

SAT-2G.509-1-ESIR-LC-01

ALLAN BLOOM'S BOOK THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND
AND ITS MODERN-DAY IMPLICATIONS

Roumyana Petrova, PhD, DLitt

Par-Time Associate Professor

Department of European Studies and International Relations

FBM, University of Ruse, Bulgaria

E-mail: roumyana.petrova@yahoo.com

***Abstract:** This paper examines the present-day implications of some twentieth-century leftist ideas explored in the book "The Closing of The American Mind" (1987) by the American philosopher Allan Bloom. Since the middle of the twentieth century, which marks their entry into the Liberal Arts curriculum in many American universities, these ideas have gradually taken hold of the leading minds in American society. Through their infiltration in academia they have progressively been eroding and destroying the very core of American democracy.*

***Keywords:** American Culture, Americanism*

***JEL:** I25*

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, the American philosopher Allan Bloom published a book with the title *The Closing of The American Mind*, supplemented with the provocative subtitle *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. [1] Contrary to the modest expectations of both author and publisher, the book quickly became a bestseller. This was quite a surprise considering its high-brow, academic style, which, together with the controversial main idea and message, made it the target of an avalanche of critical reviews. [2] Its pages abounded with references to historical and modern literary facts, names, events, and philosophical theories, e.g., virtue, the clean slate, aristocracy, truth, Moses, Herodotus, Christ, Plato, Socrates, Shakespeare, Descartes, Pascal, Newton, Goethe, Tocqueville, Wagner, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, Einstein, which, thirty years ago sounded, and still do, much too esoteric to the average reader. The chapters contained long disquisitions on a wide range of topics and ideas in the old Western tradition, many of which date back to classical Greco-Roman times or earlier. As Allan Bloom argues, these ideas have received their philosophical and artistic representation in what he describes as the Great Books of Western civilization, i.e., the literary and philosophical works of the major European thinkers and artists – a treasure trove of wisdom and experience that has inspired many generations of Europeans and Americans. Having been brought to fruition during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, many of these ideas have made their way into another Western achievement – the Liberal Arts education.

The unquestionable merits of this type of education, which was originally designed for the leisurely classes and for building the right character of prospective rulers and leaders have been widely known. [3] What was not known, however, and what nobody would have suspected at the time, was the hidden threat a Liberal Arts curriculum could pose to the fragile social contract, should it lose its links with tradition and historical reality, get deprived of ethical norms, and become permeated with exclusively secular ideas, heroes and role models. One can get a good idea of the state to which a society based on such solely humanistic (i.e., democratic, secular, atheistic) principles can evolve, from George Orwell's works, and especially from his utopian novel *1984* [4], which was published at the time when socialism began to attract probably the largest numbers of intellectuals in the U.S.A. and elsewhere in the Western world, as if in an effort to offset the pending danger – the advent of the totalitarian state. [5]

In the space below, I will dwell briefly on two major ideas discussed at great length in Allan Bloom's book: (un)truthfulness, and Americanism, and try to trace their transformation into the

present-day American vogue of openness and inclusiveness, moral and aesthetic relativity, and boundless egalitarianism, which have been gathering remarkable momentum over the last two decades. Their devastating effect on the social psyche is being discussed in a growing number of journalistic articles, literary works, films, books, scholarly essays and studies, but is best revealed at a glance in a new type of recently coined Anglo-American proverbs and aphorisms, which blend successfully humour and wit with a most profound feeling of pessimism. Below are listed some examples of this peculiar type of cynical proverbs:

If people behaved like governments, you'd call the cops.

The Lord's prayer is 66 words, the Gettysburg Address is 286 words, there are 1,322 words in the Declaration of Independence, but government regulations on the sale of cabbage total 26,911 words.;

America is the best half-educated country in the world.

No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.

It is still possible to have a friendly discourse in America, as long as you don't bring up any subject.

What this country needs is more free speech worth listening to.

If God doesn't destroy Hollywood Boulevard, he owes Sodom and Gomor an apology.

Where is Hollywood located? Chiefly between the ears. In that part of the American brain lately vacated by God.

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

Opinions are like assholes – everybody's got them and they all stink.

Ninety percent of everything is shit.

If we strip these short texts of their playful irony and wit and try to delve deeper into the motives of their authors, we will sense an overwhelming feeling of disgust and revolt aroused by what looks like an utter moral degradation of a society and its rulers. Texts like these point to the very serious malady from which the American nation is suffering.

