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The Quiet Death of Racial Progress

How can we stop backsliding toward inequality?

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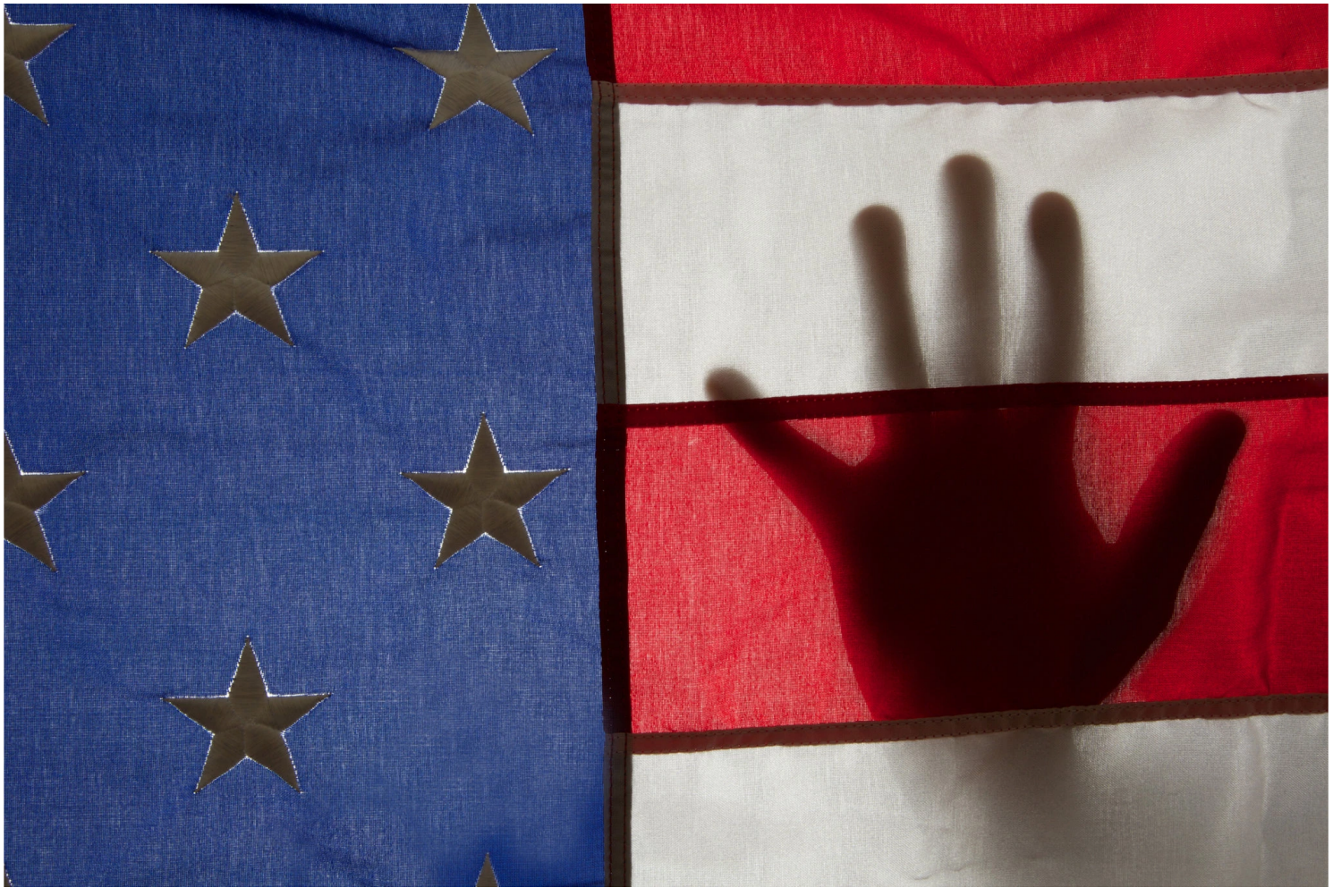

Chester Higgins/Skoto Gallery, New York

Over the past few months, I've been trying to write a comforting column. The thesis was going to be that even though Donald Trump is doing his best to inflame racial division, we are still making gradual progress against racism and racial disparities.

