

Western Civ—and Me

An Address at Harvard University

Allan Bloom

FELLOW ELITISTS:

If I were E.D. Hirsch, of “cultural literacy” fame—people do tend to mix us up—I might ask, “What is the literary influence on my salutation?” The answer is Franklin D. Roosevelt’s salutation to another select audience, the Daughters of the American Revolution. He began his address, “Fellow Immigrants.”

Roosevelt was gently ridiculing those ladies for believing that in America old stock constitutes any title whatsoever to privilege. That notion is a relic of the aristocratic past which this democracy supplanted in favor of equality or of privilege based on merit. Roosevelt was urbane and witty, this century’s greatest virtuoso of democratic leadership. We, the immigrants or the children of immigrants, loved his act; he was on our side. Our enjoyment of his joke was enhanced by the acid of vengeance against those who thought they were better than we. F.D.R. knew how to manipulate such sentiments, and his slap at the D.A.R. was not entirely disinterested insofar as there were a lot more of us than there were of them.

Moreover, Roosevelt’s enjoyment was quite different from ours. He was really one of them. His family’s claims to antiquity, wealth, and distinction were as good as practically anyone’s. It was certainly more pleasant to poke fun at his equals or inferiors than to show resentment toward his superiors. His was an aristocratic condescension. He condescended to rule in a democracy, to be, as was often said about him at the time, “a traitor to his class”—a neat mixture of man’s perpetual striving to be first and the demands of a society where all are held to be equal. The psychology of democracy is complex and fascinating.

That psychology determined the very unusual intensity of the response to my book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, focusing on my alleged elitism. I was suspect as an enemy of our democratic regime. And the first and loudest voices in this chorus came from the Ivy League, particularly from those with some connection to Harvard. Everybody knows that Harvard is in every respect—its students, its faculty, its library, and

its endowment—the best university in the world. Long ago when I, a Middle Westerner, taught for a year at Yale, I was amazed at the little Harvard worm that was eating away at the souls of practically all the professors and students there, except for the ones who had turned down the opportunity to be at Harvard. Elite is not a word I care for very much—it is imprecise and smacks of sociological abstraction—but if any American institution of any kind merits that name, it is Harvard, and it lends that tincture to everyone associated with it.

Why, then, this passion to accuse others of the crime of elitism? One is tempted to attribute it to simple self-protectiveness. “If we say *he* is one, they won’t notice *us*.” But I suspect some, or many, acted from a more tortuous, more ambiguous motive—guilt. The leading principle of our regime is the equal worth of all persons, and facts or sentiments that appear to contradict that principle are experienced by a democrat as immoral. Bad conscience accompanies the democrat who finds himself part of an elite. He tries to suppress or deny to himself whatever covert feelings he might experience—I am sure that none of you has had them—of delight or superiority in the fact that he has been distinguished by Harvard, that he is much better off than the poor jerks at Kalamazoo College, even that he deserves it, that superior gifts merit superior education, position, and esteem. A few might consciously believe such things, but since they would be at odds with the egalitarian opinions of democracy, they tend to become spiritual outlaws, hypocrites, and cynically indifferent to the only American principle of justice. The rest, to soothe their consciences, have to engage in casuistry, not to say sophistry.

The simple democratic answer would be open admissions, just as there would be if Harvard were located in Europe, where such elitism is less tolerated. But nobody here really considers that. Harvard, I gather, intends to remain adamantly exclusive, implying thereby that there are significant natural differences among human beings. President Derek Bok’s way of squaring such elitism with democratic right-thinking has been, apparently, to teach that the Harvard person is a doer of good works for society as a whole. This is in the spirit of Harvard’s own political philosopher, John Rawls, who permits people to possess

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and cultivate superior talents if they can be proved to benefit the most disadvantaged part of society. Whether this solution is reason or rationalization is open to discussion.

