DOSSIER

[Pasado y presente de una ilusión]

Allan Bloom and the Conservative Mind

JIM SLEEPER

[*DOCUMENTA*. NY TIMESSeptember 4, 2005]

CONSERVATIVES in 1987 may still have been basking in Ronald Reagan's ''morning in America,'' but nothing prepared their movement, or the academic and publishing worlds, for the wildfire success of Allan Bloom's ''Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.'' Amid a furor recalling that over William F. Buckley Jr.'s ''God and Man at Yale'' in 1951, Bloom indicted liberal academics for betraying liberal education. His attack sold more than a million copies.

Who on an American campus could ignore Bloom's accounts of Cornell faculty groveling before black-power student poseurs, or his sketches of politically correct administrator-mandarins and ditzy pomo professors? What dedicated teacher could dismiss his self-described ''meditation on the state of our souls, particularly those of the young, and their education''? Some thoughtful liberals found themselves reading ''The Closing'' under their bedcovers with flashlights, unable either to endorse or repudiate it but sensing that some reckoning was due. Conservatives championed Bloom then, of course, and they invoke him still. Roger Kimball, the managing editor of the conservative New Criterion, writes in an article, ''Retaking the University: A Battle Plan'': ''Traditionally, a liberal arts education involved both character formation and learning… to produce men and women who (as Allan Bloom put it) had reflected thoughtfully on the question 'What is man?' '' Kimball charges that the ''adversary culture of the intellectuals'' has taken over universities, an accusation echoed across a growing web of conservative campus activists, including Daniel Pipes's Campus Watch, which tracks the utterances of leftist professors on the Middle East; the Collegiate Network, which trains combative conservative student journalists; the Intercollegiate Studies Institute of conservative campus organizations; and David Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture, whose ''Academic Bill of Rights'' –which would subject professors to student grievances

against political discrimination– is now before several state legislatures.

But everyone seems to have missed the elephant in the room: Bloom's ostensibly conservative meditation in fact anticipated and repudiated almost every political, religious and economic premise of Kimball's and Horowitz's movement. Conservatives who reread Bloom today are in for a big, perhaps instructive, surprise.

Far from being a conservative ideologue, Bloom, a University of Chicago professor of political philosophy who died in 1992, was an eccentric interpreter of Enlightenment thought who led an Epicurean, quietly gay life. He had to be prodded to write his best-selling book by his friend Saul Bellow, whose novel ''Ravelstein'' is a wry tribute to Bloom. Far more than liberal speech codes and diversity regimens, the bêtes noires of the intellectual right, darkened Bloom's horizons: He also mistrusted modernity, capitalism and even democracy so deeply that he believed the university's culture must be adversarial (or at least subtly subversive) before America's market society, with its vulgar blandishments, religious enthusiasms and populist incursions.

''The semitheoretical attacks of right and left on the university and its knowledge, the increased demands made on it by society, the enormous expansion of higher education,'' Bloom wrote, ''have combined to obscure'' the universities' mission ''to maintain the permanent questions front and center'' and ''to provide a publicly respectable place . . . for scholars and students to be unhindered in their use of reason.''

Some conservatives may insist they are saying exactly that. But Bloom warned that liberal education is threatened as well by ''proponents of the free market,'' whose promise of social well-being ''no longer compels belief,'' and by religious belief that, ''contrary to containing capitalism's propensities, as Tocqueville thought it should, is now intended to encourage them.''

Bloom argued that our capitalist economy and liberal-democratic order turn civic virtue to mercenary ends. To cultivate ''the use of reason beyond the calculation of self-interest,'' he contended, ''it is necessary that there be an unpopular institution in our midst that . . . resists our powerful urges and temptations.'' That unpopular

institution was the university. Surveying with nuanced regret what he saw as the failures of religion and of the Enlightenment (whose rationalism had collapsed into fascism or Communism), he hoped to rescue a classical Greek pedagogical tradition that wove eros and intellect into the love of knowing and the love of natural virtues.

Conservatives who reread Bloom will also discover that the 60's left reminded him of the right-wing hordes his mentor Leo Strauss had encountered in Europe in the 30's: ''The fact that in Germany the politics were of the right and in the United States of the left should not mislead us. In both places the universities gave way under the pressure of mass movements'' whose participants, full of animal spirits and spiritual animus, undertook ''the dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry.'' Yet Kimball and Horowitz themselves are trying to rouse a mass movement of alumni, the public and legislatures to ''take back'' the university.

''Many parents are alarmed, rightly so, at the spectacle of their children'' coming back from college and jettisoning ''every moral, religious, social and political scruple that they had been brought up to believe,'' Kimball cries. But Bloom wanted reason to overturn familial and religious commitments, if necessary, to forge deeper attachments to truth and civic-republican virtue. Try to imagine Bloom's seconding Kimball's praise for ''the rise of conservative talk radio, the popularity of Fox News . . . and the spread of interest in the Internet with its many right-of-center populist Web logs'' as ''heartening signs'' that conservatives are becoming ''a widespread counter to the counterculture'' of universities.

Similarly, Horowitz's Academic Bill of Rights would force professors to teach scholarly work opposed to their own. Most already do that, but it's hard to imagine that Horowitz, or his conservative allies, want Milton Friedmanite free-marketeers to be required to tell their packed economics classes about Daniel Bell's claim, anticipating Bloom, that our economy had led to ''corporate oligopoly, and, in the pursuit of private wants, a hedonism that is destructive of social needs.''

Bloom wanted liberal education to resist both ''whatever is most powerful'' and the ''worship of vulgar success.'' True openness, he said, ''means closedness to all the charms that make us comfortable with the present.'' He disdained professors who strive to become counselors to the king and forget that ''the intellectual, who attempts

to influence . . . ends up in the power of the would-be influenced.'' And he lamented the emergence of new academic departments like mass communications and business management, which ''wandered in recently to perform some job that was demanded of the university.'' A few years ago, a great university's government department (not mine) nearly abolished its foreign-language requirement for Ph.D. candidates because ''rational choice'' whiz kids were touting a great new, universal language -- computer English. An eminent conservative scholar and one of his formidable leftist colleagues rolled their eyes empathetically and voted together against the initiative.

Horowitz and other conservative activists know very well that Bloom didn't reduce what he saw as liberal education's crisis to a contest of left versus right: ''I don't want the universities to be conservative,'' Horowitz himself protested recently to The Chronicle of Higher Education. ''I want them to be academic, scholarly.'' The magazine reported, however, that his small board of directors included John O'Neill of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. That can't be kind of the truth Allan Bloom had in mind.

Jim Sleeper, a lecturer in political science at Yale, is the author of ''The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York'' and ''Liberal Racism.''