Donald Trump and the upside down American Dream

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“The American Dream” and “America First” are among our nation’s most oft-used phrases.

Many Americans, however, know little or nothing at all about the myriad meanings attached to these slogans since the turn of the 20th century. As Sarah Churchwell reminds us, “detail tends to be the first casualty of reproduction.”

In “Behold, America: The Entangled History of ‘America First’ and ‘The American Dream,’” Ms. Churchwell, a professor of American literature and public understanding of the humanities at the University of London, provides an informative, and often surprising, history of these two tropes (and others) that dominate political discourse in the era of Donald Trump.

“Behold, America” is at its best when Ms. Churchwell excavates the origins of our iconic phrases. In 1630, she reveals, John Winthrop referred to “a city on a hill” to remind his fellow Colonists to strive for moral excellence, because Europeans would notice — and judge — the results of their experiment. His warning was “the antithesis” of Ronald Reagan’s self-congratulatory claim that the United States was an exemplary society worthy of emulation by the rest of the world.

Woodrow Wilson, Ms. Churchwell indicates, did not use “America First” to endorse isolationism. The United States, he declared, “must lead the world by imparting to other peoples her own ideals of Justice and Peace.” In the Progressive Era, we learn, “The American Dream” was invoked as a corrective to robber barons, self-interest, and unbridled capitalism in a society grappling with inequality; individual success, the phrase implied, could not redeem collective failure.

Over time, the content of “The American Dream” and “America First” changed. Contested by some, taken as received wisdom by many, and “fossilizing into something static and flat,” the new interpretations, Ms. Churchwell argues, have distorted our national values.
Self-styled experts retooled “The American Dream” as “shiny middle-class comfort and ease, a tale of upward social mobility and infinite generational progress, the fatuous optimism” that novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, journalist Dorothy Thompson, and other critics had railed against.

Celebrating “free markets” and the vast increase of millionaires and billionaires, many partisans in the past 70 years have deemed political, social and economic justice, ideas at the root of “The American Dream” as antithetical to it.

President Wilson’s internationalist interpretation of “America First,” Ms. Churchwell acknowledges, did not get much traction. Appropriated by isolationists, “America First” became a rallying cry for opponents of the Treaty of Versailles, which was rejected by the U.S. Senate, and for supporters of the go-it-alone foreign policies of the Harding, Coolidge and Hoover administrations.

In the 1930s, Charles Lindbergh and the German American Bund made “America First” synonymous with the appeasement of Nazi Germany.

In the period between the World Wars, Ms. Churchwell points out, “America First” and “100 Percent Americanism” were used interchangeably, especially by groups (including the KKK, whose membership approached 5 million citizens in 1925, about 4 percent of the population) driven by bigotry, arrogance, selfishness, racial antagonisms, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism.

Ms. Churchwell moves, rather abruptly, from World War II to 2016. She is eager to get Donald Trump in her crosshairs. Her present-oriented ideological agenda is clear throughout “Behold, America.” In a paraphrase of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. she suggests that “if history is to the nation as memory is to the individual, then all history is contemporary history.” She writes, for example, that behind the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which, in essence, restricted immigration to people from Western Europe, was a desire to turn the clock back, “in other words, to make America great again.”

And she notes that for fascism to take hold in the United States “all it would take was one powerful news organization to support it.”

In a concluding chapter, Ms. Churchwell reviews President Trump’s explicit references to “America First” — and the “dog whistles” he has sent to white nationalists. In his campaign and his inaugural addresses, she reminds us, Mr. Trump promised to put “America first” because “sadly, the American dream is dead.” Although his appeals were “old stuff,” she emphasizes, they remain politically potent.

These days, Sarah Churchwell concludes, “America has inherited a story that diminishes it.”

Americans, she believes, must reclaim “The American Dream” as a social contract, with a moral economy: “There is not a good reason to do so in the name of ‘America First.’”
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