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**The ‘American Dream’ is much better than we think;
‘America First’ is much worse.**

The “American Dream” is much better than we think, while “America First” is much worse, according to Sarah Churchwell. The UK-based American academic and commentator was talking today with the journalist Jackie McGlone about her new book, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*, on the final public day at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Churchwell originally expected to be writing a book about the author Henry James, but the election of Donald Trump in 2016 stopped her. “I was so angry and upset it did start to feel like a luxury I couldn’t afford, that I didn’t have the right to,” she said. “I thought that everybody had to put their shoulder to the wheel in whatever way they could. It was something that I had to do to respond to this, but I thought I had something valuable to add. The book’s not just an anti-Trump rant. There’s very little Trump in it; I worked very hard to keep him out of it.”

The focus of her book is, as the title suggests, the history of the twin phrases of the “American Dream” and “America First”, both of which emerged during the late 19th century. Going back to the newspapers of the time, Churchwell was surprised to find that usage of the phrase “American Dream” had little to do with the ideas of meritocracy, individualism, prosperity and capitalism usually associated with it.

“When it first began as a catchphrase to describe a national value system, it meant the exact opposite,” she said. “In the 1890s, monopoly capitalism was taking off, industrial capital was becoming corporate capitalism, and the industrialists were consolidating their wealth; people started talking of the 1% and the 99%—very similar conversations to the ones we’re having on both

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sides of the Atlantic today. When the phrase ‘American Dream’ emerged as a way of discussing inequality, it was in the context of checking rampant capitalism. ‘We’re about to have our first multi-millionaires; if this keeps going there may someday be a billionaire and, if there’s one thing we can all agree, it’s that a billionaire is an unAmerican dream’.”

“America First”, meantime arose out of an American desire to initially keep out of the conflict between the British and German Empires, neither of which were popular with large swathes of the US population. Very quickly, however, it was picked up by isolationists and racists: the rising Klu Klux Klan, during the 1920s, took out newspaper adverts that stated they were the only organisation that was ‘100% White, 100% American, 100% America First’.

“In 1921-22, as Mussolini was on the rise, the American press was explaining to ordinary American citizens of this new idea of fascism,” she explained. “Papers across the country - left, right, conservative, liberal, north, south, east, west, big town, small town, doesn’t matter - said that if you want to know what fascism is, what this guy Mussolini is preaching, it’s basically ‘America First’, but in Italy. It was very clear to them what it was. And they also said: ‘If you want to know the thing that the Klan is, it’s basically fascism but in America’.”

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