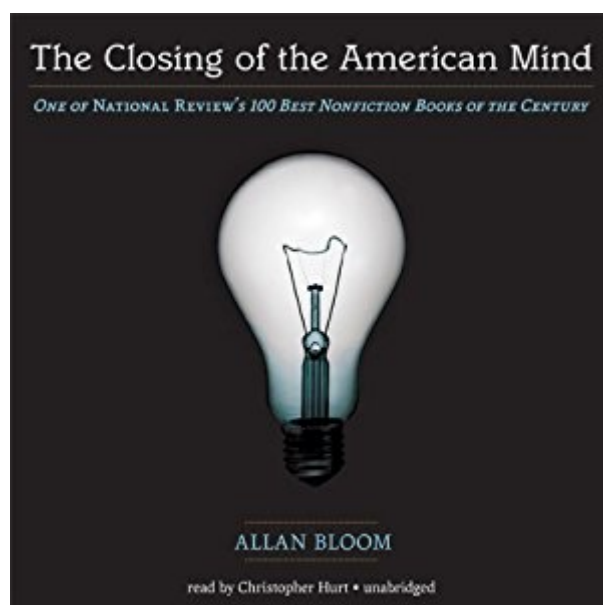


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The Closing Of The American Mind



Synopsis

By focusing on the American university, and by extension on American society, the author addresses the problem of "the radicalization of the principle of equality", and the "openness" to anything. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When *The Closing of The American Mind* was published in 1987, it instantly ignited a firestorm of praise and condemnation. Conservatives hailed it as vindication of their long-ignored criticisms about American culture in general and higher education in particular. Liberals denounced it as elitist and intolerant, and they said Bloom wanted to keep students ignorant of other cultures so he could indoctrinate them with his. Neither side had it right. *The Closing of The American Mind* is, as Bloom put it in his preface, "a meditation on the state of our souls." Both sides were wrong about the book because they didn't read it carefully enough. Liberals read Bloom's argument for philosophy as an attempt to purge non-white, non-European writers from the canon on grounds of cultural purity. Conservatives read his plea as an attempt to run all the liberal professors out of academia and replace them with conservatives. But a careful reading of Bloom would quickly prove both of these interpretations false. Bloom believed Plato's cave was culture, whether that culture was western or not (after all, it was Plato's description of his own culture that created the idea of the cave). Bloom's argument was that students should be forced to read the works of the great philosophers because those writers are the only ones who dealt with the fundamental question of life: what is man. Bloom

believed it was the university's mission to equip students with the tools that would enable them to seek the answer to this question and to lead a philosophical life. Only the great philosophers were capable of introducing students to the deepest and most profound life, and without this introduction, students would forever remain in their respective caves.

Nearly all of us Americans say that we believe in liberty and equality. But how many of us would be able to defend these beliefs against an attack by a really intelligent anti-egalitarian such as Nietzsche? Our regime was founded on the idea that reason, not religion or brute force, should rule. It was not always obvious that such a regime was either good or possible, and arguments had to be made to convince people to support its creation. The Enlightenment philosophers provided those arguments. As Bloom notes, the Enlightenment brought the philosopher (i.e., reason) and the regime into harmony as they never had been before. (Socrates, the archetypical philosopher, had of course been executed for impiety.) Rousseau, while agreeing with the the fundamental Enlightenment idea of equality, argued forcefully that reason alone could not found and sustain a society, and in the process invented the modern idea of the bourgeois, the product of the reason-based society, hatred of which was an important element of both Marxism and fascism. But it was Nietzsche who provided the really devastating attack, arguing that listening to our heads rather than our hearts had killed what was really worthwhile in us, that we need to stop reasoning and start coming up with new "values." The middle chapters of the book are the best overview of political philosophy that I have come across. Bloom understands Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Nietzsche as I believe they would have wanted to be understood. Especially Nietzsche, whose ideas are described with the utmost respect, even though it is implicit that if we are to keep our regime we ultimately must reject those ideas.

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