I played pool and Ping-Pong at the men's club.

I was soon aware that in the view of advanced European thinkers, the cultural expectations of a young man from Chicago, that center of brutal materialism, were bound to be disappointed. Put together the slaughterhouses, the steel mills, the freight yards, the primitive bungalows of the industrial villages that comprised the city, the gloom of the financial district, the ballparks and prizefights, the machine politicians, the prohibition gang wars, and you had a solid cover of "Social-Darwinist" darkness, impenetrable by the rays of culture. Hopeless, in the judgment of highly refined Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans and Italians, the spokesmen for art in its most advanced modern forms. For some of these foreign observers, America had many advantages over Europe, it was more productive, more energetic, more free, largely immune from pathogenic politics and ruinous wars, but as far as art was concerned it would be better, as Wyndham Lewis put it, to have been born an Eskimo than a Minnesota Presbyterian who wanted to be a painter. Civilized Europeans, often exceptionally free from the class prejudices of their own countries, were able conveniently to lodge their not fully mastered biases in the free-for-all U.S.A. What no one was able to foresee was that all civilized countries were destined to descend to a common cosmopolitanism and that the lamentable weakening of the older branches of civilization would open fresh opportunities and free us from our dependency on history and culture—a concealed benefit of decline. There would be barbarous manifestations certainly, but there would be also the possibility of new kinds of independence.

In this regard I find myself, as Americans have taken to saying, between a rock and a hard place. European observers sometimes classify me as a hybrid curiosity, neither fully American nor satisfactorily Euro-

pean, stuffed with references to the philosophers, the historians, and poets I had consumed higgledy-piggledy, in my Midwestern lair. I am of course, an autodidact, as modern writers always are. That spirited newcomer, the nineteenth-century novelist, guessed, ventured, conjectured daringly. Independent intelligence made its synthesis. Balzac declared, "The world belongs to me because I *understand* it." Professor Bloom's book makes me fear that the book of the world, so richly studied by autodidacts, is being closed by the "learned" who are raising walls of opinions to shut the world out.

From a different standpoint, American readers sometimes object to a kind of foreignness in my books. I mention Old World writers, I have highbrow airs, and appear to put on the dog. I readily concede that here and there I am probably hard to read, and I am likely to become harder as the illiteracy of the public increases. It is never an easy task to take the mental measure of your readers. There are things that people *should* know if they are to read books at all, and out of respect for them, or to save appearances, one is apt to assume more familiarity on their part with the history of the twentieth century than is objectively justified. Besides, a certain psychic unity is always taken for granted by writers. "Others are in essence like me and I am basically like them, give or take a few minor differences." A piece of writing is an offering. You bring it to the altar and hope it will be accepted. You pray at least that rejection will not throw you into a rage and turn you into a Cain. Perhaps naively, you produce your favorite treasures and pile them in an indiscriminate heap. Those who do not recognize their value now may do so later. And you do not always feel that you are writing for any of your contemporaries. It may well be that your true readers are not here as yet and that your books will cause them to materialize.

There are times when I enjoy making fun of the educated American. *Herzog*, for instance, was meant to be a comic novel: a Ph.D. from a good American university falls apart when his wife leaves him for another man. He is taken by an epistolary fit and writes grieving, biting, ironic and rambunctious letters not only to his friends and acquaintances, but also to the great men, the giants of thought, who formed his mind. What is he to do in this moment of crisis, pull Aristotle or Spinoza from the shelf and storm through the pages looking for consolation and advice? The stricken man, as he tries to put himself together again, interpret his

experience, make sense of life, becomes clearly aware of the preposterousness of such an effort. "What this country needs," he writes at last, surrendering to the absurdity of his state, "is a good five-cent synthesis." Here he echoes Mr. Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's Vice President, who had said at about the time of the Great War, "What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar." Certain readers of *Herzog* complained the book was difficult. Much as they might have sympathized with the unhappy and comical history professor, they were occasionally put off by his long and erudite letters. Some felt that they were being asked to sit for a difficult exam in a survey course in intellectual history and thought it mean of me to mingle sympathy and wit with obscurity and pedantry.

