

## The Sum of Us Heather McGhee

### CHAPTER 1: The Zero-Sum Hierarchy

*"Whites see racism as a zero-sum game that they are now losing"*

- What is good for them is bad for us and, since we control the levers of power, we make decisions based on this. The result is political and social decisions that disadvantage the very whites who support these decisions, all because they do not want blacks to get any of these advantages.

Origin of zero-sum social thinking

1. Our country was originally built on taking land for free from indigenous people.
2. Both whites and blacks could originally be treated as slaves, but increasing immigration created a dangerous subclass and the elite elected to differentiate, and separate, the slave class based on color (*later defined as race*). The logic was that whites would always have a class below them and thus be both more reluctant to revolt against people classed above them and incentivized to keep blacks below them. White slaves were indentured servants and there was a time limit to their servitude.

The result of these two developments was that land was easy to come by and slave labor was the most profitable way to work the land. Blacks were increasingly the slaves and anything that benefited the blacks would lessen the gap between poor whites and blacks, thus a zero-sum mentality evolved, implying that what was good for blacks would make things worse for whites.

In decade after decade since that time threats of job competition, whether from blacks, immigrants, or women has been a conservative mantra of those wealthy and in power - further solidifying a zero-sum social hierarchy concept.

- White immigrants were incentivized to *'push the blacks down'* to cement their ties with the white lower class.

The result of this zero-sum mind set is that policies that would support and expand the middle-class are rejected in favor of those that expand inequality and favor the very wealthy.

### CHAPTER 2: Racism Drained the Pool

For much of our history America has had the world's largest economy. Yet the U.S. ranks below all other successful industrialized societies in per capita government spending on it's people. Why are Americans so afraid of their government?

A clue to this question lies in the fact that free, northern states supported far more public institutions than did southern, States Rights, slave states before 1860.

- A governing class will tax themselves to invest in amenities that serve the public, because they need to attract talented people on whom their profit depends.
- A slave economy has no need to attract labor, therefore these same taxes and institutions will be vigorously resisted.
- As a result, even today, the South has 9 of the 10 poorest states and 7 of the 10 states with the least educational attainment - school is seen as a place where elites look down on others.
- In the South, counties that relied most heavily on slave labor in 1860 had the lowest per capita income in the year 2000. The impact of resisting education and public amenities in the beginning is a lasting legacy, affecting the entire country today.

A functioning society rests on a web of mutuality, a willingness among all involved to share enough with one another to accomplish what one person cannot do alone. In a sense, that is what government is.

- For most of our history, the beneficiaries of America's public investments were whites only - another driver of the zero sum economic belief.
- White society has repeatedly denied people of color economic benefits.
- The Homestead Act, 'red lining' of real estate for purchase and insurance purposes, the GI Bill was denied to blacks in much of the U.S., Social Security specifically excluded domestic workers.

Americans have generally supported an activist government - until the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

- White support for activist government policies went from 70% in 1960 to 35% in 1964 and has remained low ever since, while black support has remained high.
- With desegregation, political attacks on government benefits has escalated, to the point that people are willing to eliminate the benefits for themselves to avoid benefiting blacks.
- In the 1960's communities across the country drained public swimming pools and filled them in to avoid letting blacks swim with their white children.
- Defunding public schools and shifting their own children to private schools has become increasingly common.

### Chapter 3: Going Without

With the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Lending Act, the Republican Party instantly supplanted the Democratic Party in the South.

- The party had always resisted taxes and government programs like Social Security and Medicare, but suddenly these goals could be more easily reached if the white fear of black inclusion in government programs could be emphasized. The old zero-sum mentality and fear of 'mongrelization' could be used to demonize programs that benefited more whites than blacks (*whites made up a much higher percentage of the population*).
- As Republican strategist Lee Atwater said, "blacks get hurt worse than whites". Since blacks had been historically excluded from social programs, a higher percentage of the black population needed these programs, even though more whites suffered because the programs were terminated.

In the middle 1970s, the government effectively covered 60% of tuition for public colleges.

- Since that time federal assistance has shifted from grants to loans and state assistance has been slashed. The result is the huge student debt crisis we see today. Schools are privatized in their approach, drastically increasing tuition, while the 2005 Bankruptcy Act effectively forced students into a potential lifetime of student debt.
- In 1980 the ratio of black public college students was 1 in 6 and it is 4 in 10 today. While all of us are suffering, the black community is particularly hard hit, just when the opportunity to better themselves has been made available. Prior to the 1960s blacks were not admitted to many public schools.

### Chapter 4: Ignoring the Canary

Mortgage bankers learned to pedal sub prime mortgages in black neighborhoods without objection or oversight by the government. Once these practices became accepted, they were expanded across America and the financial crisis of 2008 practically destroyed the economy. The entire country suffered, but the black population had less wealth to lose and lost a greater percentage of what they did have.

### Chapter 5: No One Fights Alone

Unions generally supported all their members, including black members, and integrated more quickly than did other sections of society. The price they paid was to be labeled as black and left-leaning organizations, while white workers started siding with the white employers. Union power, which peaked in the early 1960s, largely owed the issue of race for fracturing the workforce and reducing their power.