All this suggests the intricate psychology of the democrat, which we must be aware of in order to know ourselves and which we are not likely to be aware of without the help of significant thinkers like Tocqueville, Burke, and Plato, who see us from the outside and judge us in terms of serious alternatives to democracy. The charge of elitism reflects the moral temper of our regime, as the charge of atheism would have done in an earlier age. You couldn't get much of a response in a university today by saying that Allan Bloom doesn't believe in God. But you can get a lot of people worked up by saying that Allan Bloom doesn't believe in equality. And this tells us a lot about our times, and explains how tempting a career is offered to egalitarian Tartufferie. "Elitist" is not a very precise charge; yet compared with the Ivy League, I would have at worst to be called a moderate elitist, and by persons other than those who are now making the charge.

BUT the real disagreement concerns the content of today's and tomorrow's elite education. We are now witnessing in our universities the introduction of a new "non-elitist," "non-exclusionary" curriculum in the humanities and in parts of the social sciences, and with it a program for reforming the human understanding. This is an extremely radical project whose supporters pass it off as mainstream by marching under the colors of all the movements toward a more equal society which almost all Americans endorse. Not recognized for what it is, this radicalism can thus marshal powerful and sometimes angry passions alongside its own fanatic ones. The American Council of Learned Societies—upset by "the disturbing success" of my book, which it attributed to "American anti-intellectualism"—has even issued a report ordering us to believe that there is now a scholarly consensus, nay, a proof, that all classic texts are expressions of the unconscious class, gender, or race prejudices of their authors. The calling of the humanities in our day, it seems, is to liberate us from the sway of those authors and their prejudices—Shakespeare and Milton, among others, are mentioned in the report. This puts humanists at the cutting edge of the battle against "Eurocentrism." (Clearly, the characters who wrote this report were sent by central casting for the movie version of *The Closing of the American Mind*.)

The battle is not primarily, or even at all, scholarly but moral and political, and members of the reactionary rear-guard are the objects of special fury, the enemies of historic destiny. Consequently, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which takes an entirely different view of the classic texts and of the humanities in general—a view

fundamentally at odds with the radical reform being imposed on us—has been brought before this Inquisition and condemned to banishment from the land of the learned.

People's angers reveal much about what concerns them. Anger almost always disguises itself as moral indignation and, as Aristotle teaches, is the only one of the passions that requires speech and reason—to provide arguments which justify it and without which it is frustrated and withers. Anger proves man's rationality while it obscures and endangers reason. The arguments it adduces always lead back to a general principle of morality and then issue in blame. Here is an example, as reported by Richard Bernstein in the *New York Times* (September 25, 1988):

In some respects, the scene in North Carolina last weekend recalled the daily "minute of hatred" in George Orwell's *1984*, when citizens are required to rise and hurl invective at pictures of a man known only as Goldstein, the Great Enemy of the state.

At a conference on the future of liberal education sponsored by Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, speaker after speaker denounced what they called "the cultural conservatives" who, in the words of a Duke English professor, Stanley Fish, have mounted "dyspeptic attacks on the humanities."

There were no pictures of these "cultural conservatives" on the wall, but they were derided, scorned, laughed at. . . .

Such sentiments—and I appreciate the *Times's* making explicit the resemblance to Stalinist thought control—represent the current establishment in the humanities, literature, and history. These professors are from hot institutions like Stanford and Duke which have most openly dedicated themselves to the new educational dawn called openness, a dawn whose rosy fingers are currently wrapped tightly around the throat of the curriculum in most universities.

IN *The Closing of the American Mind* I offer a description of the young people of today as they have been affected by the times into which they were born and the failure of liberal education, dominated as it now is by doctrinaire forms of historicism and relativism, to liberate them from the clichés of the age. Contrary to what some have alleged, I feel sorrow or pity, not contempt, for these young people whose horizon has become so dark and narrow that, in this enlightened country, it has begun to resemble a cave. Self-consciousness, self-awareness, the Delphic "know thyself" seems to me to be the serious business of education. It is, I recognize, very difficult even to understand what that means, let alone to achieve it. But one thing is certain. If one's head is crammed with ideas that were once serious but have become clichés, if one does not even know that these clichés are not as natural

as the sun and moon, and if one has no notion that there are alternatives to them, one is doomed to be the puppet of other people's ideas. Only the search back to the origins of one's ideas in order to see the real arguments for them, before people became so certain of them that they ceased thinking about them at all, can liberate us.