DISCUSSION

In a recent online article with the disturbing title "Dumb American Youth", which was published by a conservative periodical (the liberal press, being a strict observer of political correctness, would never brand anyone as 'dumb', unless this person belongs to "the other", i.e., the non-liberals), some very troubling figures have been quoted, attesting to the shocking lack of the most basic knowledge in geography, arithmetic, English and American literature, modern American history, etc., that is currently observed among large groups of American college students of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. [7].

The article comments on the way these subjects are taught in many of the two- and four-year colleges across the country, and also on how the undergraduates' progress is assessed. It shows all too clearly that when taken too far, the otherwise promising 'feel-good', student-centered approach with its emphasis on individual self-esteem regardless of the real performance of the individual student, in effect succeeds in completely obliterating all notions of good vs bad standards in the minds of both students and educators. Indeed, most liberals (i.e., democrats, socialists, progressives, or leftists) strongly believe that the idea that someone can do or be better than someone else, should be denounced as outdated, racist, supremacist, bigoted, and, probably, even fascist. In order not to hurt the feelings of the failing students, many of whom may be either Afro-Americans, Latinos, members of other minority groups, or part of the working class or the underclass, and thus avoid bitter confrontations with the local PC media or police as well as violent ethnic and political groups and lobbyists, such as the Social Justice Warriors, or the activists of the Black Lives Matter movement, the college professors feel compelled to resort to double standards, i.e., teach the weak students less "stuff", give them easier tasks, and evaluate their work using an entirely false rating system. All this brings to mind a number of relevant observations

made by Allan Bloom about thirty years ago, namely, his comment about 'the [then current] paucity of blacks in theoretical sciences and humanities.' No doubt, there are many talented and hard-working Afro-American students in various areas, explains Bloom, but they experience all kinds of severe problems, and this is precisely what stunts their growth. For example, these students often have to make extremely hard decisions: "The black student who wishes to be just a student and to avoid allegiance to the black group has to pay a terrific price, because he is judged negatively by his black peers and because his behavior is atypical in the eyes of whites". [6]

The tone of the article "Dumb American Youth" is by no means an exception to the mood exuded by the bulk of conservative journalistic articles published in the U.S.A. today; from them we learn that the lowering of academic standards has become common practice in a steadily growing number of American institutions of higher education. Allan Bloom is convinced that this corrupt practice ultimately derives from the widely promoted idea of openness and inclusiveness when taken to far:

It [the recent education of openness] 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? [7]

As can be seen from this passage, instead of making people happy and life harmonious, this well-meaning, permissive, feel-good, optimistic culture of total openness and inclusiveness, into which the unique idea of the rights of the individual born during the European and American Enlightenment has evolved, quite paradoxically has resulted in the complete lack of focus and centre of gravity in this 'free' and 'open' society. In such a society, there is no purpose in life and meaning to life that is common to all. There is in effect no society, but a communist collective, since everybody is expected to strive towards equality with everybody else, while true societies as we know them have always been stratified dynamic structures allowing varying degrees of upward and downward mobility. History demonstrates abundantly that people have never been equal (the false egalitarian communist societies with their elites, the nomenclatures, are a notable illustration), but history is currently also blamed as too outdated and prejudiced to be taken seriously. In this imaginary, utopian world of utter equality, there are no heroes whose exploits can be emulated by the most distinguished members of the group, neither are there aspirations toward lofty and noble ideals, since they may turn out to be beyond the abilities of the underprivileged, the rule being that nobody must be discouraged and left behind, nobody should feel ignored or remain isolated. In this happy super-humanistic society, T. S. Eliot's mandate about 'culture [as] what makes life worth living' would no doubt be promptly branded as 'elitists' 'bigoted', 'supremacist', or even 'racist'. In such a context, all these adjectives reveal right away the true nature of political correctness: twisting the truth by attaching wrong and often completely opposite meanings to familiar words. Political correctness is the abuse of language in the name of extreme, self-defeating humanism. It is cleverly disguised untruthfulness.

