

Moritz P. Mücke

Professor Bloom's Delight on the Right

American Conservatism and
The Closing of the American Mind



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Introduction

"In the American mind," wrote the English author Walter Bagehot, "there is, as contrasted with the old English mind, a *literalness*, a tendency to say, 'The facts are so-and-so, whatever may be thought or fancied about them.' . . . [Americans] worship visible value; obvious, undeniable, intrusive result."¹ When he wrote those words in 1867, he did not think it necessary to distinguish the American mind from the "colonial mind," but scarcely anyone can doubt that the evolution of American thought has taken on its own unique, often contradictory course. Writing 120 years after Bagehot, it was the American philosopher Allan Bloom who in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* lamented Americans' obsession with obvious, undeniable, intrusive result. His devastating verdict sent shock waves through the intellectual landscape of the United States. The crime scene on which Bloom thought the American mind to have been violated was the university.

Allan David Bloom, who was born in 1930 and died in 1992, was himself a product of higher education. A lifelong academician, he began his career at the University of Chicago, where he was heavily influenced by the German-American philosopher and classicist Leo Strauss, a man to whom the intellectual foundations of American neoconservatism are often ascribed.² After completing his Ph.D. in 1955, Bloom went on to teach at various universities and colleges in the US and around the world, most notably the University of Chicago (1955-60), Yale (1962-63), and Cornell (1963-70). It was at Cornell that Bloom, much to his dismay, experienced the student upheavals of the 1960s—to which he dedicated an entire chapter in *The Closing of the American Mind* (the full title of which goes on to read *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*). When a group of students—including Black Power activists³—forcefully and with the aid of guns demanded changes to the curriculum, the university gave way, prompting Bloom, among others, to tender his resignation.⁴ It was only with the publication of *The Closing* in

¹ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, 1867 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 175-6; emphasis in the original.

² Christopher Hitchens, for example, called Leo Strauss the "Chicago godfather of the neo-cons and mentor of Bloom," see Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation. Writers in the Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2002), 270. See also Benjamin R. Barber, *An Aristocracy of Everyone. The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 167.

³ Kenneth Alan Hovey, "Reassessing The Closing of the American Mind," *Beyond Cheering and Bashing. New Perspectives on the Closing of the American Mind*, ed. James Seaton and William K. Buckley (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 90.

⁴ Barber, *An Aristocracy*, 159-60. Among those who later also left Cornell is the prominent black conservative

1987 that he gained national attention. The hardcover version of the book, which remained on the bestseller list for almost a year, had sold 475,000 copies and gone through 20 printings by April 1988, when the paperback version had yet to be released.⁵ In Geneva, *The Closing* was awarded the renowned Rousseau prize.⁶

In the book—adapted from an article he wrote for *National Review*⁷—Bloom embarked on a genuine *tour de force*, documenting the entire history of Western philosophy – and where he thought it went wrong. Among the concepts he rejected in the book are historicism ("the view that all thought is essentially related to and cannot transcend its own time"⁸), cultural and moral relativism, and parts of popular culture (such as the "barbaric appeal" of rock music⁹). According to Bloom, the decay of American higher education contributed to fostering "nihilism, American style".¹⁰ Even so, the parts of the work that turned out to be most controversial—and "as a passionate trashing of the sixties" have "attracted much of the critical praise"¹¹—deal with what Bloom describes as his own disappointing experiences on campus: the glaringly ignorant students, the misled professors, the decline of the quest for what is true, right, and beautiful. "Today, according to Allan Bloom," wrote James Seaton and William K. Buckley in 1992, "American students are taught that there are finally no matters really worth fighting about or even arguing about. All choices are equally 'valid,' since all can be reduced to questions of personal preference. The notorious 'openness' of the American mind is achieved only by 'closing' itself to the possibility that any principles are truly important, any cause worth dying for, any love worth a lifetime commitment."¹² All in all, the tone of the book is anti-egalitarian; Bloom's Platonic outlook was

Thomas Sowell, see Till Kinzel, *Platonische Kulturkritik in Amerika. Studien zu Allan Blooms The Closing of the American Mind*, Schriften zur Literaturwissenschaft, vol. 18 (Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt, 2002; also: diss., Technische Universität Berlin, 2001), 32, footnote 7. For biographical data on Bloom, see Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "Allan Bloom," <http://www.britannica.com.proxy.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/EBchecked/topic/69980/Allan-Bloom>.

⁵ Dennis H. Wrong, "The Paperbacking of the American Mind," *New York Times*, Apr. 17, 1988.

⁶ Kinzel, *Platonische Kulturkritik*, 12.

⁷ Andrew Ferguson, "The Book That Drove Them Crazy," *The Weekly Standard*, Apr. 9, 2012. http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/book-drove-them-crazy_634905.html?nopager=1.

⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind. How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹ Barber, *An Aristocracy*, 156. See also Kinzel, *Platonische Kulturkritik*, 143.

¹² Seaton and Buckley, introduction to *Beyond Cheering and Bashing*, ed. Seaton and Buckley, 3.