Our study of history has taught us to laugh at the follies of the whole past, the monarchies, oligarchies, theocracies, and aristocracies with their fanaticism for empire or salvation, once taken so seriously. But we have very few tools for seeing ourselves in the same way, as others will see us. Each age always conspires to make its own way of thinking appear to be the only possible or just way, and our age has the least resistance to the triumph of its own way. There is less real presence of respectable alternatives and less knowledge of the titanic intellectual figures who founded our way. Moreover, we are also affected by historicism, which tells us one cannot resist one's way, and relativism, which asks, "What's the use, anyway?" All this has the effect of crippling the natural longing to get out.

In *The Closing of the American Mind* I criticized doctrinaire historicism and relativism as threats to the self-awareness of those who honestly seek it. I pointed to the great sources of those serious ideas which have become dogmas and urged that we turn to the study of them in order to purge ourselves of our dogmatism. For this I have been violently attacked as nostalgic, ideological, and doctrinaire myself. The real meaning is: "Don't touch our belief structure; it hurts."

Yet we ought to recognize, on the basis of historical observation, that what epochs consider their greatest virtue is most often really their greatest temptation, vice, or danger—Roman manliness, Spanish piety, British class, German authenticity. We have to learn to put the scalpel to our virtues. Plato suggests that anyone born in a democracy is likely to be a relativist: it goes with the territory. Relativism may be true, but since we are by birthright inclined to it, we especially had better think it over. Not for the sake of good morals or good social order, at least in any usual sense of those terms, but for the sake of our freedom and our self-awareness.

Since I first addressed the issue of relativism, I have learned with what moral fervor it is protected. For example, the celebrated liberal, Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., says that (in contrast to my own alleged absolutism) the authentic American tradition is relativist. To support this latter contention he cites—*mirabile dictu*—the Declaration of Independence's "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . ." Professor Schlesinger takes this statement of fundamental principle to be evidence of the American Founders' *relativism*. He made this astounding argument in a commencement address at Brown Uni-

versity, where he apparently thinks the students will believe anything.

It is a waste of time to defend myself when the charges allege that I said things I did not say, but it is perhaps useful to instruct Professor Schlesinger about the real question. I never stated, nor do I believe, that man is, or can be, in possession of absolutes. I tried to teach, evidently not very successfully in his case, that there are two threats to reason, the opinion that one knows the truth about the most important things and the opinion that there is no truth about them. Both of these opinions are fatal to philosophy; the first asserts that the quest for the truth is unnecessary, while the second asserts that it is impossible. The Socratic knowledge of ignorance, which I take to be the beginning point of all philosophy, defines the sensible middle ground between two extremes, the proofs of which demand much more than we know. Pascal's formula about our knowing too little to be dogmatists and too much to be skeptics perfectly describes our human condition as we really experience it, although men have powerful temptations to obscure it and often find it intolerable.

Socrates' way of life is the consequence of his recognition that we can know what it is that we do not know about the most important things and that we are by nature obliged to seek that knowledge. We must remain faithful to the bit of light which pierces through our circumambient darkness.

The fervor with which relativism is protected is matched by the zeal with which its contemporary opposite, "Eurocentrism," is attacked (though in this attack Professor Schlesinger, perhaps a little inconsistently, does not join). This fervor does not propose an investigation but a crusade. The very idea that we ought to look for rational standards by which to judge ourselves is scandalous. One simply has to believe in the current understanding of openness if one is to believe in democracy and be a decent person.

THIS openness dogma was epitomized by one intellectual who, unencumbered by acquaintance with my book, ridiculed me for not simply accepting that all cultures are equal. He said that this opinion must be standard equipment for all those who expect to cope with "the century of the Pacific" which is upon us.

His formulation set my imagination in motion. I decided it might be interesting to experience a Gulliver's travel to Japan to see whether we really want to set our bark on the great Pacific with a relativist compass and without a "Eurocentric" life jacket. We can weigh anchor at the new, new Stanford, whose slogan has in effect become "Join Stanford and see the world." When we arrive in Japan we shall see a thriving nation. Its success clearly has something to do with its society, which asks much of itself and gets it. It is a real community; its members have roots. Japanese society

Relativism - The theory that all truth is relative to the individual & to the time or place in which he acts

No. This is a well said essay.

