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ESSAY

Revisiting the Canon Wars

By RACHEL DONADIO

Correction Appended

Twenty years ago, when Reagan and Gorbachev were negotiating the end of the cold war and college cost far less than it does today, a book arrived like a shot across the bow of academia: “The Closing of the American Mind,” by Allan Bloom, a larger-than-life political philosophy professor at the [University of Chicago](#). Subtitled “How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students,” it spent more than a year on the best-seller list, and today there are more than 1.2 million copies in print. [Saul Bellow](#), who had urged his brilliant and highly idiosyncratic friend to write the book in the first place, wrote the introduction. (Bellow later cast Bloom as the main character in “Ravelstein.”)

Bloom’s book was full of bold claims: that abandoning the Western canon had dumbed down universities, while the “relativism” that had replaced it had “extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life”; that rock music “ruins the imagination of young people”; that America had produced no significant contributions to intellectual life since the 1950s; and that many earlier contributions were just watered-down versions of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud and other Continental thinkers. For Bloom, things had gone wrong in the ’60s, when universities took on “the imperative to promote equality, stamp out racism, sexism and elitism (the peculiar crimes of our democratic society), as well as war,” he wrote, because they thought such attempts at social change “possessed a moral truth superior to any the university could provide.”

“The Closing of the American Mind” hit the scene at a time when universities were embroiled in the so-called canon wars, in which traditionalists in favor of centering the curriculum on classic works of literature faced off against multiculturalists who wanted to include more works by women and members of minorities. In early 1988, students at Stanford held a rally with [Jesse Jackson](#), where they shouted, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go,” to protest a required Western civilization course. (The faculty quickly voted to replace it with a requirement including more works by women and minorities.) Bloom’s book shared space at the top of the best-seller list with E. D. Hirsch’s “Cultural Literacy” (1987), which argued that progressive education had left Americans without a grasp of basic knowledge. It also inspired further conservative attacks against the university, including Roger Kimball’s “Tenured Radicals” (1990) and Dinesh D’Souza’s “Illiberal Education” (1991).

Although it had great popular appeal, “The Closing of the American Mind” did not go over well among academics. Bloom’s detractors criticized everything from his interpretation of the Greeks to his views on youth culture and feminism, which he saw as corrosive influences. “The amazing thing about Allan Bloom’s book was not just its prodigious commercial success ... but the depth of the hostility and even hatred that it inspired among a large number of professors,” John Searle, the Berkeley philosophy professor and former proponent of the ’60s radical Free Speech Movement wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 1990. Searle also noted a “certain irony” that the Western canon, from Socrates to Marx, which had once been seen as “liberating,” was now seen as “oppressive.” “Precisely by inculcating a critical attitude,” Searle wrote, “the ‘canon’ served to demythologize the conventional pieties of the American bourgeoisie and provided the student with a perspective from which to critically analyze American culture and institutions. ... The texts once served an unmasking function; now we are told that it is the texts which must be unmasked.”

Today it's generally agreed that the multiculturalists won the canon wars. Reading lists were broadened to include more works by women and minority writers, and most scholars consider that a positive development. Yet 20 years later, there's a more complicated sense of the costs and benefits of those transformations. Here, the lines aren't drawn between right and left in the traditional political sense, but between those who defend the idea of a distinct body of knowledge and texts that students should master and those who focus more on modes of inquiry and interpretation. However polarizing Bloom may have been, many of the issues he raised still resonate — especially when it comes to the place of the humanities on campus and in the culture.

Debates over what an educated person should know go back to the 19th century in America, when teaching any literature beyond the Greek and Roman classics was still controversial. But today, there's widespread concern that the humanities are losing ground — as well as intellectual cachet, students and financing — to the hard sciences on the one hand and business on the other. A 2006 report [[PDF](#)] on higher education commissioned by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, which [raised hackles](#) with its proposal to introduce No Child Left Behind-style standards testing in universities, hardly mentioned the humanities. At the same time, several state legislatures have debated an “academic bill of rights” that would provide a grievance procedure against “political discrimination” on campus — a measure proposed by David Horowitz, a Marxist-turned-conservative critical of what he sees as academia's left-wing bias.