But I was making fun of pedantry!

The reply: "If that was your purpose, you didn't altogether succeed. Some of your readers thought you were setting up a challenge, something resembling an obstacle course, or an egghead crossword puzzle for members of MENSA." A few may have been flattered, while others resented being tested. People reserve their best thinking for their professional specialties and, next in line, for serious matters confronting the alert citizen—economics, politics, the disposal of nuclear waste, etc. The day's work done, they want to be entertained. They can't see why their entertainment should not simply be entertaining, and in some ways I agree, for I myself, in reading Montaigne as I sometimes do, am tempted to skip his long citations from the classics, which put my high school Latin under some strain, and it is not amusing to send oneself back to high school.

To finish with *Herzog*, I meant the novel to show how little strength "higher education" had to offer a troubled man. In the end he is aware that he has had *no* education in the conduct of life (at the university who was there to teach him how to deal with his erotic needs, with women, with family matters?) and he returns, in the language of games, to square one—or as I put it to myself while writing the book, to some primal point of balance. *Herzog's* confusion is barbarous. Well, what else can it be? But there is one point at which, assisted by his comic sense, he is able to hold fast. In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as our education. But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part

of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether.

Romantic poets and other edifying theorists of the nineteenth century had it wrong—poets and novelists will never be the legislators and teachers of mankind. That poets—artists—should give new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience, is ambition enough, if one must offer a purposive account of the artist's project. What makes that project singularly difficult is the disheartening expansion of trained ignorance and bad thought. For to put the matter at its baldest, we live in a thought-world, and the thinking has gone very bad indeed. Therefore the artist, whether or not he views himself as an intellectual, is involved in thought-struggles. Thinking alone will never cure what ails him, and any artist should be grateful for a naive grace which puts him beyond the need to reason elaborately. For me, the university has been the place of divestiture where I am able to find help in the laborious task of discarding bad thought. It was at the university that I began to work through the modern ideologies, Capitalist as well as Marxist, and the psychologies, the social and historical theories, as well as the philosophies (logical positivism, naturalism, existentialism, etc.). Shedding superfluities so that my mental body could recover its ability to breathe, and protecting the root-simplicities of being, I have never viewed the university as a sanctuary or shelter from "the outer world." Life in a strictly academic village, in isolation from a great turbulent city, would have been a torment to me. So I have never been, as a "radical" Central European novelist recently called me, a "campus writer." Rather, I have trained myself to pick up the endless variations on radical and right-wing themes so that I have become able (not an enviable skill) to detect the untreated sewage odors of a century of revolutionary rhetoric or, from another direction, to identify in Gore Vidal's recent outburst of "original" geopolitics nothing other than the Hearst Sunday Supplement theme of the "Yellow Peril," the odor of which is no more pleasant now than it was in the thirties. There is nothing

at all new in the fiery posturing of these agitational and “activist” writers. If they were able to come up with something of their own, the universities would not hold their monopoly on the intellectual life.

The heart of Professor Bloom’s argument is that the university, in a society ruled by public opinion, was to have been an island of intellectual freedom where all views were investigated without restriction. Liberal democracy in its generosity made this possible, but by consenting to play an active or “positive,” a participatory role in society, the university has become inundated and saturated with the backflow of society’s “problems.” Preoccupied with questions of Health, Sex, Race, War, academics make their reputations and their fortunes and the university has become society’s conceptual warehouse of often harmful influences. Any proposed reforms of liberal education which might bring the university into conflict with the whole of the U.S.A. are unthinkable. Increasingly, the people “inside” are identical in their appetites and motives with the people “outside” the university. This is what I take Bloom to be saying, and if he were making a polemical statement merely it would be easy enough to set aside. What makes it formidably serious is the accurate historical background accompanying the argument. He explains with an admirable command of political theory how all this came to be, how modern democracy originated, what Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and the other philosophers of enlightenment intended, and how their intentions succeeded or failed.

