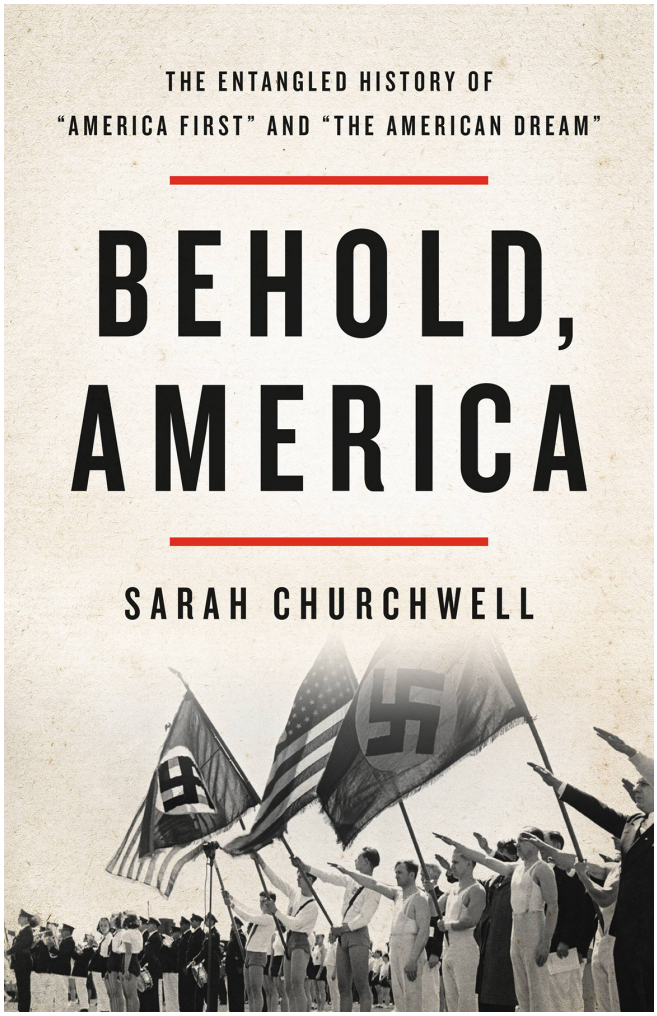

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THE AMERICAN DREAM 1924–1929: A WILLINGNESS OF THE HEART

THE AMERICAN DREAM appears to have vanished into thin air in 1924; no one seems to have mentioned it at all that year. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the American dream went quiet just then, as if silenced by the noise of the boom as it took off: between 1924 and 1929 the Dow Jones Industrial Average increased by 216 per cent. Perhaps Americans were too busy dreaming of easy riches to have time for dreaming of anything else; a euphoric faith that endless prosperity was at hand took hold of much of the United States during those years. In so far as the American dream had been conjured in the first place to express progressivist ideals, it seems to have been partly eclipsed along with the progressivism it had championed.

But there is also a sense in which the expression was gathering its forces. There remained writers thinking about the ideas already associated with the American dream that year, including one who would finish a novel at the end of 1924 that is now widely hailed as one of the greatest articulations of the American dream ever written.

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald never uses the phrase 'American dream', but his novel is full of dreams of America. The story takes place on Long Island, between Manhattan and the village of Great Neck (which Fitzgerald calls 'West Egg'), where Fitzgerald had lived for eighteen months, from the autumn of 1922 to the spring of 1924. Much of the action occurs in the area between those two locations, in Queens, where the novel's plutocratic villain, Tom Buchanan, has a mistress named Myrtle Wilson. The Buchanans live on Long Island–where, as Fitzgerald was well aware, the Klan was busily burning crosses to terrorise African-Americans when the action of the story takes place.

Tom Buchanan is a white supremacist, spouting eugenicist nonsense he's learned from books about Nordicism. 'The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be–will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved… It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things.' Mocked by his dinner companions, Tom tries to defend his 'scientific' theories. 'We're Nordics. I am, and you are and you … and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization–oh, science and art and all that.'[1] He trails off in confusion, unable to defend the inanity of scientific racism. By the end of the novel, Fitzgerald has underscored Buchanan's stupidity: 'There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind.'[2]

Fitzgerald's allusion to an 'American dream' arrives primarily in the novel's famous concluding passage, as Nick Carraway looks out over the Atlantic and becomes

> aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes–a fresh,"green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and

> greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.[3]

Gatsby had 'come a long way' to get there, the passage goes on, 'and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.'[4]

The concept of the American dream of individual aspiration and its diminution into materialism could be said to emerge at last here, in Fitzgerald's novel–many have argued that it does. If so, then at the moment the American dream we know is intimated, it has already vanished back into the past, into the rolling fields of a dark republic.

