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The deep-rooted myth of meritocracy is widening the racial wealth gap

Talib Visram : 11-14 minutes : 10/1/2021

In 1834, the first-known appearance in a text of the phrase “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” was supposed to be satirical. It was intended as a metaphor for something that was absurdly impossible: In this case, the image of a man trying to haul himself across a river simply by tugging on his bootstraps. Yet, over time, the phrase has come to be the driving force behind the notion that anyone who works hard can become prosperous.

It may seem like a harmlessly earnest expression that inspires a national work ethic, propelling all who participate toward the American Dream. But, that kind of upward mobility is simply unattainable for the majority—and a new report says the narrative is a key driver of the racial wealth gap. The bootstraps trope, glamorized historically in the pursuits of heroic robber barons and the rags-to-riches tales of Horatio Alger, has become the basis for a belief in a meritocratic system—even though self-made stories are extremely rare.

“It has become something that really dominates our psyche,” says Anne Price, president of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, which published the report. Coupled with another age-old narrative of anti-Black racism that the report says “undergirds policies that marginalize and disproportionately punish [Black people],” the myth serves to keep government from providing a route to wealth for Black Americans. “The impetus of this paper,” Price says, “was to fight against these tropes, and how they’ve been used against Black people.”

The report argues that while white people have benefitted from government help in the past, Black people have not, and are shut out of wealth-building due to the continuation of the culturally ingrained narrative. It points to such landmark policies as the Homestead Act of 1862, helping white Americans settle the West—not through trailblazing and individualist spirit, but through the U.S. government distributing 270 million acres of (Native American) land to 1.5 million white families. Studies have found that at least 45 million white Americans today still benefit from that act. Similarly, the GI Bill, key to building the white middle class, provided \$190 billion in federal loans for nearly 2.4 million veterans returning from World War II; Black vets were largely excluded.

These biased policies—combined with the fact that “Black people are the only group in this country who started off with zero capital”—have had a cumulative effect in building wealth for white people, who can continue to succeed today, in part, because of that heritage of wealth. Conversely, Black people taking the same, responsible steps cannot excel equally. “Getting married doesn’t lead to financial freedom” for Black Americans, Price says. “Nor does getting an education, nor does buying a home. It just doesn’t lead to the same things.”

A good education, for instance, is not the equalizer we often profess it to be; Black heads of households with a college degree hold \$22,000 less wealth than their white counterparts with high school diplomas. Similarly, for Black people, homeownership isn’t the “ticket to full economic freedom” that many think it is. Owners need money to keep maintaining their homes; the report points to a 2019 study that found the median value of Black real estate assets was 60% that of white assets. “It’s been so lopsided,” Price says, “that you can’t just think putting a few million dollars into homeownership is going to suddenly close these gaps that have been in play for 400 years.”

The authors make recommendations of policies that they say are necessary to narrow the severe racial wealth gap—and they say the change must start with reparations, in the form of direct payments to those descended from slaves. Black people, the report notes, owned 0.5% of the U.S.’s total wealth after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863; today, that figure is only slightly more, at 1% to 2%. “You just can’t talk about this issue in any serious way without talking about reparations,” she says.

While major federal policies are necessary to fully eliminate the gap, the report says progress can start on state and local levels. Price notes that pandemic recovery has shown the ease of rolling out local pilot programs, such as those around [guaranteed income](#), and suggests the same should be done around [baby bonds](#)—a policy long favored by [Senator Cory Booker](#) that would allow every newborn to receive a deposit at birth that grows in value over time, and matures when the child turns 18. “If we can provide Americans with stimulus checks,” she says, “we can provide every baby in this country with a wealth account.” At the same time, governments should be curbing wealth extraction, such as when California recently [abolished \\$16 billion](#) of criminal justice fees, which disproportionately hurt Black people.

And, though it’s hard to eliminate such an ingrained idea, the report’s authors say we must make progress in removing the bootstraps myth from the American psyche, so that it stops influencing policy decisions. “Billions of dollars are still invested in upholding that narrative,” she says. “These aren’t innocent narratives.”

By Marianne LaCroix for The Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative

After setting out before dawn in a small day boat, a Maine lobsterman pulls up traps by hand from the rocky bottom of the Gulf of Maine.

The first trap to surface contains nothing, as the trap’s “efficiently inefficient” design lets undersized lobsters and other sea creatures enter and exit freely to protect the species and other marine life.