The heat of the dispute between Left and Right has grown so fierce in the last decade that the habits of civilized discourse have suffered a scorching. Antagonists seem no longer to listen to one another. It would be a pity if intelligent adversaries were not to read Professor Bloom’s book with disinterested attention. It makes an important statement and deserves careful study. What it provides, whether or not one agrees with its conclusions, is an indispensable guide for discussion, not a mere skimming of the tradition, but a completely articulated, historically accurate summary, a trustworthy resumé of the development of the higher mental life in the democratic U.S.A.

SAUL BELLOW

## *Preface*

This essay—a meditation on the state of our souls, particularly those of the young, and their education—is written from the perspective of a teacher. Such a perspective, although it has grave limitations and is accompanied by dangerous temptations, is a privileged one. The teacher, particularly the teacher dedicated to liberal education, must constantly try to look toward the goal of human completeness and back at the natures of his students here and now, ever seeking to understand the former and to assess the capacities of the latter to approach it. Attention to the young, knowing what their hungers are and what they can digest, is the essence of the craft. One must spy out and elicit those hungers. For there is no real education that does not respond to felt need; anything else acquired is trifling display. What each generation is can be best discovered in its relation to the permanent concerns of mankind. This in turn can best be discovered in each generation’s tastes, amusements, and especially angers (this is above all true in an age that prides itself on calm self-awareness). Particularly revealing are the various impostors whose business it is to appeal to the young. These culture peddlers have the strongest of motives for finding out the appetites of the young—so they are useful guides into the labyrinths of the spirit of the times.

The teacher’s standpoint is not arbitrary. It is neither simply dependent on what students think they want or happen to be in this place or time, nor is it imposed on him by the demands of a particular society or the vagaries of the market. Although much effort has been expended in

trying to prove that the teacher is always the agent of such forces, in fact he is, willy-nilly, guided by the awareness, or the divination, that there is a human nature, and that assisting its fulfillment is his task. He does not come to this by way of abstractions or complicated reasoning. He sees it in the eyes of his students. Those students are only potential, but potential points beyond itself; and this is the source of the hope, almost always disappointed but ever renescent, that man is not just a creature of accident, chained to and formed by the particular cave in which he is born. Midwifery—i.e., the delivery of real babies of which not the midwife but nature is the cause—describes teaching more adequately than does the word socialization. The birth of a robust child, independent of the midwife, is the teacher's true joy, a pleasure far more effective in motivating him than any disinterested moral duty would be, his primary experience of a contemplation more satisfying than any action. No real teacher can doubt that his task is to assist his pupil to fulfill human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice. The vision of what that nature is may be clouded, the teacher may be more or less limited, but his activity is solicited by something beyond him that at the same time provides him with a standard for judging his students' capacity and achievement. Moreover there is no real teacher who in practice does not believe in the existence of the soul, or in a magic that acts on it through speech. The soul, so the teacher must think, may at the outset of education require extrinsic rewards and punishments to motivate its activity; but in the end that activity is its own reward and is self-sufficient.

These are the reasons that help to explain the perversity of an adult who prefers the company of youths to that of grownups. He prefers the promising "might be" to the defective "is." Such an adult is subject to many temptations—particularly vanity and the desire to propagandize rather than teach—and the very activity brings with it the danger of preferring teaching to knowing, of adapting oneself to what the students can or want to learn, of knowing oneself only by one's students.

Thus, teaching can be a threat to philosophy because philosophizing is a solitary quest, and he who pursues it must never look to an audience. But it is too much to ask that teachers be philosophers, and a bit of attachment to one's audience is almost inevitable. And if it is well resisted, the very vice can turn into something of a virtue and encourage philosophizing. Fascination with one's students leads to an awareness of the various

kinds of soul and their various capacities for truth and error as well as learning. Such experience is a condition of investigating *the* question, "What is man?," in relation to his highest aspirations as opposed to his low and common needs.