Fitzgerald was responding to a culture that had, for twenty years at least, been arguing for a larger American dream, one that protected the American creed against the encroachments of the mechanistic spirit that was overtaking the country. Fitzgerald captures a moment when materialism was taking hold of the dream–he registered it, and saw what its costs would be: the death of hope, and endless disappointment; the loss of wonder, not the realisation of it.

Gatsby's famous ending, in other words, describes the narrowing of the American dream, from a vision of infinite human potential to an avaricious desire for the kind of power wielded by stupid white supremacist plutocrats who inherited their wealth and can't imagine what to do with it beyond using it to display their dominance.

Without quite using the phrase 'American dream', Fitzgerald evoked the trajectory it had begun to follow nationally: from a dream of justice, liberty and equality, to a justification for selfishness and greed. The American dream was emerging as a way to describe what the country was betraying: namely, its ideals.

This is why it is a dream Fitzgerald carefully connects not to the religious beliefs of the Puritans but to the commercial ambitions of Dutch merchants–because the novel is suggesting that economic opportunism is what will destroy the 'capacious' American dream, not what will realise it. Idealism is killed by unrestrained capitalism: Jay Gatsby's potential for greatness is corrupted by a nation that teaches him only to desire the trappings of wealth and luxury, while Tom Buchanan's inherited capital grants him virtually unlimited domination, which is indistinguishable from white supremacy.

In other words, Buchanan's white supremacy is no passing detail: it is central to Fitzgerald's conception of how power in America works, his clear recognition that American industrial capitalism was built on the immoral inheritance of slave labour (a point he had already made explicit in his 1922 story 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz').

Jay Gatsby swallows wholesale the religion of pure capitalism, as Fitzgerald suggests in another famous passage, calling his protagonist 'a son of God, [who] must be about His Father's Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty'.[5] Gatsby is the quintessential, symbolic American, absorbing all of its doctrines, including self-invention, the

ability to become whoever you will yourself into being. But the son of a 1920s American God would necessarily interpret his father's business literally, crassly, as commercial business, one in the service of the 'meretricious'–superficial beauty that is worthless and lacking integrity, glitzy but trashy. That is the gospel of wealth.

When *The Great Gatsby* appeared in the spring of 1925, it sold only modestly, its ambivalent anti-plutocrat message unsurprisingly rejected or overlooked by Americans in the midst of the boom. By contrast, one of the most successful books of the same moment was Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, which was published exactly a month after *Gatsby*.

The Man Nobody Knows celebrates Jesus Christ as the model of the perfect businessman, and it was one of the bestselling (supposedly) non-fiction books in America between 1925 and 1926. Jesus, Barton explains, was not only 'the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem', and 'an outdoor man', but a 'startling example of executive success'.[6] The apostles were his employees: Jesus 'picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world'.[7] His parables were 'the most powerful advertisements of all time'.[8] If Jesus were alive in the 1920s, he 'would be a national advertiser… as he was the greatest advertiser of his own day'.[9] The insights just keep coming.

Making Jesus sound indistinguishable from George Babbitt, Barton informs his reader that the son of God was 'the founder of modern business', glossing the story of the Feast at Jerusalem as 'the big national vacation', at which the young Jesus went missing. When his parents find him, Jesus gets snippy.

> How is it that ye sought me?' [Jesus] asked. 'Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?'…
>
> He thought of his life as business. What did he mean by business? To what extent are the principles by which he conducted his business applicable to ours? And if he were among us again, in our highly competitive world, would his business philosophy work?
>
> On one occasion, you recall, he stated his recipe for success… [10]

And so it goes, as Barton turns the New Testament into a business self-help manual, complete with italicising 'business' when Jesus happens to say it in translation. It is no coincidence that both Fitzgerald and Barton lit on the same biblical phrase, 'His Father's Business'–albeit from opposite perspectives–to discuss the worship of business in modern America. A bestseller that calls Jesus the first great businessman is the reductio ad absurdum of America's long conflation of business with religion, its veneration of success, and its degraded Calvinist idea that personal wealth must mean God loves you more.

