



Sarah Churchwell. *Behold, America: The Entangled History of “America First” and “the American Dream”*. New York: Basic Books, 2018. 368 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5416-7340-3.

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Commissioned by Evan C. Rothera (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

It is no secret that current events often inform historians’ interests.[1] In her recent book on the intertwined evolutions of the phrases “America first” and “the American dream,” Sarah Churchwell views those histories through the lens of recent political developments in the United States. Churchwell’s book is clearly a reaction to the election of Donald Trump, who declared the American dream dead and propounded foreign and economic policies of “America first,” thereby thrusting both phrases back into the heart of American political discourse.[2] Drawing heavily on published primary sources ranging from political commentary and speeches to popular literature, Churchwell argues that both phrases “have similarly been misunderstood, and misrepresented.” While the American dream was initially rooted in “principled appeals for a more generous way of life,” the staunchly nationalist “America first” originated decades before it gained popular currency through the isolationist America First Committee (AFC) in the early years of World War II (p. 7). These phrases, she posits, came to represent opposing sides of “a battle over the moral economy” of the United States from about 1900—when the phrase “American dream” began gaining credence, several years before “America first”

entered the national discourse—up to the Second World War (p. 8).

Churchwell sets the scene with a vignette featuring demonstrations by American fascists and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members during New York City’s 1927 Memorial Day celebrations. She draws her readers in by ending her prologue with a brief account of the arrest of Fred Trump—father of the forty-fifth president of the United States—along with several Klansmen, despite the fact that Trump was not a Klansman himself. She then plunges into her analysis, which she divides into three discrete periods: 1900–20, 1920–30, and 1930–40. The individual chapters within each section (four each, except for part 3, which has five) alternate foci, oscillating between the American dream and “America first” during shorter periods within each larger epoch. This approach engenders a structure reminiscent of a double helix or a “Jacob’s ladder,” with the narrative progressing chronologically, while comparing each phrase’s developments over time.

Contrary to its current formulation, the American dream of 1900–16 centered on the idea of equality as essential to the workings of democracy. Indeed, Churchwell demonstrates that, rather than embodying personal success represented by material prosperity, the American dream—which

emerged in the early 1900s—originally placed great focus on the collective success and well-being of the American community, though unfortunately Churchwell does not give the nineteenth-century roots of these discussions much attention. At the same time, this American dream shied away from aggressive government, recognizing “that dreams of endless progress could be as socially destabilising as unregulated competition or vast economic inequality” (p. 35). Prior to the United States’ entry into World War I, “America first” was associated with not only isolationist groups who opposed “foreign entanglements”—especially the Great War in Europe—but also the eugenicist, nativist, and racist ideas of “100% Americanism” and “Pure Americanism.” World War I helped refine the meanings of both “America first” and the American dream. While the American dream still represented the desire to keep corporate interests in check and ensure what is now called “social democracy,” it also grew to represent pacifist impulses, often serving as a foil to the growth of communism (encapsulated in the nascent Soviet Union). During the war, “America first” briefly donned the mantle of jingoism, but after that conflict ended, it returned to its isolationist roots, representing opposition to American involvement in President Woodrow Wilson’s proposed League of Nations. Such isolationists feared globalism, foreign interference, and “fake news.” Many proponents of “America first” in this period, however, also perpetuated fears regarding nonwhite and immigrant Americans as detrimental to the country’s well-being. In the postwar period, “America first” was used by Warren G. Harding in his successful bid for the presidency, where it gained acceptance among his followers and increasing derision from his opponents.

Part 2 of Churchwell’s account begins in the early 1920s. In this period, the American dream and “America first” intermingled, as the former came to represent a dream of assimilation, thereby adopting some of the latter’s nativist inclina-

tions. Additionally, notions of financial prosperity began creeping into uses of the American dream, as, “increasingly, the American dream of liberty, which by definition is unregulated, was coming into conflict with American dreams of equality and justice, which by definition (or at least by human nature) require regulation to be realised” (p. 103). At the same time, right-wing groups like the KKK continued invoking “America first” to justify excluding groups they deemed undesirable. Many political commentators at the time drew parallels between the popularity of such extreme conservative groups in the United States and the concurrent rise of fascism in Europe. As the success of the Roaring Twenties ramped up in the middle of that decade, the American dream began shifting more explicitly toward notions of individual material success; indeed, during this period, F. Scott Fitzgerald penned “one of the greatest articulations of the American dream ever written,” *The Great Gatsby* (p. 129). This iteration of the American dream glorified personal enrichment and big business. Concurrently, “America first” increasingly focused on organizing the social hierarchy to the liking of such extremists as the KKK and American fascist groups. In a related development, a rash of lynchings—described in horrific detail by Churchwell—swept the country, as these groups asserted their dominance, increasingly identifying themselves with the fascist movements in Germany and Italy.

The development of both phrases in the 1930s, which Churchwell explores in part 3, differed considerably, despite their shared historical context. In the wake of the nation’s plunge into the Great Depression, the American dream’s meaning seemed indeterminate, while “America first” continued to represent isolationist and often racist views. While the American dream retrograded, turning once more against the accumulation of wealth, proponents of “America first” increasingly identified themselves with German National Socialists, most strikingly exemplified by the German American Bund. From the middle of

the decade, the American dream gained popular acceptance, as its meaning returned once more to notions of upward mobility, though still tied to beliefs about the necessity of democratic equality. During this same period, the American dream was increasingly set up as a foil against totalitarianism, while “America first” continued to be associated with the Klan and American fascist groups, drawing greater negative attention from political moderates and liberals, especially journalist Dorothy Thompson. The phrase’s popularity received a boost from legal philosopher Jerome Frank’s 1938 book, *Save America First: How to Make Our Democracy Work*, which explicitly called for a policy of isolationism, though simultaneously rejecting European modes like fascism and communism.