A liberal education means precisely helping students to pose this question to themselves, to become aware that the answer is neither obvious nor simply unavailable, and that there is no serious life in which this question is not a continuous concern. Despite all the efforts to pervert it (a few of which will be discussed in this book), 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 these alternatives, many of which go against the grain of our nature or our times. The liberally educated person is one who is able to resist the easy and preferred answers, not because he is obstinate but because he knows others worthy of consideration. Although it is foolish to believe that book learning is anything like the whole of education, it is always necessary, particularly in ages when there is a poverty of living examples of the possible high human types. And book learning is most of what a teacher can give—properly administered in an atmosphere in which its relation to life is plausible. Life will happen to his students. The most he can hope is that what he might give will inform life. Most students will be content with what our present considers relevant; others will have a spirit of enthusiasm that subsides as family and ambition provide them with other objects of interest; a small number will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous. It is for these last, especially, that liberal education exists. 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. Without their presence (and, one should add, without their being respectable), no society—no matter how rich or comfortable, no matter how technically adept or full of tender sentiments—can be called civilized.

From the teacher's standpoint, thus understood, I have for more than thirty years, with the most intense interest, watched and listened to students. What they bring to their higher education, in passions, curiosities, longings, and especially previous experience, has changed; and there-

with the task of educating them has changed. In this book I am attempting to make a contribution to understanding this generation. I am not moralizing; I no more want to be Jeremiah than Pollyanna. More than anything else, this book is to be taken as a report from the front. The reader can judge for himself the gravity of our situation. Every age has its problems, and I do not claim that things were wonderful in the past. I am describing our present situation and do not intend any comparison with the past to be used as grounds for congratulating or blaming ourselves but only for the sake of clarifying what counts for us and what is special in our situation.

A word about my "sample" in this study. It consists of thousands of students of comparatively high intelligence, materially and spiritually free to do pretty much what they want with the few years of college they are privileged to have—in short, the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities. There are other kinds of students whom circumstances of one sort or another prevent from having the freedom required to pursue a liberal education. They have their own needs and may very well have very different characters from those I describe here. My sample, whatever its limits, has the advantage of concentrating on those who are most likely to take advantage of a liberal education and to have the greatest moral and intellectual effect on the nation. It is sometimes said that these advantaged youths have less need of our attention and resources, that they already have enough. But they, above all, most need education, inasmuch as the greatest talents are most difficult to perfect, and the more complex the nature the more susceptible it is to perversion.

There is no need to prove the importance of education; but it should be remarked that for modern nations, which have founded themselves on reason in its various uses more than did any nations in the past, a crisis in the university, the home of reason, is perhaps the profoundest crisis they face.

This book has concentrated my mind on the experiences of a lifetime of teaching. Because my career has been an unusually happy one, gratitude is the leading sentiment evoked in reviewing it. My acknowledgments, therefore, reflect contributions to that total experience rather than to this particular book. So above all, I must thank all the students to whom I have had the privilege of teaching classic texts for more than thirty years, especially those I came to know well and from whom I learned so much about the questions discussed here.

Among them are those old students, now very independent thinkers and friends, who have told me of their experiences and observations and helped me interpret mine: Christopher J. Bruell, Hillel G. Fradkin, James H. Nichols, Jr., Clifford Orwin, Thomas L. Pangle, Abram N. Shulsky, Nathan and Susan Tarcov. David S. Bolotin, in particular, responded to my thesis and in turn persuaded me of its seriousness. All of them contributed to and tempered my enthusiasms, each in his own special way. Michael Z. Wu has assisted me enormously with his sharp insight and criticism.