"Foundations" of dogmatic Christianity forms.

meaning of relativism is not accepted by students as an established dogma.

is often compared to a family. These characteristics are in tune with much of current liberal thought in America. (Remember Governor Mario Cuomo's keynote speech on this very theme to the Democratic convention in 1984.)

But the family in general is exclusive. There is an iron wall separating insiders from outsiders, and its members feel contrary sentiments toward the two. So it is in Japanese society, which is intransigently homogeneous, barring the diversity which is the great pride of the United States today. To put it brutally, the Japanese seem to be racists. They consider themselves superior; they firmly resist immigration; they exclude even the Koreans who have lived for generations among them. They have difficulty restraining cabinet officers from explaining that America's economic failings are due to blacks.

Should we open ourselves up to this new culture? Sympathize with its tastes? Should we aim for restrictiveness rather than diversity? Should we experiment with a more effective racism? All these things could be understood as part of our interest in keeping up with the Japanese economic miracle. Or they could, in a tonier vein, help us in our search for community and roots.

Of course, we recoil in horror at even having such thoughts. But how can we legitimate our horror? It is only the result of our acculturation, excess baggage brought with us on such voyages of discovery. If there are no transcultural values, our reaction is Eurocentric. And the one thing we know absolutely is that Eurocentrism is bad. So we have painted ourselves into a corner.

Condemning Eurocentrism is frequently a sign of intellectual, although not necessarily moral, progress. But it is only a first step. To recognize that some of the things our culture believes are not true imposes on us the duty of finding out which are true and which are not, a business altogether more difficult than the wholesale jettisoning of all that one thought one knew. Such jettisoning always ends up with the selective and thoughtless return to old Eurocentric ideas on the basis of what one needs right now, of what pleases one, of pure feeling.

This process has been nicely illustrated in recent times by the case of Salman Rushdie, author of the novel *The Satanic Verses*, which insulted the Muslim faith and occasioned the Ayatollah Khomeini's command to have Rushdie killed. There was general shock throughout the Western world at this, and writers, whose ox was being gored, rushed before the TV cameras to denounce so blatant an attack on the inviolable principle of freedom of speech. All well and good. But the kicker was that most of these very same writers had for many years been teaching that we must respect the integrity of other cultures and that it was arrogant Eurocentrism to judge other cultures according to our standards, themselves merely products of our culture. In this case, however, all such reasonings were forgotten, and the Eurocent-

ric principle of freedom of speech was treated as though its claims to transcultural status, its claims to be valid everywhere and always, were true. A few days earlier such claims had been treated as instruments of American imperialism; miraculously they were transformed into absolutes. By now, however, one can already see a softening on the question of Rushdie's innocence among the more modish radical intellectuals.

Leaving aside the intellectual incoherence here, this floating means to say that we do not know from moment to moment what we will do when there are conflicts, which there inevitably will be, between human rights and the imperatives of the culturally sacred. The serious arguments that established the right of freedom of speech were made by philosophers—most notably Locke, Milton, and John Stuart Mill—but our contemporaries do not return to them to refresh their memories and to see whether the arguments are really good. And this is due not only to laziness but also to the current attack on the very idea of such study.

FROM the slogans and the arguments echoed so frequently in the universities and the press one can judge the intentions of the "non-elitist" and "non-exclusionary" curriculum now sweeping the country, and what is at stake. The key word is *canon*. What we are witnessing is the Quarrel of the Canons, the 20th century's farcical version of the 17th century's Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns—the greatest document of which is Swift's *Battle of the Books*. Would that he were here to describe ours as he described theirs!

The issue is what food best nourishes the hungers of young souls. The canon is the newly valued, demagogically intended, expression for the books taught and read by students at the core of their formal education. But as soon as one adopts the term, as both sides have done, the nature of the debate has thereby been determined. For canon means what is established by authority, by the powers, hence not by criteria that are rationally defensible. The debate shifts from the content of books to how they become powerful, the motives for which they are used. And since canons are, by definition, instruments of domination, they are there to be overthrown, *deconstructed*, in the name of liberation by those who seek *empowerment*.

