

**American Academia and the Schizophrenic Mind**  
**A Book Review**

Allen Mendenhall

Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow. *The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism*. West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2015. 260 pages.

In the mid-1980s, the late Professor Allan Bloom set out to write what he deemed “a meditation on the state of our souls, particularly those of the young, and their education.”<sup>1</sup> He could never have anticipated the commotion that ensued. The book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reached print in 1987 and became a smash, surpassing not only his expectations but also those of his publisher. E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s *Cultural Literacy* appeared coincidentally the same year, rocketing to the top of the bestseller lists.

It wasn’t that the average American had suddenly gleaned the importance of higher learning and a more rigorous, more humanistic curriculum. It was that Bloom and Hirsch filled a void and tapped an aboriginal desire for knowledge, inquiry, and discernment; they elicited both vituperative and vitriolic outbursts within certain chambers of the academy. Leftist faculty saw their comfortable way of life and radical programs suddenly under attack, or at least exposed, finally, to the “naïve” masses that still envisioned the professoriate as a bunch of harmless old males wearing tweed sport coats, modeling comb-overs and gruff beards, smoking pipes,

---

<sup>1</sup> 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), 19.

and lugging around leather-bound tomes. The self-professed custodians of the humanities (who were anything but) were enraged and alarmed when Bloom pulled back the curtain to reveal the radical “wizards” underneath. If only they had taken his advice, they might have saved their slowly dying profession from themselves. Is this overstatement? Of course. That doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

Saul Bellow penned the foreword to Bloom’s storied polemic, so it’s appropriate, some twenty-eight years later, for Saul’s son, Adam Bellow, to bring forth this present edition, *The State of the American Mind*, to Adam Bellow, to esteemed literary critic than Mark Bauerlein. Both *The Closing of the American Mind* and *The State of the American Mind* seem from their titles to presuppose a distinct and unified culture, a single American mind that can be named and described. Upon further examination, this American mind appears nuanced and multifaceted, having something to do with “independent thought and action, thrift and industriousness, delayed gratification and equal opportunity” and possessing “specific knowledge” about such things as “the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Bible . . . , along with stories of the first colonists, the Founding, and the pioneer experience.”<sup>2</sup> The American mind, according to Bauerlein and Bellow, understands religious and economic liberty, entrepreneurship, popular sovereignty, federalism, localism, decentralization, freedom of speech and expression, and qualified individualism. If we believe Bauerlein and Bellow, this American mind is dead.<sup>3</sup> If not dead, it’s at least in a grotesque and sickly state.

So why this volume if not to beat a dead or almost-dead horse, which is to say, a dead or almost-dead attitude and mindset? The stated purpose is to question the policies and programs that killed the American mind, namely, institutional commitments to diversity and multiculturalism and other such agendas that were supposed to inspire marginalized groups, equipping them with the knowledge and imagination to achieve what couldn’t be achieved under the old practices and curricula. In various ways and with differing

<sup>2</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow, “Foreword,” *The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Intellectuals on the New Anti-Intellectualism* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015), vii-ix.

<sup>3</sup> “The American mind was one of the casualties” brought about by higher education since the publishing of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bauerlein and Bellow, supra note 2 at xi.

styles, the contributors to this volume ask: has it worked, this shift away from the American mind towards more inclusive and diverse forms of learning?

The answer is resoundingly *no*. In fact, Bauerlein and Bellow list the following consequences of such flawed learning: 1) “Instead of acquiring a richer and fuller knowledge of U.S. history and civics, American students and grown-ups display astounding ignorance of them, and their blindness is matched by their indifference to the problem.”<sup>4</sup> 2) “Civic virtue is a fading trait, our political sphere now typically understood as merely a contest of group interests. Patriotism and the common good are quaint notions.”<sup>5</sup> 3) “Individualism has evolved from ‘rugged’ versions of the past into present modes of self-absorption.”<sup>6</sup> 4) “Not only has self-reliance become a spurious boast . . . , but dependency itself has become a tactical claim.”<sup>7</sup> 5) “Instead of upholding basic liberties, more and more Americans accept restrictions on speech, freedom of association, rights to privacy, and religious conscience.”<sup>8</sup> In short, the new approaches to teaching and curriculum have produced the disabling conditions they were supposed to eradicate. Bauerlein and Bellow don’t attempt to resuscitate or reanimate the American mind. Nor do they blow the rusty trumpets of the unmissed culture wars. They modestly seek, instead, to examine the consequences of the death of the American mind, enlisting several public intellectuals to discuss narrow issues of culture and society but not to orchestrate grand ideological schemes that purport to solve our problems.

It is neither practical nor prudent to rehearse all of the searching and at times impassioned arguments made by the many contributors to this fine edition, but I permit myself a few glosses. Hirsch himself opens the book by echoing his earlier admonitions about flawed curricula that elevate thinking skills and problem-solving over the acquisition of broad, general knowledge

<sup>4</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, xii.