Among my colleagues with whom I share conversation and students, I want to make mention of Saul Bellow and Werner J. Dannhauser. The former, with his special generosity, entered into my thoughts and encouraged me in paths I had never before taken; the latter, my intellectual companion throughout my adult life, undertook as usual to read my manuscript and gave me the benefit of his penetration and honesty.

In the preparation of the manuscript, Judy Chernick, Terese Denov, and Erica Aronson worked as loyal friends with total reliability, making the most boring phases in the production of a book seem exciting. I have been particularly happy in my editors, Robert Asahina, of Simon and Schuster, and Bernard de Fallois, of Editions Julliard, who pushed me to write the book and then spent more time working on it than I could have imagined. The Earhart Foundation and the John M. Olin Foundation have supported me as teacher and scholar for a long time, and I am very grateful to their officers.

Finally, I want to express my admiration for Allan P. Sindler, who has been for me the model of the selfless university man. His lifelong behavior proves that the enterprise is still possible and worthwhile.

I must say, and not only *pro forma*, that my mention of these persons in no way implies that they endorse my views.

ALLAN BLOOM

Chicago, May 1986

# *Introduction: Our Virtue*

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question  $2 + 2 = 4$ . These are things you don't think about. The students' backgrounds are as various as America can provide. Some are religious, some atheists; some are to the Left, some to the Right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. And the two are related in a moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it. They have all been equipped with this framework early on, and it is the modern replacement for the inalienable natural rights that used to be the traditional American grounds for a free society. That it is a moral issue for students is revealed by the character of their response when challenged—a combination of disbelief and indignation: "Are you an absolutist?," the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as "Are you a monarchist?" or "Do you really believe in witches?" This latter leads into the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might well be a witch-hunter or a Salem judge. The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to open-

ness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.

The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated. The best they can do is point out all the opinions and cultures there are and have been. What right, they ask, do I or anyone else have to say one is better than the others? If I pose the routine questions designed to confute them and make them think, such as, "If you had been a British administrator in India, would you have let the natives under your governance burn the widow at the funeral of a man who had died?" they either remain silent or reply that the British should never have been there in the first place. It is not that they know very much about other nations, or about their own. The purpose of their education is not to make them scholars but to provide them with a moral virtue—openness.

Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being. This intention is more or less explicit, more or less a result of reflection; but even the neutral subjects, like reading and writing and arithmetic, take their place in a vision of the educated person. In some nations the goal was the pious person, in others the warlike, in others the industrious. Always important is the political regime, which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principle. Aristocracies want gentlemen, oligarchies men who respect and pursue money, and democracies lovers of equality. Democratic education, whether it admits it or not, wants and needs to produce men and women who have the tastes, knowledge, and character supportive of a democratic regime. Over the history of our republic, there have obviously been changes of opinion as to what kind of man is best for our regime. We began with the model of the rational and industrious man, who was honest, respected the laws,

and was dedicated to the family (his own family—what has in its decay been dubbed the nuclear family). Above all he was to 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." A powerful attachment to the letter and the spirit of the Declaration of Independence gently conveyed, appealing to each man's reason, was the goal of the education of democratic man. This called for something very different from the kinds of attachment required for traditional communities where myth and passion as well as severe discipline, authority, and the extended family produced an instinctive, unqualified, even fanatic patriotism, unlike the reflected, rational, calm, even self-interested loyalty—not so much to the country but to the form of government and its rational principles—required in the United States. This was an entirely new experiment in politics, and with it came a new education. This education has evolved in the last half-century from the education of democratic man to the education of the democratic personality.

The palpable difference between these two can easily be found in the changed understanding of what it means to be an American. The old view was that, by recognizing and accepting man's natural rights, men found a fundamental basis of unity and sameness. Class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights, which give men common interests and make them truly brothers. The immigrant had to put behind him the claims of the Old World in favor of a new and easily acquired education. This did not necessarily mean abandoning old daily habits or religions, but it did mean subordinating them to new principles. There was a tendency, if not a necessity, to homogenize nature itself.

