Discussion Guide: "The Closing of the American Mind" by Allan Bloom

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Heterodox Academy invites students, professors, and other heterodox enthusiasts to adopt or adapt these discussion questions as warranted by their interests and circumstances. Our one request: within an environment of open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility, please encourage disagreement and ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Thank you to the Heterodox Academy members who participated in our Virtual Book Club about this book. Questions and ideas that surfaced in that discussion served as the basis for this discussion guide.

Citation: Bloom, A. (1987). The Closing of the American Mind. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

About the Book

From the publisher: "In 1987, eminent political philosopher Allan Bloom published The Closing of the American Mind, an appraisal of contemporary America that 'hits with the approximate force and effect of electroshock therapy' (*The New York Times*) and has not only been vindicated, but has also become more urgent today. In clear, spirited prose, Bloom argues that the social and political crises of contemporary America are part of a larger intellectual crisis: the result of a dangerous narrowing of curiosity and exploration by the university elites."

Discussion Questions

1

Throughout the book, but particularly in the section *Two Revolutions and Two States of Nature* (p. 157-172), Bloom refers to the differences in beliefs about human nature held by Locke and Rousseau. Locke saw people as inherently capable of Enlightenment and life in civil society, whereas Rousseau saw people as corrupted by Enlightenment and civil society. Locke advocated the establishment of universal human rights, while Rousseau championed the uniqueness of authenticity and culture.

These two ideas can be seen in American politics today (and often side by side, as noted by Bloom on p. 172). They are often in conflict, and "sometimes the United States is attacked for failing to promote human rights; sometimes for wanting to impose the 'American way of life' on all people without respect for their cultures" (p. 191-192).

To what degree do these two ideas underlie the conflict between the modern political left and right? To what degree are they compatible with each other, and what does that mean for political discourse?

2

Several times, Bloom either implies or explicitly states that the democratization of society results in its vulgarization. In other words, transferring political power from a few (aristocrats) to the many (the demos) encourages a turn towards base or vulgar tastes in the arts and mediocrity in learning. Bloom suggests that this is because, in a democracy, the primary goal is "utility" (see p. 250).

What does Bloom mean by "vulgar"? What does he say or imply is its opposite, and why is it desirable? Or is it not, actually? In considering these questions, try to think about people in your life, literature, pop culture, or history who represent those two extremes (vulgarity and its opposite).

Why does Bloom say that democracies focus on utility, and why does this mean they tend towards the vulgar (again, see p. 250)? If so, does this mean the vulgarization of political discourse is an intractable problem in democracies?

3

In the introduction, Saul Bellow says that "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." Many political and academic commentators have said similar things about the present moment (2014-2020, at least). Yet Bloom's description of what was happening on college campuses in the 1960s (see pages 313-322) looks worse compared to what is happening today.

Do you believe that political discourse is improving or deteriorating? What is the situation like on your campus regarding political discourse and how does that compare to the situation in the rest of the country?

4

Bloom suggests at various places throughout the book that, contrary to what value relativism says, the university should have "a vision of what an educated person is." But he also states that the university should be a harbor for the free exchange of ideas.

How can the university say with confidence what an educated person is while still being open to the free exchange of ideas (among which might be a debate about what constitutes "educated")? Do you see a philosophical contradiction between enforcing curricula that rest on the assumption that being educated means learning a certain set of things while also admitting that perhaps being educated does not mean learning a certain set of things? How can this be resolved? Or can it not?

5

In their book, "The Coddling of the American Mind," Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff attribute the recent upheaval in universities to three great "untruths" (misconceptions), namely, that "What doesn't kill you makes you weaker," "always trust your feelings," and "life is a battle between good people and evil people."

How do these contemporary beliefs or "untruths" map onto, contradict, or differ from Bloom's explanation of what led to the revolutions of the 1960s? Generally speaking, do you think the authors are diagnosing the problem similarly or differently?

6

In his introduction (p. 28), Bloom states that liberalism has always tended towards increased freedom—i.e., decreased regulation. But he also says that, "*it was possible to expand the space exempt from legitimate social and political regulation only by contracting the claims to moral and political knowledge.... It begins to appear that full freedom can be attained only when there is no such knowledge at all... [and] of course, the result is that...the argument justifying freedom disappears, and...all beliefs begin to have an attenuated character.*"

This is a powerful statement about the relationship between freedom and truth. If what Bloom is saying is true (and his book attempts to substantiate his claim through a historical narrative), free and open societies undermine their legitimacy, because they lose the ability to positively argue for the very values they are built on: freedom and openness. This leaves us with a dilemma that Bloom addresses by advocating a return to the "contemplation of Socrates" (p. 312).

Do you think Bloom is right that increasing degrees of freedom and openness ultimately undermine themselves? If not, how can freedom and openness be privileged, that is, exempt from criticism? What does he mean by the "contemplation of Socrates," and how does he think it would it solve the problem? Do you agree?

7

On page 249, Boom says, *"The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities, that makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable.... [Yet] repugnance at the power of the people, at the fact that the popular taste should rule in all arenas of life, is very rare in a modern democracy."*

Then on p. 251-252 he says, *"It is to prevent or cure this peculiar democratic blindness that the university may be said to exist in a democracy, not for the sake of establishing an aristocracy but for the sake of democracy and for the sake of preserving the freedom of the mind."*

He seems to be suggesting that one of the university's roles is to provide a forum for the criticism of (or as he says, "repugnance at") democracy. Is this kind of criticism good for a democratic society? Is it not akin to biting the hand that feeds you? If it shouldn't be allowed, why should democracy be excepted from criticism? And if it should, what are the risks?

