

# **Americans Are Determined to Believe in Black Progress Whether it's happening or not**

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For two days in early June, as America was erupting in sustained protests over the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by police in Minneapolis, the most watched movie on Netflix was *The Help*. The 2011 film—which depicts Black servants working in affluent white households in 1960s Mississippi, and centers on a white female journalist—won acclaim in some quarters. But it has also been criticized as a sentimental and simplistic portrayal of racism—and redemption—amid the cruelties of Jim Crow.

To ask what was going on here—why people started watching *The Help* at a moment of deep racial trauma—is to risk tumbling down a rabbit hole. That the movie was newly available on Netflix does not explain everything. One reality that the *Help* phenomenon makes us recognize is the enduring power of mythology when it comes to American racism. The mythology takes many forms. Sometimes it involves a desperate grasping for affirmation. Sometimes it involves a gauzy nostalgia. Sometimes it involves a willful ignorance. All of these strains, and others, are woven into a larger and enduring narrative—the mythology of racial progress.

This is a uniquely American mythology. Since the nation's founding, its prevailing cultural sensibility has been optimistic, future-oriented, sure of itself, and convinced of America's inherent goodness. Despite our tragic racial history, Americans generally believe that the country has made and continues to make steady progress toward racial equality. Broad acceptance of this trajectory underlies the way our leaders talk. It also influences the way racism is treated in popular culture.

When we think about the nation's racial history, we often envision a linear path, one that, admittedly, begins in a shameful period but moves unerringly in a single direction—toward equality. As if we're riding a Whiggish escalator, the narrative of racial progress starts with slavery, ascends to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, speeds past segregation and Jim Crow to the victories of the civil-rights movement, and then drops us off in 2008 for Barack Obama's election. Many people asserted at the time that America had become a "postracial" society, or was at least getting close—maybe one more short escalator ride away. This redemptive narrative not only smooths over the past but smooths over what is yet to come: It holds out the promise of an almost predestined, naturally occurring future that will be even more just and egalitarian.

Thinking this way won't make the future better.

The mythology of racial progress distorts our perceptions of reality; perhaps more significantly, it absolves us of responsibility for changing that reality. Progress is seen as natural and inevitable—inescapable, like the laws of physics. Backsliding is unlikely. Vigilance is unnecessary.

It is obviously true that many of the conditions of life for Black Americans have gotten better over time. Material standards have in many ways improved. Some essential civil rights have advanced, though unevenly, episodically, and usually only following great and contentious effort. But many areas never saw much progress, or what progress was made has been halted or even reversed. The mythology of racial progress often rings hollow when it comes to, for instance, racial gaps in education. Or health outcomes. Or voting rights. Or criminal justice. Or personal wealth. History is not a ratchet that turns in one direction only. Martin Luther King Jr. famously asserted that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And maybe it will, in the end. But in our actual lifetimes we see backward steps and tragic detours.

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The protests that began in late May have focused on fundamental questions of police violence and civil rights. This sort of awakening offers great opportunity—more on that in a moment—but it is rare in our history, and challenges the nation's prevailing psychology. My own research as a social psychologist focuses in part on racial wealth disparities—particularly, what people do and don't believe, and do and don't acknowledge about those disparities. Unless people understand the systemic forces that create and sustain racial inequality, we will never successfully address it. But perceptions, it turns out, are slippery.

For the past several years, I, along with my Yale colleague Michael W. Kraus and our students, have been examining perceptions of racial economic inequality—its extent and persistence, decade by decade. In a 2019 study, using a dozen specific moments between 1963 and 2016, we compared perceptions of racial wealth inequality over time with actual data on racial wealth inequality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the respondents in our study significantly overestimated the wealth of Black families relative to that of white families. In 1963, the median Black family had about 5 percent as much wealth as the median white family. Respondents said close to 50 percent. For 2016, the respondents estimated Black wealth to be 90 percent that of whites. The correct answer for that year was about 10 percent.

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People's estimates of inequality were not only far too low for every period, but the estimates actually grew more inaccurate the closer they got to the present. People are willing to assume that things were at least somewhat bad 50 years ago, but they also assume that things have gotten substantially better—and are approaching parity. The mythology of racial progress exerts a powerful hold on our minds.