The recent education of openness has rejected all that. It pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime, which are now thought to have been essentially flawed and regressive. It is progressive and forward-looking. It does not demand fundamental agreement or the abandonment of old or new beliefs in favor of the natural ones. It is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything. But when there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible?

From the earliest beginnings of liberal thought there was a tendency in the direction of indiscriminate freedom. Hobbes and Locke, and the American Founders following them, intended to palliate extreme beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, which lead to civil strife. The members of sects had to obey the laws and be loyal to the Constitution; if they did so, others had to leave them alone, however distasteful their beliefs might be. In order to make this arrangement work, there was a conscious, if covert, effort to weaken religious beliefs, partly by assigning—as a result of a great epistemological effort—religion to the realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge. But the right to freedom of religion belonged to the realm of knowledge. Such rights are not matters of opinion. No weakness of conviction was desired here. All to the contrary, the sphere of rights was to be the arena of moral passion in a democracy.

It was possible to expand the space exempt from legitimate social and political regulation only by contracting the claims to moral and political knowledge. The insatiable appetite for freedom to live as one pleases thrives on this aspect of modern democratic thought. In the end it begins to appear that full freedom can be attained only when there is no such knowledge at all. The effective way to defang the oppressors is to persuade them they are ignorant of the good. The inflamed sensitivity induced by radicalized democratic theory finally experiences any limit as arbitrary and tyrannical. There are no absolutes; freedom is absolute. Of course the result is that, on the one hand, the argument justifying freedom disappears and, on the other, all beliefs begin to have the attenuated character that was initially supposed to be limited to religious belief.

The gradual movement away from rights to openness was apparent, for example, when Oliver Wendell Holmes renounced seeking for a principle to determine which speech or conduct is not tolerable in a democratic society and invoked instead an imprecise and practically meaningless standard—clear and present danger—which to all intents and purposes makes the preservation of public order the only common good. Behind his opinion there was an optimistic view about progress, one in which the complete decay of democratic principle and a collapse into barbarism are impossible and in which the truth unaided always triumphs in the marketplace of ideas. This optimism had not been shared by the Founders, who insisted that the principles of democratic government must be returned to and consulted even though the consequences might

be harsh for certain points of view, some merely tolerated and not respected, others forbidden outright. To their way of thinking there should be no tolerance for the intolerant. The notion that there should be no limitation on free expression unless it can be shown to be a clear and present danger would have made it impossible for Lincoln to insist that there could be no compromise with the *principle* of equality, that it did not depend on the people's choice or election but is the condition of their having elections in the first place, that popular sovereignty on the question of black slavery was impermissible even if it would enable us to avoid the clear and present danger of a bloody civil war.

But openness, nevertheless, eventually won out over natural rights, partly through a theoretical critique, partly because of a political rebellion against nature's last constraints. Civic education turned away from concentrating on the Founding to concentrating on openness based on history and social science. There was even a general tendency to debunk the Founding, to prove the beginnings were flawed in order to license a greater openness to the new. What began in Charles Beard's Marxism and Carl Becker's historicism became routine. We are used to hearing the Founders charged with being racists, murderers of Indians, representatives of class interests. I asked my first history professor in the university, a very famous scholar, whether the picture he gave us of George Washington did not have the effect of making us despise our regime. "Not at all," he said, "it doesn't depend on individuals but on our having good democratic values." To which I rejoined, "But you just showed us that Washington was only using those values to further the class interests of the Virginia squirearchy." He got angry, and that was the end of it. He was comforted by a gentle assurance that the values of democracy are part of the movement of history and did not require his elucidation or defense. He could carry on his historical studies with the moral certitude that they would lead to greater openness and hence more democracy. The lessons of fascism and the vulnerability of democracy, which we had all just experienced, had no effect on him.