<sup>6</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, xii.

of people, places, philosophies, and events. A man of the left, Hirsch laments that his arguments have been misunderstood and that the “levelers” in education have persisted in policies that preclude underprivileged students from closing the achievement gap and realizing their full potential. His essay is a late reflection on the legacy of *Cultural Literacy*.

Bauerlien follows Hirsch with a fascinating essay challenging popular assumptions about rising IQ scores. Although IQ scores are improving, Bauerlien submits, they measure not knowledge, fact-retention, or cultural literacy but an ability to accept without qualification certain abstract conditions in order to arrive at equally abstract conclusions. IQ examinations measure the uncreative ability to move from one abstract premise to another and thus are ill-suited for inquiring minds that would challenge the predicate assumptions inherent in the test. It’s no wonder that the rise in IQ levels corresponds with a decrease in general knowledge and vocabulary, and with gradual but definite cultural illiteracy.

Other chapters consist of predictable complaints and calls to action: Daniel L. Dreisbach stresses the importance of biblical literacy; Gerald Graff examines the general decline in writing skills; Richard Arum decries the lack of academic rigor in underperforming university classrooms; David T. Z. Mindich proposes solutions to the problem of civic neglect, ignorance, and disengagement; Jean M. Twenge denounces the narcissistic “self-belief” that has displaced high performance and achievement as indicia of success; and Ilya Somin considers political ignorance and its effects upon voting.

Then there are less predictable but no less important topics: Robert Whitaker explores what he calls the “epidemic” of mental disorder and mental illness and the concomitant rise in the use of psychiatric drugs; Maggie Jackson waxes poetic about the need to slow down and observe, giving the selective human mind an opportunity to process the wide range of information coming at it from all sides; Jonathan Kay describes the pathological tendencies of those who traffic in conspiracy theories that the Internet makes readily available; and Steven Wasserman defends “the Eros of difficulty” as a cultural and literary standard.<sup>9</sup> One should not miss Dennis Prager’s essay on the “Age of Feelings,” Greg Lukianoff’s essay on the

<sup>9</sup> Steve Wasserman, “In Defense of Difficulty,” in *The State of the American Mind*, 187.

“Expectation of Confirmation” (whereby university students and administrators invite only speakers with whom they agree and disallow speakers and speech with which they disagree), or R.R. Reno on the “New Antinomian Attitude.”

Nicholas Eberstadt’s tracing of the historical aversion to the welfare state in America, and the sudden institutionalization of the welfare state during and after the 1960s, is particularly upsetting and captivating. This disappointing change in the structure of American government has resulted in mass dependency and a sense of entitlement, among other disorders. It signals a paradox: “America today is the richest society in history, and more prosperous and productive now than three decades ago, yet our entitlement state behaves as if Americans have never been more needy.”<sup>10</sup> Eberstadt calls dependency a “mental condition, one that distorts the facts in order to sustain itself.”<sup>11</sup> “The paradox,” he says, “is easily explained: means-tested entitlement transfers are no longer an instrument for strictly addressing absolute poverty, but instead a device for a more general redistribution of resources.”<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of Eberstadt in this book makes *The State of the American Mind* broader in scope and more interdisciplinary than anything Bloom produced.

It is an open question whether the mission and makeup of the modern university and contemporary education is more or less tenable, more or less sustainable today than it was twenty-eight years ago when *The Closing of the American Mind* took everyone by surprise. I don’t dare proffer an answer or pretend to have reached a conclusion. I merely echo Bloom’s stark summons, which still resonates but seems to me less powerful and prescient in our own era, as if an opportunity has been lost and an awesome possibility already squandered:

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

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, “Dependency in America,” in *The State of the American Mind*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Eberstadt, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Eberstadt, 159.

fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before. The gravity of our given task is great, and it is very much in doubt how the future will judge our stewardship.<sup>13</sup>

What is troubling about these lines is not that we were ever in doubt. On the contrary, it is that now we are justifiably more certain – as Bloom’s imagined future has become our actual present – that the judgment to which he referred is not in our favor, that we have not realized and so have not accomplished the task we faced. There are many brilliant ideas and intellectuals in this country, but even in the aggregate there is not one American mind. Not anymore. There are only American minds, and there is no discernable consensus about what America and her ideas are or ought to be. Whether such confused multiplicity is enough to preserve a culture and hence a civilization, only time will tell. It doesn’t look promising. Bauerlein and Bellow, though, remain optimistic. “It can happen again,” they inform us, “another cultural revolution” which can “undo the delinquent habits and attitudes of our citizens and shake the diversity ideology of our elites.”<sup>14</sup> I hope they’re right, for all our sakes.

---

<sup>13</sup> Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 382.

<sup>14</sup> Bauerlein and Bellow, “Afterword,” 241.

**Gera**  
 wher  
 direc  
*Journ*  
 has l  
 and  
 He  
 Scho  
 grad  
 Trial  
 facu  
 Brac  
 mos  
*Relig*  
 and  
 worl

**Dav**  
 Univ  
 2010  
 inter  
 thec  
*Toeq*  
*The*  
 app  
*Stua*