And the hold is very hard to break, as a study we recently conducted, in collaboration with the Northwestern professor Ivuoma Onyeodor, makes all too clear. Up to a point, this new study had the same basic design as the one just cited. But the sample group consisted only of white Americans. And before they provided estimates, a subset of the respondents were asked to read a short article about the persistence of racial discrimination. Exposure to the article had an impact. But here's the surprise: Those who read the article still estimated that, in 2016, Black wealth was close to that of whites. They simply plotted a more gradual slope of progress. In other words, if

people accepted that progress had been slower than they'd imagined—the takeaway message of the article they read—then they arrived at the idea that the past must not have been as bad as they thought. They did not entertain the idea that the present must be worse than they think it is. The mind is a remarkable instrument, adept at many things, including self-delusion. Getting people to alter overly optimistic outlooks—at least in the domain of racial progress—is not a straightforward matter.

Forming narratives is a way for individuals to find meaning in life and to make life seem more orderly and predictable. The narratives we tell about ourselves—and about the social groups to which we belong—help us organize how we interpret events as they unfold, and respond to them. Narratives are part of our mental architecture, and certain quirks of mind make specific narratives hard to escape. For instance, there's what might be called the generational fallacy: Many who acknowledge the reality of racism see salvation in the ebbing presence of older white people and their replacement by a surging mass of enlightened younger people. But generational change is not so simple. Young people's racial attitudes are more like their parents' than they may realize. (It is also the case that this "solution," even if effective, would be very slow.)

The mythology of racial progress is corrosive in countless ways. It provides a reason to blame the victim: If we're converging on equality, then those left behind must not be trying. And it diffuses moral responsibility for actively and significantly reforming the American system: If we're converging on equality anyway, then why do we need laws and other measures to promote it?

This isn't some abstract worry. You'll encounter it everywhere, once you're primed to look for it. The mythology of racial progress animated the majority opinion written by Chief Justice John Roberts in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the 2013 decision striking down a key section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Roberts wrote:

Nearly 50 years later, things have changed dramatically ... There is no doubt that these improvements are in large part *because* of the Voting Rights Act. The Act has proved immensely successful at redressing racial discrimination and integrating the voting process.

Since *Shelby*, multiple states have passed new election laws, including stringent voter-ID regulations, and purged their voter rolls. And the first-line remedy—legal challenges demonstrating that these laws are discriminatory—is unlikely to prevent violations of voting rights.

Similarly, even in upholding some forms of affirmative action in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor invoked the narrative of racial progress:

It has been 25 years since Justice Powell first approved the use of race to further an interest in student body diversity in the context of public higher education. Since that time, the number of minority applicants with high grades and test scores has indeed increased ... We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.

Seventeen years later, this prediction seems at best naive.

These Supreme Court decisions, different as they may be, rest on a rejection of the idea that systemic racism continues to make itself felt in American institutions. They reflect a Court that sees society, both in terms of institutions and individuals, as becoming more racially egalitarian—

admittedly with the help of past “course corrections” that the justices believe are now or soon will be unnecessary and obsolete.

The mythology of racial progress is durable, and can survive many direct hits. The moments in our history when it has fractured decisively have been moments when a sense of national disruption was deep and pervasive, and people could not avoid seeing the chasm between myth and reality. Such moments—after the Civil War, and again in the 1960s—are rare, but they can create significant opportunities. I believe we are in such a moment now. Most Americans are disgusted and angered by police tactics and attitudes toward Black citizens. Police killings of Black Americans are nothing new, of course, but the urgent attention to law enforcement’s behavior comes at a time when the country is also facing a devastating pandemic and historic levels of unemployment—both of which disproportionately affect minority communities. The year 2020 has not been a good one for America’s “master narrative” in any of its traditional forms. And it has exposed, at least momentarily, the narrative of racial progress—automatic, continuous, requiring little real effort—for the myth it has always been.

This is the time to strike, the time to take audacious steps to address systemic racial inequality—bold, sweeping reparative action. The action must be concrete and material, rather than solely symbolic, and must address current gaps in every significant domain of social well-being: jobs, politics, education, the environment, health, housing, and of course criminal justice. A window has opened, and acting fast is essential. It is possible that something has permanently shifted in the American psyche; we should hope that this is true. But history and psychology suggest instead that this window of clarity and opportunity will close quickly—it always has in the past. For one thing, success often proves self-limiting: Implement audacious new measures, and the temptation is to dust off your hands in satisfaction and declare the problem solved. For another, as the historian Carol Anderson demonstrates in her book *White Rage*, any significant advance toward racial justice will be met with a backlash. The passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments was followed by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and a new era of racial subjugation in the form of Jim Crow. The landmark legislation of the civil-rights era was followed by Richard Nixon’s “southern strategy” and the ascendance of racial dog whistles as a central tactic of American politics.

We should not think of the next year or two as the start of a decade or more of incremental progress. We should think of the next year or two as all the time we have, and a last chance to get it right.

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