Allan Bloom devotes a lot of attention to one more feature of the American society in the 1980s: 'the loss of a national view of the future.' [8] Today, thirty years later, we can see that the progressives (i.e., democrats, liberals, socialists or leftists) tend to be viewing their country not as a nation of one people, but as a loose, mechanical sum of equally valuable ethnic groups, each with its own cultural identity and pride, and therefore equal political rights. This last kind of equality begs the logical question: suppose each of these ethnic communities starts fighting for political leadership? Suppose it believes in its right for supremacy over the other ethnic groups in the nation? Wouldn't this destabilize the whole society? In contrast, Huntington [10], Bellah [11], Huntson [12], and many other distinguished scholars have argued that there does exist an American nation and a specific, American national character, defined along socio-cultural rather

than ethnic or religious lines. Such an authentic character with its specific traits, beliefs and aspirations has emerged very clearly from my most recent extensive study of a large corpus of American proverbs, sayings and aphorisms. [13] Americans are Americans because they share the same traditional values and the same creed. Some thirty years ago, the well-known literary critic and historian Marcus Cunliffe compared this enduring creed with the visible changes in technological progress and concluded that “[t]echnologically the United States has undergone constant change. Ideologically it has remained remarkably static. The creed upholds individual enterprise. ... America is a land of liberty and equality. [...] The nation has never had any full-scale creed except liberalism [i.e., entrepreneurial democracy with a liberal economy based on personal initiative and a free market – R.P.]. [...] American democracy and private property have become indissolubly bonded.” [14]

Marcus Cunliffe’s words were written in 1987, when the American society was stronger and far more united than it is today. Now we are witnessing a great crisis in a deeply divided nation. The creed that used to unite all American people together has been forgotten and replaced by a very different, progressive (liberal, democrat, socialist, leftist) mentality. Large parts of the blacks and Latinos, many unemployed whites, and the bulk of the millennials no longer share the Protestant work ethic of the previous generations. Having lost control over their lives, they have no vision for the future, since their dependence on the state for their wellbeing and survival has turned them into a helpless proletariat. Many of them have no understanding of what it is to have responsibilities, be a patriot, or believe in God. The disintegration of the manufacturing industries in the United States following the rise of corporate taxes, which resulted in massive waves of corporate conversion (i.e., the movement of companies, firms and large businesses away from the country to places of cheap labour), has created unprecedented levels of unemployment. Small business is dying and the middle class in America is on the verge of extinction. [15] The lofty ideals of the Founding Fathers and the mentality they used to promote have been largely forgotten. Less and less people believe in them, because the Founding Fathers are no longer held in esteem. They are no longer studied in the history class at school or in the university. Instead, they are now seen as representing ‘white privilege,’ of which Americans, especially the whites, should be ashamed. An atmosphere of guilt and distrust permeates many university campuses. And what is extremely troubling is that this anti-culture of hatred is being steadily fuelled by the mainstream media and entertainment business. [16]

The signs pointing to the pending crisis of the American society, provided in Allan Bloom’s book, are numerous and convincing. But the book also implies that there is a way out of the great danger. The malady can be cured, and the cure is in the minds and hearts of the people themselves. A reform in the college education which will bring back the Great Books of Western civilization to both citizens, statesmen and politicians, seems to imply Allan Bloom, is a sure way for Americans to restore their human dignity, overcome the threat of economic and cultural collapse, and bring back the national consensus. Indeed, today there still are large numbers of people in the United States, who are prepared to embrace such a reform. These people, termed as the ‘silent majority’, still believe in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which, together with the Bible, make up the bedrock of Americanism. These people no longer trust the mainstream media. Instead, they prefer to communicate with like-minded friends using other channels – the family, the social media, the church, the sports club, the professional association, etc.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, we can say that Allan Bloom’s prophetic book *The Closing of The American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* was a powerful warning against the great moral and economic crisis the American people are struggling with today. Instead of becoming outdated, the power of the message and the great intellectual value of the book have risen tremendously over the decades. The lessons it teaches are simple and clear, although clothed in subtle scholarly prose, and many readers have understood

them and taken them to heart. However, there still is a great threat. If the mainstream media in the U.S.A. continue their disruptive policy of turning the citizens into blind slaves to the bureaucratic machine by way of manipulating their minds, if the American schools and universities continue to deprive the young generation of high-quality literature, art, science, and good and noble examples to follow, if the American people continue to be denied the truth and are instead being fed even more lies, the healing process may very well be stunted in its inception and the United States will probably repeat the destiny of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. What the U.S.A. needs more than anything now is not another, Western-style, politically correct communism, but a return to the true knowledge and wisdom of the Great Books of Western civilization and to the values that made this nation great.

REFERENCES

[1] Bloom, Allan. *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.

[2] *The Closing of The American Mind*. – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Closing_of_the_American_Mind (accessed 28.08.2016). The irrational hostility of the book's reviewers is an indisputable sign of its greatness.