Philosophy in the past was about knowing; now it is about power. "Philosophy is the most spiritualized will to power." That is from Nietzsche, as is, more or less, all the current talk about the canon. "It's all about power," as they say, and in a more metaphysical sense than most know. This is the source of the deep drama being played out so frivolously about us. Professor Edward Said of the Columbia English department said at Stanford that the new university reforms were the triumph of post-modernism, meaning, among other things, that the curriculum which

This argument seems to prove that the ~~idea~~ created equal is

taught that the theoretical life is highest has been overcome. Curiously, books are invested with a very great significance in all this. They are the causes, not mere epiphenomena, as Marxism would have it. Change the books, not the ownership of the means of production, and you change the world. "Readers of the world, you have nothing to lose but your canon."

Underlying the tumult over non-Western content, then, is a discussion among Westerners using entirely Western categories about the decline or end of the West. The suicide of the West is, by definition, accomplished by Western hands. The *Times* report of the North Carolina conference gives the flavor of the public discussion:

... the conference's participants denounced what they said was a narrow, outdated interpretation of the humanities and of culture itself, one based, they frequently pointed out, on works written by "dead white European males."

That is *the* slogan. Above all the campaign is against Eurocentrism:

The message of the North Carolina conference was that American society has changed too much for this view to prevail any longer. Blacks, women, Latinos, and homosexuals are demanding recognition for their own canons. "Projects like those of [William] Bennett, [E.D.] Hirsch, and [Allan] Bloom all look back to the recovery of the earlier vision of American culture, as opposed to the conception of a kind of ethnic carnival or festival of cultures or ways of life or customs," Professor Fish said.

Replace the old, cold Greek temple with an Oriental bazaar. Overthrow the Waspocracy by means of a Rainbow Coalition. This has more or less plausibility as a political "strategy." Whether it should be the polar star in the formation of young minds is another question. It promises continuing wondrous curricular variations as different specialties and groups vie for power.*

This is the popular surface of the movement, the publicly acceptable principle of everyone's getting a piece of the action in a nation that has bought into group politics. But there is a deeper, stronger, and more revealing side:

The conference buzzed with code words. When the speakers talked about "the hegemonic culture," they meant undemocratic domination by white men. The scholars particularly scorned the idea that certain great works of literature have absolute value or represent some eternal truth. Just about everything, they argued, is an expression of race, class, or gender.

This is academic jargon, one-third Marxist, two-thirds Nietzschean; but it points toward the metaphysics of the cosmic power struggle in terms of which we interpret everything nowadays. All books have to be reinterpreted to find the conscious or unconscious power motive of their authors. As Nietzsche puts it, "Every philosophy is the author's secret confession."

The other side in this struggle can be found in the words of the black writer and activist W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the century:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil.

I confess that this view is most congenial to me. Du Bois found our common transcultural humanity not in a canon, but in certain works from which he learned about himself and gained strength for his lonely journey, beyond the veil. He found community rather than war. He used the books to think about his situation, moving beyond the corrosive of prejudice to the independent and sublime dignity of the fully developed soul. He recapitulates the ever-renewed experience of books by intelligent poor and oppressed people seeking for a way out.

But during the recent Stanford curriculum debate, a leader of the black student group declared that the implicit message of the Western civilization curriculum is "nigger go home." From this perspective Du Bois was suffering from false consciousness, a deceptive faith in theoretical liberation offered by the inventors of practical slavery.

Now, obviously books are being used by nations and religions to support their way and to train the young to it. But that is not the whole story. Many books, perhaps the most important ones, have an independent status and bring us light from outside our cave, without which we would be blind. They are frequently the acid which reveals the outlines of abusive power. This is especially true in a liberal society like our own, where it is hard to find a "canonical" book which truly supports our way unqualifiedly. Fur-

* During the question period following the lecture from which this article has been adapted, I discovered that this project has been a roaring success with at least some students. A Chinese, a black, an Armenian, and a person speaking for homosexuals wondered whether they were being "excluded," inasmuch as books by members of their "communities" are not represented in curricula in proportion to their numbers in the population. They seemed to think that Greeks and Italians have been in control of the universities and that now their day is coming. One can imagine a census which would redistribute the representation of books. The premise of these students' concerns is that "where you come from," your culture, is more important than where you are going. They are rather like Plato's noble guardian dogs in the *Republic* who love what is familiar, no matter how bad it is, and hate all that is strange or foreign. This kind of demand is entirely new. You do not go to college to discover for yourself what is good but to be confirmed in your origins.

ther, it is at least plausible that the books which have a continuing good reputation and used to be read in colleges have made it on their intrinsic merits. To be sure, traditions tend to ossify and also to aggregate superfluous matters, to be taught authoritatively by tiresome persons who do not know why they are important and who hold their jobs because they are virtuosos of trivia. But this only means that the traditions have to be renewed from time to time and the professors made to give an account of themselves.