All this reflects what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum today describes as a “loss of respect for the humanities as essential ingredients of democracy.” Nussbaum, who panned Bloom's book in *The New York Review* in 1987, teaches at the University of Chicago, which like Columbia has retained a Western-based core curriculum requirement for undergraduates. But on some campuses, “the main area of conflict is trying to make sure that the humanities get adequate funding from the central administration,” Nussbaum wrote in an e-mail message, adding, “Our nation, like most nations of the world, is devaluing the humanities vis-à-vis science and technology, so constant vigilance is required lest these disciplines be cut.” Louis Menand, a [Harvard](#) English professor and *New Yorker* staff writer who serves on Harvard's curriculum reform committee, concurs: “The big question for humanists is, How do we explain why what we do is important for people who aren't humanists? That's been tough, really tough.”

But when college costs run as high as \$50,000 a year, it's harder to ignore questions like “What will this major do for my career prospects?” While humanities departments thrive at elite institutions (at [Yale](#), for example, history has long been the most popular major, with English usually beating out economics for second place), the high cost of college today exacerbates a utilitarian strain that's always made it hard for the liberal arts to make a case for themselves in practical-minded America. According to the Department of Education, in the 2003-4 school year, only 1.6 percent of America's 19 million undergraduates majored in English and 1.3 percent in history, compared with 20 percent in business, 16 percent in health, 9 percent in education and 6 percent in computer science.

Not all academics object to raising market questions. For [Alan Wolfe](#), a political science professor at [Boston College](#) and the director of its Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, “the introduction of economic criteria into the university is a good thing.” During the canon wars of the late '80s, he said, scholars had an “imperious” idea that “if we want to argue about the curriculum we're free to do that.” But now, most realize “we have obligations to the students and the parents and the taxpayers.”

According to [Stanley Fish](#), a law professor at Florida International University and an occasional *New York Times* columnist, the conservative critique of academia connects to an economic one. “The message the neoconservatives were putting out, that universities are hotbeds of atheism, sexual promiscuity, corrosive relativism and a host of suspect philosophies being imported from France and Germany, actually took quite strongly with the intended audience,” said Fish, who was embroiled in these debates as chairman of Duke's theory-oriented English department from the mid-'80s to the early '90s. “It's easier for a state legislature to cut

university funding when there is an unflattering view” of academia, he said.

But Fish thinks humanities professors bear some blame for their diminished standing. He’s at work on a new book, “Save the World on Your Own Time,” which argues that academics should teach, not proselytize. In his view, “the invasion of political agendas” into the classroom in the ’60s and ’70s was “extremely dangerous,” since it meant classrooms could become battlegrounds for political demagoguery.

The invasion of politics has been particularly notable in the literature curriculum. On campus today, the emphasis is very much on studying literature through the lens of “identity” — ethnic, gender, class. There has also been a decided shift toward works of the present and the recent past. In 1965, the authors most frequently assigned in English classes were Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Dryden, Pope and T. S. Eliot, according to a survey by the National Association of Scholars, an organization committed to preserving “the Western intellectual heritage.” In 1998, they were Shakespeare, Chaucer, Jane Austen, Milton, Virginia Woolf and [Toni Morrison](#). The most-assigned living authors were Morrison, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, [Salman Rushdie](#), Thomas Pynchon and [Philip Roth](#). (Roth himself may not be so pleased with the company. His forthcoming “Exit Ghost” includes a character’s rant about a library display: “They had Gertrude Stein in the exhibit but not [Ernest Hemingway](#). They had [Edna St. Vincent Millay](#) but not William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens or [Robert Lowell](#),” the character says. “Just nonsense. It started in the colleges and now it’s everywhere. [Richard Wright](#), Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, but not Faulkner.”)

But many scholars see these changes as part of a necessary evolution. To Michael Bérubé, an English professor at [Pennsylvania State University](#) and the author of “What’s Liberal About the Liberal Arts?” (2006), the changes have been particularly beneficial in American literature, which has seen the most canon revision in part because it never had a very stable canon to begin with. “The old guard had very little to offer in the way of serious intellectual argument against the reading and teaching of ... Olaudah Equiano or Djuna Barnes or Zora Neale Hurston, so the canon of the past two or three centuries got itself revised in fairly short order,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “Only the Department of Surly Curmudgeons still disputes that we’re dealing with a usefully expanded field.”