[3] While the Liberal Arts education does not prepare students directly for jobs on the labour market, it equips them with the knowledge and values that make them truly human. Among the most popular Liberal Arts subjects are history, philosophy, language, linguistics, literature, anthropology, sociology, mathematics, communication, etc. Cf. the article "Liberal Arts education" – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_arts_education (accessed 29.09.2016).

[4] Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1949.

[5] In his article "The Ideology of Totalitarian Humanism" published online (<https://attackthesystem.com/the-ideology-of-totalitarian-humanism/>) Keith Preston writes that 'totalitarian humanism' is the "best label for political correctness he has ever encountered." This collocation is indeed one of most adequate summaries of PC.

[6] Петрова, Румяна. *Аксиосфера на американизма: лингвокултурно изследване на паремии*. Дисертация за степента „доктор на науките“. Русе: Русенски университет "Ангел Кънчев", 2016 (465с.). [Roumyana Petrova. *Axiosphere of Americanism: A Linguocultural Study of Proverbs*. A D.Litt. Dissertation. Rousse, University of Rousse, 2016 (465 pgs.)]. The proverbs are taken from the two major modern American proverb collections, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs*. Wolfgang Mieder, editor-in-chief, Stewart A. Kingsbury and Kelsie B. Harder (eds.) (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*. Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder and Fred Shapiro (eds.) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), as well as from some smaller online collections. In the dissertation they can be found on pages 271, 273, 244, 247, 248, 248, 249, 245, 245, 248, 282, and 193.

[7] Williams, Walter E. "Dumb American Youth". – In: Townhall. Posted Oct 26, 2016. <https://www.creators.com/read/walter-williams/10/16/dumb-american-youth> This article lists multiple examples showing the drastic decline in the educational standards of large sections of American students, e.g.: "An article on News Forum for Lawyers titled "Study Finds College Students Remarkably Incompetent" cites a study done by the American Institutes for Research that revealed that over 75 percent of two-year college students and 50 percent of four-year college students were incapable of completing everyday tasks. About 20 percent of four-year college students demonstrated only basic mathematical ability, while a steeper 30 percent of two-year college students could not progress past elementary arithmetic. NBC News reported that Fortune 500 companies spend about \$3 billion annually to train employees in 'basic English'.

[8] Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of The American Mind*, p. 86.

[9] Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of The American Mind*, p. 94-95. In a recent interview titled “Racism Is Not The Cause Of Black Failure” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ac_B-xiWWZU), the conservative writer and film maker Dinesh D’Souza argues that the reasons many blacks are failing their lives are cultural rather than ethnic, racial, or political. They have not embraced fully the Protestant work ethic of their fellow-countrymen, which has made America a prosperous society.

[10] Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of The American Mind*, p. 27.

[11] Huntington, Samuel P. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

[12] Bellah, Robert N. “Is There a Common American Culture?” – In: *The Journal for the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 66, Number 3, Fall 1998, pp. 613-625. – http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_6.htm (accessed 2.02.2016).

[13] Hutson, Matthew. “Still Puritan After All These Years.” – In: *The New York Times Sunday Review, the Opinion Pages*, August 3, 2012. – 463 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/opinion/sunday/are-americans-stillpuritan.html> (accessed 9.02.2015).

[14] Петрова, Румяна. *Аксиосфера на американизма: лингвокултурно изследване на паремии*. [Roumyana Petrova. *Axiosphere of Americanism: A Linguocultural Study of Proverbs*. A D.Litt. Dissertation.] The study demonstrates that Americanism is based predominantly on four major themes: God, society, the human being, nature.

[15] Cunliffe, Marcus. “Literature and Society.” – In: Cunliffe, Marcus (ed.). *American Literature since 1900*. London: Penguin Books, 1993 [first ed. 1975; revised ed. 1987], pp. 399-400.

[16] Snyder, Michael. “28 Signs That the Middle Class Is Heading Toward Extinction.” – In: *The Economic Collapse: Are You Preparing For the Coming Economic Collapse and the Next Great Depression?* – <http://theeconomiccollapseblog.com/archives/28-signs-that-the-middle-class-is-heading-toward-extinction>, February 5, 2014 (accessed 15.09.2016).

[17] McGuire, Paul. “The 2016 Election and the Future of America.” – <http://www-paulmcguire.us/nwv092616.html> (accessed 30.09.2016). This article offers a penetrating dissection from a theological perspective of the true causes of the present moral, social and economic decline of the U.S.A. In the view of the author, the mainstream media, the show business and the education are among the major culprits.