IN JANUARY 1925, President Calvin Coolidge declared in a famous speech: 'The chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing,

buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world.'[11] Commerce was always an American value, but during the brief years of the so-called Coolidge prosperity, the nation accepted almost without question that the days of boom and bust were over, that everyone could get rich on the stock market.

In truth, between 1923 and 1929, 93 per cent of the country experienced a drop in per capita income, while throughout the 1920s, monopolies and corporate mergers were once again in the ascendant, as six thousand independent companies merged, leaving only two hundred large corporations in control of over half of American industry. By the end of the decade, 1 per cent of the American population owned 40 per cent of the nation's wealth.

Calvin Coolidge was well named, for Calvinism, in a mass-market sense, was his basic creed. Coolidge was widely quoted for declaring that 'the man who builds a factory builds a temple; the man who works there worships there, and to each is due, not scorn and blame, but reverence and praise'.[12] His faith in the market was literal, and the stock market began to surge, while experts promised that stocks would continue to rise. 'Coolidge prosperity' was deeply unequal, however: wealth was largely concentrated at the top, while the poor continued to be left behind. But that faith in prosperity soon started to feel like a promise, even a guarantee.

It is also in 1925 that descriptions of the American dream start to sound increasingly familiar, as when one widely reprinted article hailed the city of Miami as 'the minting in America, in one fine, shining piece, of the substantial compound of that very American dream of freedom—opportunity and achievement'.[13] In the mid-1920s, Florida was enjoying a real estate boom that was, in fact, a bubble; the idea of a get-rich-quick scheme was starting to turn up alongside the 'American dream' more frequently. As American dreams of individual wealth grew, so did the American dream increasingly converge with ideals of 'freedom—opportunity and achievement' over ideals of equality.

We have seen the American dream of freedom before, when it was marshalled during the First World War against the forces of imperialism. It would be mobilised again to fight totalitarianism, but that was yet to come. Different contexts could still shift the implications of the phrase, reframing it in terms of one value in the American creed or another.

It could continue to be associated with internationalism, as when the League of Nations' agreement to establish a World Court was called the realisation of 'an American dream' by different journalists from Los Angeles to Iowa,[14] while readers were assured that 'the World Conference on Faith and Order, the fulfillment of an American dream of 17 years, will be an unparalleled council of churches'.[15]

The attachment of the American dream to pioneers and immigration was also strengthening. A 1925 book was described as 'evoking American dream towns of the early days', when the goals of pioneers yet shaped the land.[16] *The Milwaukee Journal* shared a reprinted portrait of a group of Jewish junk peddlers living on the South Side of Chicago who prospered. 'That American dream seemed to be coming true.'[17] But it is still only 'that American dream', suggesting the availability of others.

Such passing references as 'the American dream of beautiful womanhood' at a beauty pageant or 'the American dream of "impregnable defense"' show that although upward social

mobility was converging with it, the 'American dream' had some way to go before it would narrow down to our very specific, limited meaning.[18] In 1925 a minister assured his congregation that 'our American dream of a Christianized individualism, our principles of a Constitutional republic and the Christ-like spirit of brotherliness' would triumph over 'Russian Bolshevism and the futility of European Socialism'.[19]

Individualism was starting to push ahead of other values symbolised by the American dream, but it had not yet left behind the principles of constitutional democracy and equality.

A question over the right of a House representative to take his seat prompted a congressional minority to issue a report arguing against setting a precedent in which corrupt politics could 'select anyone they need for any special purpose, and the House would be powerless to resist it'. This would effect no mere erosion of the Constitution, they warned, but 'a frontal attack on it, a blasting process which is to weaken the foundation of the great American dream of "representative government"'.[20]

Meanwhile, even when individual dreams were affiliated with the national dream, they continued to be modest, and secured to the myth of the country's founding as a golden moral age. 'The "little farm well tilled" was the average American dream,' said the Miami News in 1927, its use of the past tense suggesting that the days of this Jeffersonian yeoman dream were seen as numbered.[21]

The bull market, having lasted a mere four years, was galloping to breaking point. Coolidge decided not to run again in 1928; supposedly he said in private that he thought a correction was coming. His vice president, Herbert Hoover, however, promised America that prosperity was never-ending. He would put a chicken in every pot, two cars in every garage, and on the campaign trail he promised that America was closer to the 'final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land'.[22]

ON 19 OCTOBER 1929, Fitzgerald published a story called 'The Swimmers', about an American named Marston working for the ironically named 'Promissory Trust' Bank, and his realisation that his nation's ideals have been corrupted by money.