- Employers learned the lesson of keeping white workers at a psychological level above black workers - allowing them to split the work force, reducing union's power, and keeping wages and benefits lower.

## Chapter 6: Never a Real Democracy

The most consequential loss the zero-sum hierarchy has cost our country is that we do not have, and have never had, a functional, representative democracy, i.e. VOTING RIGHTS.

The original U.S. Constitution...

1. Allowed the 13 original states to limit voting rights to white, male, landowners.
2. Allowed slave states to count non-voting blacks as 3/5 of a person, for representation purposes. This reduced the legislative power of every white male landowner in free states.
3. The Electoral College subverts the direct will of the people by reducing the power of the most populous states (*each state's vote equals the number of representatives in the House - never less than 1 - and the number of Senators - 2 for every state, regardless of size*).
  - 9 states have 51% of the population and 45% of the Electoral College
  - 18% of the population controls 52% of the Senate
  - The smallest states are 2 to 1 Republican
  - Twice in the last 20 years the winning presidential candidate has lost the popular vote

Requiring people to register to vote was only implemented after the Civil War, along with poll taxes, and state designated tests, all in a blatant effort to keep blacks from voting.

- The filibuster is an unanticipated consequence of an early change to Senate rules. It was little used until after the Civil War, when the minority used it to block legislation on civil rights, election law, and nominations.

## Chapter 7: Living Apart

The cost of segregation

- Segregated communities have higher levels of pollution for everyone in and around the community.
  - Segregated communities will push polluting industries to the black and brown areas, while integrated communities can work together to ban them entirely or force cleaner methods to be used.
- “The way we talk about ‘good schools’ and ‘good neighborhoods’ makes it clear that the absence of people of color is, in large part, what defines our schools and neighborhoods as good” - Robin DiAngelo.
  - White communities tend to draw their school district boundaries narrowly, in order to make ultra-local, racially, and socioeconomically homogeneous districts - hoarding local property tax wealth.
  - Increasingly public education has been hollowed out, with the majority of public school students in the U.S. being children of color. White children increasingly attend private or charter schools.
- The privatization and pricing up of public goods has been a cost for all of us - white and black - but, with the lower average standard of living, the black families suffer more acutely.
- Someone with average wages cannot afford to live in 65% of the zip codes with highly rated elementary schools.

Compared to students at predominantly white schools, white students who attend diverse K-12 schools achieve better learning outcomes and higher test scores, particularly in areas such as math and science.

- Exposure to multiple viewpoints leads to more flexible and creative thinking and greater ability to solve problems.
- Racially and ethnically diverse educational experiences resulted in improvements in critical thinking and learning outcomes and skills.

The cost of segregation for whites is ultimately the loss in flexibility, understanding, and problem solving. This cost is so large as to be incalculable. The improvement in our ability to relate, think, and problem solve is similar to when women were added to the work force - both on the work floor and in management.

## Chapter 8: The Same Sky

The Republican Party is increasingly driven by racial resentment. Racial resentment by whites and distrust of government are very highly correlated.

This helps explain why climate change policy is so opposed by people who are being directly affected by the increasingly erratic climate cycles.

- Not wanting government to do anything about climate change is a natural consequence, resulting from increasing distrust of government.
- Science and technology advances generally generate change, and change - as seen by people trying to maintain the status quo - means an increasing probability that they will lose their place in a social hierarchy. This is seen as a zero-sum situation.

Perhaps all this makes sense, if you've spent a lifetime seeing yourself as the winner of a zero-sum competition for status. You would have probably learned along the way to accept inequality as normal.

- The higher your status, the less problems will affect you.

The problem with this logic is that environmental and climate change issues affect all of us - we live under the same sky. It all seems to come back to the zero-sum story: climate change opposition is sold by an organized, self-interested white elite to a broader base of white constituents already racially primed to distrust government action.

To accept that we live under the same sky is to reject the dominant U.S. approach to environmental risk, which has been to shunt off the pollution by-products of industry into what's known as sacrifice zones.

- Race is the most important predictor of proximity to hazardous waste facilities in America.
- Government data show that black people are 1.5 times more likely to breathe polluted air and drink unsafe water than the overall population.
- Invariably, areas beyond the 'sacrifice zone' have lower air and water quality, so, the truth is that problems leak over into the general community, even if they are worse within the 'sacrifice zone' community.

## Chapter 9: The Hidden Wound

Ultimately, an economy - the rules we abide by and set for what's fair and who merits what - is an expression of our moral understanding.

By denying the reality of racism - i.e. color blindness - and their role in it, white Americans have denied themselves critical self-knowledge and created a prettified and falsified version of American history, one built on the "wishful insinuation that we have done no harm" - Wendell Berry in *'The Hidden Wound'*.