8

On page 254, Bloom says, *"The university must resist the temptation to try to do everything for society. The university is only one interest among many and must always keep its eye on that interest for fear of compromising it in the desire to be more useful, more relevant, more popular."*

Granting that he is correct, what does Bloom see as the one interest the university should have? Do you agree? How could a focus on this one interest be built into the structure of the university's administration, organization, or operating procedures? How could the temptation to be "more useful, more relevant, more popular" be mitigated?

9

On page 261, Bloom says, "The authors of The Federalist hoped their scheme of government would result in the preponderance of reason and rational men in the United States. They were not particularly concerned with protecting eccentric or mad opinions or life-styles. Such protection, which we now often regard as the Founders' central intention, is only an incidental result of the protection of reason, and it loses plausibility if reason is rejected. These authors did not respect the many religious sects or desire diversity for its own sake. The existence of many sects was permitted only to prevent the emergence of a single dominant one."

What do you believe are the chief benefits of diversity? By what metrics should diversity be measured? Would a renewal of the Founders' beliefs about the value of diversity (as presented by Bloom) change the way that we try to implement it in universities today?

10

On pages 263-265, Bloom argues that the Enlightenment thinkers essentially agreed with the Ancients that the philosophic life was the highest life; but the Ancients thought that philosophers alone could become enlightened, while the Moderns believed that it was possible to enlighten all men. Bloom then points out (p. 266-267) that it was the Moderns, not the Ancients, who took Plato's championing of philosopher-kings seriously: the Moderns didn't become kings themselves, of course, but their political schemes were put into practice (e.g. in the U.S. Constitution), with philosophy at the helm.

In other words, the Moderns created a system of government based on reason because they, unlike the Ancients, believed that all people—granted the freedom to do so—could use their reason to lead them to the good life.

Are all people equally capable of using their reason to lead them to a good life? Or are some privileged by nature and/or nurture to do so more effectively? If some are advantaged, is a free society really "fair"? Why or why not?

11

On page 312, Bloom articulates one of the main theses of the book: *"Our present educational problems cannot seriously be attributed to bad administrators, weakness of will, lack of discipline, lack of money, insufficient attention to the three R's, or any of the other common explanations.... All these things are the result of a deeper lack of belief in the university's vocation. One cannot say that we must defend academic freedom when there are grave doubts about the principles underlying academic freedom.... In order to find out why we have fallen on such hard times, we must recognize that the foundations of the university have become extremely doubtful to the highest intelligences."*

By "grave doubts about the principles underlying academic freedom," he is referring to the fact that academics (the "highest intelligences") have accepted value relativism (via Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others), which has made it impossible for them to make any claims about truth.

If the university doesn't believe in objective truth, what is its purpose? What can it teach? Are you or your peers relativists? Do you believe that there are objective truths that transcend cultures? Which ones, and why? Is Bloom right that relativism is at the root of the university's problem? If so, what can be done to fix it?

12

Bloom partially attributes the motives of students who led the 1960s protests to thrill-seeking (p. 328-329) and elitism (i.e. fame and status, see p. 329-332), the latter of which he suggests has an inherent allure in democratic societies.

Do you think the average student would be tempted by the thrill or notoriety involved in participating (or even leading) protests? Do you think thrill-seeking and elitism can explain the motivations of students who are interrupting academic activity on college campuses today? Is this a problem? If so, how could fame or status be removed as motivations for interrupting academic activity?

13

On pages 355-356, Bloom talks about the silver lining of the 1960s upheaval in the universities. He talks about the emergence of "a new, tougher strain" of professors with "an awareness of the importance of academic freedom" and who were "not necessarily all of the same personal political persuasion." Arguably, the same emergence is occurring now with people like those who compose Heterodox Academy, FIRE, and similar organizations.

Especially given the comparisons being made between the current campus climate and that of the 1960s, do you believe that a similar emergence is taking place today? If yes, do you think these emergent traits and alliances are permanent, or merely temporary ones that will subside once the upheaval has passed? Do you think that these traits and alliances are enough to precipitate a re-organization of political party lines or shift in campus culture? Why or why not?

14

Bloom emphasizes the need for the university to maintain a distance from society—not to get involved in political affairs. This is necessary because, as Bloom puts it on page 267, there is "an essential opposition between the two highest claims on a man's loyalty—his community and his reason."

On page 278, he suggests that a philosopher (or, by proxy, a university) "who attempts to influence...ends up in the power of the would-be influenced."

What does Bloom mean by "essential opposition"? And why is it necessary that by trying to get involved in influencing politics, one will eventually be influenced oneself? Do you agree or disagree this is the case? It seems impossible for the university to withdraw from society completely, so what is a good rule of thumb for determining what degree of engagement is appropriate? Do you agree that the university should remain separate from political affairs? Is this realistic?

15 In closing, Bloom cautions that "This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities."

Do you think that he is correct in placing this degree of emphasis the importance of guarding freedom in the universities? Could there be other social and political forces—like the U.S. Constitution—at work that will protect freedom of expression? Or do they, too, rely on academic freedom and the health of the universities?

16 Academics are notorious for heralding the impending downfall of society. Is Bloom not just another of them? Why or why not? Has he underestimated or overestimated the problem?