Early in the story Marston's unfaithful wife, who is French, complains about the American women she sees on the Riviera:

> 'How would you place them?' she exclaimed. 'Great ladies, bourgeoises, adventuresses– they are all the same. Look!…'
>
> Suddenly she pointed to an American girl going into the water:
>
> 'That young lady may be a stenographer and yet be compelled to warp herself, dressing and acting as if she had all the money in the world.'
>
> 'Perhaps she will have, some day.'
>
> 'That's the story they are told; it happens to one, not to the ninety-nine. That's why all their faces over thirty are discontented and unhappy.'[23]

The American dream comes true for just 1 per cent: for the other 99 per cent, only discontent and bitterness await. The idea that the richest 1 or 2 per cent of the population was controlling the nation had become axiomatic. The 'American dream' as a dangerous delusion of wealth that writers like Dreiser and Anderson had warned against is here recognisably shifting to the 'promise' implicit in twenty-first-century meanings of the American dream, and the bitterness that ensues when that promise is–all but inevitably–broken.

The villain of 'The Swimmers' is a rich, vulgar banker who preaches an updated version of the Gilded Age's gospel of wealth. 'Money is power… Money made this country, built its great and glorious cities, created its industries, covered it with an iron network of railroads.'[24] The banker is wrong, the story makes clear, but his vision of America is winning out.

Feeling increasingly alienated, Marston finds himself musing on the meanings of America, and especially its eagerness to forget history. 'Americans, he liked to say, should be born with fins, and perhaps they were–perhaps money was a form of fin. In England property begot a strong place sense, but Americans, restless and with shallow roots, needed fins and wings. There was even a recurrent idea in America about an education that would leave out history and the past, that should be a sort of equipment for aerial adventure, weighed down by none of the stowaways of inheritance or tradition.'[25] The buoyancy of modern America depended on its being unanchored by history or tradition.

Marston eventually decides that there is no place for him in the profiteering society symbolised by his rival, but he will not relinquish his faith in the ideals that America can represent. As Marston sails for Europe, watching America recede into his past, Fitzgerald offers a closing meditation nearly as incantatory as the famous conclusion of *Gatsby*.

> Watching the fading city, the fading shore, from the deck of the Majestic, he had a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America was there, that under the ugly débris of industry the rich land still pushed up, incorrigibly lavish and fertile, and that in the heart of the leaderless people the old generosities and devotions fought on, breaking out sometimes in fanaticism and excess, but indomitable and undefeated. There was a lost generation in the saddle at the moment, but it seemed to him that the men coming on, the men of the war, were better; and all his old feeling that America was a bizarre accident, a sort of historical sport, had gone forever. The best of America was the best of the world… France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter–it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.[26]

Wall Street crashed ten days later.

Notes Chapter 7: A Willingness of the Heart

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 (1925), p. 14.

2. Ibid., p. 99.

3. Ibid., p. 143.

4. Ibid., pp. 143–4.

5. Ibid., p. 79.

6. Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924, 1925, pp. iv, 32, 23.

7. Ibid., p. iv.

8. Ibid., p. 107.

9. Ibid., p. 140.

10. Ibid., pp. 159–63; original emphasis.

11. *Racine Journal-Times*, Racine, WI, 19 January 1925.

12. Calvin Coolidge, 'Have Faith in Massachusetts: Massachusetts Senate President Acceptance Speech', 7 January 1914.

13. *Daily Republican*, Monongahela, PA, 3 September 1925.

14. *Los Angeles Times*, 29 January 1926; Daily Times, Davenport, IA, 29 January 1926.

15. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 June 1927.

16. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 October 1925.

17. *Ironwood Daily Globe*, Ironwood, MI, 1 Oct 1927.

18. *Morning Herald*, Uniontown, PA, 17 September 1925; Ithaca Journal, Ithaca, NY, 16 November 1929.

19. *Los Angeles Times*, 6 July 1925.

20. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 18 March 1928.

21. *Miami News*, 8 April 1927.

22. *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1928.

23. F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Swimmers', *Saturday Evening Post*, 19 October 1929, p. 13[…]"