Reading lists, though, are a zero-sum game: for every writer added, another is dropped. One can debate the changing fortunes of writers on the literary stock market, but it’s clear that today the emphasis is on the recent past — at the expense, some argue, of historical perspective. As Alan Wolfe puts it, “Everyone’s read ‘Things Fall Apart’ ” — Chinua Achebe’s novel about colonial Nigeria — “but few people have read the Yeats poem that the title comes from.”

For John Guillory, an English professor at [New York University](#) and the author of “Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation” (1993), “The major fact that the discipline is confronting today is global English, which is a cultural corollary of economic globalization.” At the same time, postcolonial Anglophone culture is only half a century old. “I’m often impressed by this scholarship, but I’m also concerned that this new field seems to be so disconnected from the history of literature and scholarship that goes before it,” Guillory said. “I see too many scholars in the field who know very little about anything before the 20th century, and that concerns me.”

Elaine Showalter, a feminist literary scholar and a former president of the Modern Language Association, who retired from Princeton in 2003, today urges a reconsideration of some of the changes made in past decades. “This period of discovery and recovery (for example, of women writers) has been stimulating, exciting and renewing,” Showalter wrote in an e-mail message. “But now it’s time for a period of evaluation and consolidation.”

To some, another question is how to get students to read critically in the first place. “What does it profit

progressives to get minority writers like Walker and Black Elk into the syllabus if many students need the Cliffs Notes to gain an articulate grasp of either?" asked Gerald Graff, an English professor at the [University of Illinois](#) at Chicago who has written on the canon wars.

The historian Tony Judt, a self-described "old leftist" and the director of the Remarque Institute at N.Y.U., which examines Europe and European-American relations, said undergraduates often arrive unprepared from high school and seeking courses "in what we might have thought of as the old-fashioned approach" — broad surveys. But many young professors aren't interested in teaching outside their narrow specialties, nor are they generally prepared to do so. And colleges are loath to reinstate the core curriculums they abandoned in the '60s. "Because we lack cultural self-confidence, we've lacked the ability to say, 'This is a good book and should be taught, this isn't and shouldn't,'" said Judt, who was dean of the humanities at N.Y.U. in the early '90s.

Judt also denounces the balkanization created by interdisciplinary ethnic studies programs. Multiculturalism "created lots and lots of microconstituencies, which universities didn't have the courage to oppose," he said. "It's much more like a supermarket — kids can take pretty much any courses they like: Jewish kids take Jewish studies, gay students gay studies, black students African-American studies. You no longer have a university, but a series of identity constituencies all studying themselves."

Some say this kind of identity-based thinking is at odds with the true purpose of education — something canon traditionalists can misunderstand as badly as their multiculturalist opponents. "What Americans yearn for in literature is self-recognition," said Mark Lilla, a professor of political philosophy and religion who just left the University of Chicago for Columbia. "That's where the conservatives went wrong. The case for the canon itself isn't a case for book camp and becoming a citizen in the West." Wrestling with difficult, often inaccessible works is "the most alienating experience possible," he continued. "When you read Toni Morrison, there's no alienation. It affirms your Americanism."

Bloom believed education should be transformative — that it should remove students from the confines of their own backgrounds to engage with books that open up new realms of meaning. "He told students that they had come to the university to learn something, and this meant that they must rid themselves of the opinions of their parents," Bellow wrote of Ravelstein/Bloom in his novel. "He was going to direct them to a higher life, full of variety and diversity, governed by rationality — anything but the arid kind." In "The Closing of the American Mind," Bloom himself wrote that a liberal education should provide a student with "four years of freedom" — "a space between the intellectual wasteland he has left behind and the inevitable dreary professional training that awaits him after the baccalaureate." Whether students today see college as a time of freedom or a compulsory phase of credentialing is an open question. From Bloom's perspective, "the importance of these years for an American cannot be overestimated. They are civilization's only chance to get to him."

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Correction: September 30, 2007

An essay on Sept. 16 about literature curriculums in American universities referred incorrectly to "Things Fall Apart," a 1958 novel about Nigeria by Chinua Achebe. It is set around the turn of the 20th century, during the early period of British colonization, not in "postcolonial" times

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