Liberalism without natural rights, the kind that we knew from John Stuart Mill and John Dewey, taught us that the only danger confronting us is being closed to the emergent, the new, the manifestations of progress. No attention had to be paid to the fundamental principles or the moral virtues that inclined men to live according to them. To use language



now popular, civic culture was neglected. And this turn in liberalism is what prepared us for cultural relativism and the fact-value distinction, which seemed to carry that viewpoint further and give it greater intellectual weight.

History and social science are used in a variety of ways to overcome prejudice. We should not be ethnocentric, a term drawn from anthropology, which tells us more about the meaning of openness. We should not think our way is better than others. The intention is not so much to teach the students about other times and places as to make them aware of the fact that their preferences are only that—accidents of their time and place. Their beliefs do not entitle them as individuals, or collectively as a nation, to think they are superior to anyone else. John Rawls is almost a parody of this tendency, writing hundreds of pages to persuade men, and proposing a scheme of government that would force them, not to despise anyone. In *A Theory of Justice*, he writes that the physicist or the poet should not look down on the man who spends his life counting blades of grass or performing any other frivolous or corrupt activity. Indeed, he should be esteemed, since esteem from others, as opposed to self-esteem, is a basic need of all men. So indiscriminateness is a moral imperative because its opposite is discrimination. This folly means that men are not permitted to seek for the natural human good and admire it when found, for such discovery is coeval with the discovery of the bad and contempt for it. Instinct and intellect must be suppressed by education. The natural soul is to be replaced with an artificial one.

At the root of this change in morals was 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. Franklin Roosevelt declared that we want “a society which leaves no one out.” Although the natural rights inherent in our regime are perfectly adequate to the solution of this problem, provided these outsiders adhere to them (i.e., they become insiders by adhering to them), this did not satisfy the thinkers who influenced our educators, for the right to vote and the other political rights did not automatically produce social acceptance. The equal protection of the laws did not protect a man from contempt and hatred as a Jew, an Italian, or a Black.

The reaction to this problem was, in the first place, resistance to the notion that outsiders had to give up their “cultural” individuality and

make themselves into that universal, abstract being who participates in natural rights or else be doomed to an existence on the fringe; in the second place, anger at the majority who imposed a “cultural” life on the nation to which the Constitution is indifferent. Openness was designed to provide a respectable place for these “groups” or “minorities”—to wrest respect from those who were not disposed to give it—and to weaken the sense of superiority of the dominant majority (more recently dubbed WASPs, a name the success of which shows something of the success of sociology in reinterpreting the national consciousness). That dominant majority gave the country a dominant culture with its traditions, its literature, its tastes, its special claim to know and supervise the language, and its Protestant religions. Much of the intellectual machinery of twentieth-century American political thought and social science was constructed for the purposes of making an assault on that majority. It treated the founding principles as impediments and tried to overcome the other strand of our political heritage, majoritarianism, in favor of a nation of minorities and groups each following its own beliefs and inclinations. In particular, the intellectual minority expected to enhance its status, presenting itself as the defender and spokesman of all the others.

This reversal of the founding intention with respect to minorities is most striking. For the Founders, minorities are in general bad things, mostly identical to factions, selfish groups who have no concern as such for the common good. Unlike older political thinkers, they entertained no hopes of suppressing factions and educating a united or homogeneous citizenry. Instead they constructed an elaborate machinery to contain factions in such a way that they would cancel one another and allow for the pursuit of the common good. The good is still the guiding consideration in their thought, although it is arrived at, less directly than in classical political thought, by tolerating faction. The Founders wished to achieve a national majority concerning the fundamental rights and then prevent that majority from using its power to overturn those fundamental rights. In twentieth-century social science, however, the common good disappears and along with it the negative view of minorities. The very idea of majority—now understood to be selfish interest—is done away with in order to protect the minorities. This breaks the delicate balance between majority and minority in Constitutional thought. In such a perspective, where there is no common good, minorities are no longer problematic,