One of the most obvious cases of a writer used as an authority to bolster what might be called a structure of power is Aristotle during the Christian Middle Ages. Scholasticism was a stifling force which had to be rebelled against in order to free the mind. But to take that Will Durant-like interpretation as exhaustive would be naive. In the first place, Aristotle is something on his own. He survived the wreckage of scholasticism quite nicely and needed no power structure prior to that time or afterward to insure the continuing interest in his works.

Secondly, Aristotle's accession to power was a result of a revolution in Christianity brought about by the explosion of Greek philosophy into Christian Europe. That philosophy had been preserved and renewed among the Muslims, and the challenge of reason to revelation presented by the Muslim philosophers precipitated a crisis in Christianity that was appeased but not entirely resolved by Thomas Aquinas. Here we have a truly interesting case of the relation between the allegedly Western and the allegedly non-Western.

But this is by no means the only case which shows what a grave error it is to accept that the books of the dead white Western male canon are essentially Western—or any of those other things. The fact that I am doubtful about the non-Western craze suggests automatically, even to sympathetic critics, that I am promoting Western Civ or the like. Yet the very language used reveals how enslaved we have become to the historicist assertion that all thought is decisively culture-bound. When Averroes and Thomas Aquinas read Aristotle they did not think of him as Greek and put him into his historical context. They had no interest in Greek Civ but treated him as a wise man, hence a contemporary at all times.

We smile at this naiveté, but they understood Aristotle better than do our scholars, as one can see simply by perusing their commentaries. Plato and Kant claim that they speak to all men everywhere and forever, and I see no reason to reject those claims *a priori*. But that is precisely what is done when they are taken to be parts of Western Civ. To the extent they are merely that, the appeals against them are justified, for Western Civ is clearly partial, demanding the supplement of all the other Civs. The strength of these appeals is thus in their demand for wholeness or completeness of understanding.

HENCE, the real, underlying quarrel is *not* about Western and non-Western but about the possibility of philosophy. Nobody, or practically nobody, argues that natural science is essentially Western. Some efforts have been made in that direction, just as some feminists have tried to show that science is essentially male, but these efforts, aside from their admirable sense of the need for theoretical consistency, have not proved persuasive. There is that big rock of transcultural knowledge or truth, natural science, standing in our midst while we chatter on about the cultural basis of all knowledge. A serious non-Western *Putsch* would require that students learn 50 percent non-Western math, 50 percent non-Western physics, 50 percent non-Western biology, and so forth for medicine and engineering. The reformers stop there because they know they would smack up against a brick wall and discredit their whole movement. But philosophy, they say, is not like that. Perhaps, but I have yet to see a serious discussion about wherein it differs. Differ it does today. But qualitatively? That question ought to keep us busy for a long time. Science is surely somehow transcultural. Religion seems pretty much limited to cultures, even to define them. Is philosophy like science, or is it like religion? What we are witnessing is an attempt to drag it away definitively to the camp of religion.

The universities have dealt with this problem by ceding the despised historicized humanities to the political activists and extremists, leaving undisturbed their non-historicized scientific disciplines, which is where the meat and the money are. It is a windfall for administrators to be able to turn all the affirmative-action complaints over to the humanities, which act as a lightning rod while their ship continues its stately progress over undisturbed waters. Stanford shows its "concerned," "humane," radical face to its inner community, and its serious technical face to the outside community, particularly to its donors. The humanities radicals will settle for this on the calculation that if they can control the minds of the young, they will ultimately gain political control over the power of science.