I was going to cite evidence showing a steady decline in racist attitudes. I was going to point to a steady rise in intermarriage rates. In 1967, 3 percent of American newlyweds married outside their race or ethnicity. As of 2015, 17 percent do, including 24 percent of African-American men.

I was going to point out that in 2017, 87 percent of blacks 25 and older had completed high school.

I was even going to note some positive economic statistics, too. The black unemployment rate was at a record low (and is now still close). After you control for parental income, black women now out-earn their white counterparts. In 1960, only 38 percent of black men — measuring by family income — were members of the middle class or above. Today, 57 percent are. In 1960, over 40 percent of black men lived in poverty. Now only 18 percent do.

Unfortunately, this is not that comforting column. The deeper I dug into the evidence, the more I came to doubt the idea that we are still making progress on race. For every positive statistic indicating racial reconciliation, there was one indicating stagnation or even decay.

Let's take that statistic about the decline in poverty among black men. It comes from an excellent report by Bradford Wilcox and others at the American Enterprise Institute. As their report clearly shows, the vast bulk of that decline happened between 1960 and 1975. If you look at poverty data since 1980, there's been little progress, either in black men moving out of poverty or into the middle class.

The recent famous study co-produced by Raj Chetty points to an elemental truth: There is still a strong, steady societal wind pushing against African-American men. Those born into poverty are much less likely to be able to climb out than their counterparts in other races. Those born into affluence are much more likely to fall down the income scale over the course of their lives.

When it comes to segregation, the story is even worse. One of the things we've learned over the past decades is that place really matters — the nature of your neighborhood and surroundings.

American neighborhoods are desegregating slightly, but the situation is worse for children. Black and Hispanic children are more likely to be residentially segregated than minority adults.

Schools are resegregating, too. The percentage of black students who are attending schools that are 90 to 100 percent minority went down in the South in the 1970s and 1980s, but now is shooting up. In the Northeast, the percentage of black students in these schools has been climbing for decades.

Even the workplace is showing signs of regression. Big companies are still reasonably integrated, but newer, smaller businesses are more segregated, often largely white, black or Hispanic.

As a nation we seem to have lost all enthusiasm for racial integration. A culture of individualism has led people to focus more on individual outcomes and less on the components of each community. We have settled into a reality that is separate and unequal, and we seem not too alarmed about that.

I'd say the correct response to all this is an attitude I encounter a lot among people who are working in these communities, which you might call left on structural racism and right on cultural accountability.

That is to say, the left-wingers have it correct when they point to the systems of oppression that pervade society: the legacy of residential segregation; the racist attitudes in the workplace that demonstrably make it much harder for African-American men to get jobs; the prejudices — in the schools, in the streets and in the judicial system — that make it much more likely that African-American males will be punished, incarcerated and marginalized.

But conservatives are right to point to the importance of bourgeois norms. Three institutions do an impressive job of reducing racial disparity: the military, marriage and church. As the A.E.I. study shows, black men who served in the military are more likely to be in the middle class than those who did not. Black men who attended religious services are 76 percent more likely to attain at least middle-class status than those who did not. As Chetty's research shows, the general presence of fathers — not just one's own — in the community is a powerful determinant of whether young men will be able to rise and thrive.

We've fallen into a bogus logjam in which progressives emphasize systems of oppression and conservatives emphasize cultural norms. Both critiques are correct. If we're going to do something about this appalling retrogression on race, we probably need to be radical on both ends.

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David Brooks became an Op-Ed columnist in 2003. His column appears every Tuesday and Friday. He is currently a commentator on "PBS NewsHour," NPR's "All Things Considered" and NBC's "Meet the Press," and is also a best-selling author.

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