The second trap comes up with several lobsters; however, after measuring the animals’ carapaces, one is too small to keep (a juvenile). Another lobster is of legal size, but there are clusters of black eggs on the underside of the lobster’s tail—indicating she’s a protected breeding female. The fisherman takes a special tool and carves a harmless “V notch” on one of the lobster’s tailfins and throws her back into the water, ensuring this momma will continue to be returned to the water for years to come, even if she’s caught while not actively bearing eggs.

Out of all the traps, only three lobsters can be legally harvested. It’s a lot of work for just a few “keepers,” but lobstering in Maine isn’t just a job, it’s a way of life.

SUSTAINING A WAY OF LIFE

For 150 years, the Maine Lobster fishery has been defined by its commitment to fishing sustainably, with many of its practices created by fishermen and self-policed. This commitment to sustainability is the driving force of the entire industry.

“I’ve been out on the water for as long as I can remember, and I’m proud to continue the tradition of so many before me, including my father and grandfather,” said Brian Billings, a 4th generation fisherman. “Our office is the ocean, and that means having a deep commitment to protecting not only our lobster stocks, but every other species in the Gulf of Maine—something we hope diners consider when eating Maine Lobster.”

The Maine Lobster industry is no stranger to challenges both on and off the water. Having faced the impacts of climate change, global trade disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently the fight to protect endangered North Atlantic right whales – the next decade will be a pivotal time for one of the most beloved American industries.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Scrutiny of the Maine Lobster industry has been at the forefront of the discussions around endangered North Atlantic right whales, with ship strikes being the leading cause of serious injury and death. With fewer than 400 right whales remaining, the urgency to protect the species is at an all-time high, and proposed regulations are set to bring major changes to the Maine Lobster fishery.

Well before the most recent regulations, the fishery implemented proactive changes to their gear to make it safer for right whales. These changes have been in place for years and have made a positive difference. Changes include:

- Converting to “sinking” rope that falls to the ocean floor, reducing the risk of entanglement

- Reducing the amount of rope in the water by setting more traps on each buoy line
- Added “weak links” to gear to allow whales to break away if entangled

Following the adoption of these measures in 2009, there was a 90% reduction in known U.S. lobster gear entanglements.

However, in 2019, a successful lawsuit filed against the federal government means that the risk to right whales must be cut to essentially zero over the next 10 years. This has led many to believe that removing all rope from the water and practicing “ropeless fishing” is the only possible solution.

Never before having been used at a large scale in a commercial fishery, ropeless fishing gear relies on wireless signals and expensive technology. Lobstermen are participating in initial tests, but conversion to this high-tech gear is years away from being commercially feasible with no proof if implemented in Maine that it would save a single whale.

“In Maine we’ve been doing our part for years, and we stand ready to continue to work with regulators and scientists to protect these endangered whales,” said Kristan Porter, a lobsterman who fishes out of Cutler, Maine. “The fact is there has never been a right whale death or serious injury attributed to our gear. We can’t act alone to save the species – it’s going to take widespread collaboration across industries and countries.”

As the fishery fights to protect right whales and the way of life that is so critical to Maine, the industry is still eyeing innovation and growth.

MAINE LOBSTER 2.0

Despite the challenges looming, the industry is focused on its next chapter—continually innovating as more consumers turn to seafood. Advances in the processing sector have led to more lobster product formats, more variety in sales channels from home cooks to retailers to restaurants, as well as an uptick in international consumption over the past decade. Many businesses in Maine have also looked beyond the popular whole and lobster tail formats to create unexpected products including Maine Lobster cakes, mac & cheeses, infused butters, and even Maine Lobster fertilizers created with lobster shells.

“We know we have a great product with a great sustainability story,” said Ben Conniff co-founder of Luke’s Lobster. “As we look ahead to the next five years, we know there will be challenges, but we’re also excited about the opportunity to do more with Maine Lobster, introducing consumers to new ways to think about and use the crustacean.”

As the global food landscape continues to shift and diners demand more from their food, the Maine Lobster industry will continue to deliver, working through challenges and protecting their way of life.

There’s a saying in the industry: “It’s not the easy way to do it, but it’s the right way to do it.” For more than 150 years, Maine Lobstermen have been doing it the right way, and that won’t stop anytime soon.

To learn more about the Maine Lobster industry and efforts to protect right whales visit rightwhalesandmainelobster.com.

Marianne LaCroix is the executive director of the Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative, a commodity group that seeks to promote the core values of the Maine Lobster industry, which are sustainability and traceability that’s deeply rooted in tradition.

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