The serious scholars in non-Western thought should bring us the powerful *texts* they know of to help us. For the true canon aggregates around the most urgent questions we face. That is the only ground for the study of books. Nietzsche did not seek out Socrates because he was part of the classical canon German boys learned in school. He did so in spite of that fact. Socrates was necessary to him as the profoundest statement of what philosophy is and as the worthiest of rivals. Machiavelli was impelled by real need, not by conformism, when he sought out Xenophon. Male, female, black, white, Greek, barbarian—that was all a matter of indifference, as it should be. Nietzsche reflected on Buddha when he wanted to test the principle of contradiction. That is a model of the way things should be. The last thing

we need is a sort of philosophic UN run by bureaucrats for the sake of representation for all peoples.

Each must ultimately judge for himself about the important books, but a good beginning would be to see what other thinkers the thinkers who attract him turn to. That will quickly lead to the top. There are very few who remain there, and they recognize each other. There is no conspiracy; only the desire to know. If we allow ourselves to be seduced by the plausible theses of our day, and turn our backs on the great dialogue, our loss will be irreparable.

In my book I connected this radical historicism with fascism and asserted that the thinking of the European Right had wandered over to the Left in America. This earned me severe and unthinking criticism (with the honorable exception of Richard Rorty). It seems to such critics that I am one of those persons who trivialize unique and terrible phenomena by calling anyone whom I dislike a fascist or a Nazi. But I did not call persons active in the 60's those names. I said that the language of the New Left was no longer truly Marxist and had become imbued with the language of fascism. And anyone with an ear for the speech of intellectuals in Weimar Germany will hear echoes all around us of the dangerous ideas to which they became accustomed.

Since the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind*, fortuitously there has been fresh attention paid to the Nazism of Martin Heidegger, more and more widely recognized as the most intelligent figure contributing to the post-modernist movement. At the same time the late Paul de Man, who as a professor at Yale introduced deconstructionism into the U.S., was revealed to have written, as a young man in his native Belgium, pro-Nazi articles for a collaborationist newspaper. In reading these articles I was struck by the fact that if one suppresses the references to Hitler and Hitlerism, much of it sounds like what one reads in advanced literary reviews today.

The lively debate around these issues has not been very helpful, for it focuses more on questions of personal guilt than on the possible relation of Heidegger's or de Man's thought to the foulest political extremism. The fact that de Man had become a leftist after settling in America proves not a thing. He never seems to have passed through a stage where he was attracted by reason or liberal democracy. Those who chose culture

over civilization, the real opposition, which we have forgotten, were forced to a position beyond good and evil, for to them good and evil were products of cultures.

THIS, then, is how the contemporary American intellectual scene looks. Much greater events occurring outside the United States, however, demonstrate the urgency of our task. Those events are epitomized by the Statue of Liberty erected by the Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. Apparently, after some discussion about whether it should be altered to have Chinese rather than *Eurocentric* features, there was a consensus that it did not make any difference.

The terror in China continues, and we cannot yet know what will become of those courageous young persons. But we do know the justice of their cause; and although there is no assurance that it will ultimately triumph, their oppressors have won the universal execration of mankind. With Marxist ideology a wretched shambles everywhere, nobody believes any longer in Communist legitimacy. Everywhere in the Communist world what is wanted is rational liberal democracy that recognizes men's natural freedom and equality and the rights dependent on them. The people of that world need and want education in democracy and the institutions that actualize it. Such education is one of the greatest services the democracies can offer to the people who still live or recently have lived under Communist tyrannies and long for liberty. The example of the United States is what has impressed them most, and their rulers have been unable to stem the infection.

Our example, though, requires explanations, the kind the Founders gave to the world. And this is where we are failing: the dominant schools in American universities can tell the Chinese students only that they should avoid Eurocentrism, that rationalism has failed, that they should study non-Western cultures, and that bourgeois liberalism is the most despicable of regimes. Stanford has replaced John Locke, the philosopher of liberalism, with Frantz Fanon, an ephemeral writer once promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre because of his murderous hatred of Europeans and his espousal of terrorism. However, this is not what the Chinese need. They have Deng Xiaoping to deconstruct their Statue of Liberty. We owe them something much better.

Agree with basic premise
Compare to Judaism, re:
accepting a higher central
authority, that there
exists some absolutes not
relative.