- James Baldwin wrote his account of what happens when white people open their eyes to racism. *"What they see is a disastrous, continuing, present condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility. But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it."*
- 2019 public opinion survey: majorities of both black and white people said that being black makes it more difficult to get ahead in America. Yet only 56% of white respondents believed the corollary; that being white helps you get ahead. A majority of those who believed the corollary felt the blame lay at the feet of black people themselves.

White fear of people of color is behind most of the white-on-black brutality, whether by citizens or police forces.

- This fear is largely the result of segregation.
  - Not having ongoing personal contact with black society breeds fear of the 'other'. Blacks, on the other hand, are required to understand white society to survive by its rules.
  - The zero-sum fear of the 'other' replacing you in the social/economic economy is only possible because you have little ongoing contact with these 'others'.
  - A white teacher's response to a friend's question - Was she scared to teach at a largely black high school? - "Scared of what? Don't be scared of black kids, Be scared for them."

- Where does this fear come from?
  - Segregation breeds unfamiliarity, which breeds fear.
    - White gun ownership skyrocketed during the Obama presidency. *Curious fact:* white men make up 33% of the population, but are 75% of the gun suicide victims.
  - 69% of people arrested for criminal activity are white, yet make up only 28% of the criminal reports appearing on TV.
  - Less policing in middle-income and wealthy neighborhoods means their violent crimes more often go unreported.
  - Since whites have been terrorizing blacks with impunity for so long, they are likely to be ‘projecting’ (*assigning to others their own worst attributes*) their own impulses onto blacks.
    - Since whites stole two continents and two hundred years of labor, blacks are thought of as thieves.
    - Since whites have raped black women with impunity, blacks are perceived as sexual predators.
    - Whites ‘red lined’ blacks into ghetto areas - *copied by the Nazis in dealing with Jews* - therefore blacks must be poor because of lazy work habits.

Perhaps the most powerful role white Christianity has played in the gruesome drama of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and massive resistance to racial equality, is to maintain an unassailable sense of religious purity that protects white racial innocence. White Christians are alternatively portrayed as the noble protagonists and the blameless victims.

As long as white people think that the issue of race is mostly about people of color/minorities and what has happened and continues to happen to them, we will fail to address the problem of systemic racism in America.

- The problem of racism is a problem of white people.

Wendell Berry: *“If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than have black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know.”*

## Chapter 10: The Solidarity Dividend

The faith in the idea of different cultures not only coexisting, but thriving through their differences didn’t come from theory or ideology; it came from lived experience.

The global economy has decimated much of rural America, draining small towns of both jobs and people. However, immigrants have flooded in to take low-paying jobs and start businesses.

- In the decade after 2000, people of color made up almost 83% of the growth in rural population in America.
- The growth and prosperity new people bring to rural areas give the lie to the zero-sum model.
- Asians, Africans, and Latinos are becoming the lifeline for rural American towns.

Perhaps the best indicator of zero-sum thinking is an African saying, *“When election day comes, keep your knife close”*; that’s when problems happen, especially inter-clan problems. Politicians will try to separate us, but once the election is gone, people become normal and resume trading with each other.

With failing support for government over the last fifty years has come falling support for taxes, a brain drain from the public sector, and a failure to maintain the infrastructure investments of the early twentieth century.

Five Discoveries the author made while traveling across America:

1. We have reached the productive and moral limit of the zero-sum economic model.
2. The quickest way to get to a solidarity dividend is to refill the pool of public goods and rebuild a thriving middle class - *for everyone*.
3. Because people are not all standing at the same depths today, resist the temptation to use universal instruments to attain universal ends. That way lies a continuation of widening white over black economic disparity.
4. We truly do need each other - this is why uprooting the zero-sum model is so essential.

5. We all have to get on the same page before we can turn that page. It's time to tell the truth, with a nationwide process that enrolls all of us in setting the facts straight.

There is a growing body of literature that shows that inequality itself impedes a country's economic growth - just as allowing women into the workforce didn't cost men jobs, but expanded the total economy.

- The solidarity dividend comes from finding a sea of potential allies in the people working alongside you - not the people trying to divide you as a group.
- When people have a chance to create a bond that's not based on skin color or culture, what they actually connect on are the things they value in common.

Members of a homogeneous group are somewhat assured that they will agree with one another - they don't need to work to understand the other person. People have to work harder in diverse environments, both cognitively and socially, but that hard work often leads to better outcomes.

To move forward we all need to accurately understand our past and we need to plan our future with as broad a coalition of people as possible. A multiracial and multifaceted group is required to find equitable answers.

The laws we make are expressions of a root belief, and it is time to face our most deep-seated one: a belief in the hierarchy of human value. "It's a powerful, liberating frame to realize that the fallacy of racial hierarchy is a belief system that we don't have to have/retain."

Who is an American, and what are we to one another?

- We are a nation of ancestral strangers that has to work to find connection, even as we grow more diverse.
- Politics offers two visions of why all the peoples of the world have met here...
  1. We are nothing more than competitors and when one wins the other loses
  2. Perhaps the proximity of so much difference forces us to admit our common humanity

I know which of these two I would rather work toward.