Breaking with the pattern established in the preceding sections of her book, Churchwell uses a fifth chapter to close part 3. In this chapter, Churchwell examines both phrases in the context of the Second World War before American entry into that conflict. During that period, she argues, “the long-standing, implicit friction between the principles of ‘America first’ nativist isolationism, and the ‘American dream’ of tolerance and equality, finally ignited into open conflict” (p. 241). This conflagration erupted from the debate over American involvement in the war, encapsulated by Charles Lindbergh’s vocal support for the America First Committee (AFC). Many liberals—led once more by Thompson—argued that the AFC’s isolationist stance was tantamount to supporting fascism. Lindbergh’s speech in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 11, 1941, seemed to confirm these accusations, as he adopted Nazi tropes, asserting that the British and the Jews were conspiring to drag America into the war for their own benefit. His remarks sparked a national outcry against the AFC and the expression from which it derived its name. Simultaneously, liberals deployed the American dream to argue that the United States

had a duty to oppose fascism’s expansion at home and abroad.

In an epilogue running from the close of the Second World War up through 2017, Churchwell summarizes some of the important invocations of the American dream and “America first” over the past seventy years. This epilogue bounces between events like the use of the American dream in the “I Have a Dream” speech (1963) by Martin Luther King Jr. and Pat Buchanan’s invocation of “America first” during his 1992 presidential campaign. Taken as a whole, however, the vast majority of this final chapter focuses on Donald Trump, arguing that he derived his controversial views on race relations from his father, Fred, who Churchwell implies was sympathetic to the Klan. Churchwell concludes the book by reflecting on the history of “America first” and the American dream, ending her work by noting that people can only successfully oppose fascism by uniting, rather than dividing.

Churchwell’s research draws “almost exclusively from primary sources, to try to resist received wisdoms,” arguing that “returning to the originals let us reconsider what we thought we knew,” since “nuance gets lost in transmission” (p. 10). Most of her sources are books, editorials, and press reports published during the first half of the twentieth century, with her newspaper sources appearing to come by way of keyword searches of newspaper databases. While her primary source base is fairly sound, it seems that an approach drawing on some archival research could yield fascinating details about how public intellectuals and politicians developed their conceptions of “America first” and the American dream, rather than focusing solely on the public sphere. Even if reticent to use archival sources, edited collections of personal papers and writings seem like a promising and important primary source base from which to draw. It is unfortunate that Churchwell’s book neglects such sources, as it could have bolstered its intellectual aspects.

Unfortunately, by clearly writing for a popular audience, Churchwell misses several opportunities in her book. First, at no point does she provide any discussion of the public sphere, nor does she include Jürgen Habermas's influential work in her notes or bibliography; this is somewhat unsettling, given the apparent implications that concept holds for her book.[3] This lack of a theoretical framework—which would, ostensibly, be discursive in nature—weakens her analysis, reducing it to little more than a chronology of the use of the expressions in question. Furthermore, Churchwell's decision to “resist received wisdoms” by avoiding discussion of other works on the history of both phrases, while perhaps relieving for the casual reader, is frustrating for the academic historian. While this lack of any historiographical discussion is understandable for a popular press book, it seems a long discursive endnote might placate fellow academics. Finally, it is clear from the very outset of the book that the election of President Trump inspired Churchwell's research; indeed, she admits as much in her acknowledgments at the end of the book, even going so far as to confess that she only began working on the project in earnest in early 2017. While of course it is possible to produce quality scholarly work in such a short period, it seems that the time constraints under which Churchwell worked skewed her analysis, as she projects her own views on recent history and current events onto the past. This is perhaps clearest in the relative dearth of historicism or cultural relativism throughout the book; she repeatedly injects her personal views of various sociocultural mores of the past by way of parenthetical or offhand remarks, which detract from her argument's power (for example, see pp. 96, 142, 148, 200).

Although, as noted at the beginning of this review, all historical works are in some way related to the context in which they are written, and although perfect objectivity is humanly impossible, it seems that the apparent political slant of Churchwell's argument detracts from its value, in

the view not only of other academics but also of the public audience to which the book is addressed. Explicitly interpreting the events of the past through the lens of present concerns, though tempting, does a disservice to the individuals and ideas about which one writes, and it also smacks of sermonizing, of which the general public has seemingly tired. Gilbert K. Chesterton's maxim regarding tradition is instructive and applies well to the study of history, which “means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. [History] refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; [history] objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.”[4]

As academic historians struggle to engage the public, we cannot lose sight of our duty to eschew bias as best we can when performing our craft. Only then can we truly enlighten popular audiences, rather than further dividing them and lending credence to accusations of “liberal bias” in the academy.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931; repr., New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965).

[2]. For an example of how Trump's policy of “America first” played out in the context of the Khashoggi Affair, see my blog “Honesty: The Worst Policy?,” *Benjamin V. Allison* (blog), December 16, 2018, <https://benjaminvallison.com/2018/12/16/honesty-the-worst-policy/>.

[3]. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (1962; repr., Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

[4]. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 85.

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