

DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE MYTHOLOGY OF RACIAL PROGRESS

*Believing that things
are always getting better
actually makes them worse.*

BY JENNIFER
A. RICHESON

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.

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.

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 Onyeador, 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

led the generational fal-
Many who acknowledge
ality of racism see salva-
the ebbing presence of
white people and their
ement by a surging mass
ghtened younger people.
nerational change is not
ple. Young people's racial
des are more like their
ts' than they may real-
t is also the case that this
ion," even if effective,
l be very slow.)

ie mythology of racial
ess is corrosive in count-
ys. It provides a reason to
: the victim: If we're con-
g on equality, then those
hind must not be trying,
t diffuses moral respon-
y for actively and signifi-
reforming the American
a: If we're converging on
ity anyway, then why do
ed laws and other mea-
to promote it?

his isn't some abstract
: You'll encounter it every-
e, once you're primed to
for it. The mythology of
progress animated the
rity opinion written by
Justice John Roberts in
y *County v. Holder*, the
decision striking down a
ction of the Voting Rights
f 1965. Roberts wrote:

arly 50 years later, things
ve changed dramati-
ly ... There is no doubt
it these improvements are
large part *because* of the
ting Rights Act. The Act
s proved immensely suc-
ssful at redressing racial
scrimination and inte-
ting the voting process.

nce *Shelby*, multiple states
passed new election laws,
ding stringent voter-ID
ations, and purged their
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 pre-
diction seems at best naive.

These Supreme Court deci-
sions, different as they may be,
rest on a rejection of the idea
that systemic racism continues
to make itself felt in Ameri-
can 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 opportuni-
ties. I believe we are in such
a moment now. Most Ameri-
cans 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

ACTING FAST
IS ESSENTIAL.
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of unemployment—both of
which disproportionately affect
minority communities. The
year 2020 has not been a good
one for America's “master nar-
rative” 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 mate-
rial, rather than solely sym-
bolic, and must address cur-
rent gaps in every significant
domain of social well-being:

jobs, politics, education, the
environment, health, hous-
ing, 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 his-
tory and psychology suggest
instead that this window of
clarity and opportunity will
close quickly—it always has in
the past. For one thing, suc-
cess often proves self-limiting:
Implement audacious new
measures, and the tempta-
tion is to dust off your hands
in satisfaction and declare the
problem solved. For another,
as the historian Carol Ander-
son 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. *A*

*Jennifer A. Richeson, a 2006
MacArthur Fellow, is the
Philip R. Allen professor of
psychology and the director
of the Social Perception &
Communication Laboratory
at Yale University.*