

THE SUM OF US

**What Racism Costs
Everyone and How We Can
Prosper Together**

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The Sum of Us is a work of nonfiction.
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Chapter 1

AN OLD STORY: THE ZERO-SUM HIERARCHY

Growing up, my family and my neighbors were always hustling. My mother had the fluctuating income of a person with an entrepreneur's mind and a social worker's heart. My dad, divorced from my mom since I was two, had his own up-and-down small business, too, and soon a new wife and kids to take care of. If we had a good year, my mom, my brother, and I moved into a bigger apartment. A bad spell, and I'd notice the mail going unopened in neat but worrisome piles on the hall table. I now know we were in what economists call "the fragile middle class," all income from volatile earnings and no inherited wealth or assets to fall back on. We were the kind of middle class in the kind of community that kept us proximate to real poverty, and I think this shaped the way I see the world. My mother took us with her to work in Chicago's notorious Robert Taylor public housing projects while she gave health lessons to young mothers, and some of my earliest playmates were kids with disabilities in a group home where she also worked. (It seemed she was always working.) We had cousins and neighbors who had more than we did, and some who had far less, but we never learned to peg that to their worth. It just wasn't part of our story.

I did learn, though, to ask “why,” undoubtedly to an annoying degree. In the back seat of the station wagon facing the rear window, I asked why there were so many people sleeping on the grates on Lower Wacker Drive downtown, huddled together in that odd, unsunny yellow lamplight. Why did the big plant over on Kedzie have to close, and would another one open and hire everybody back? Why was Ralph’s family’s furniture out on the curb, and where did their landlord think Ralph was going to live now?

My father turned eighteen the year the Voting Rights Act was signed; my mother did when the Fair Housing Act was signed three years later. That meant that my parents were in the first generation of Black Americans to live full adult lives with explicitly racist barriers lowered enough for them even to glimpse the so-called American Dream. And just as they did, the rules changed to dim the lights on it, for everyone. In the mid-1960s, the American Dream was as easy to achieve as it ever was or has been since, with good union jobs, subsidized home ownership, strong financial protections, a high minimum wage, and a high tax rate that funded American research, infrastructure, and education. But in the following decades, rapid changes to tax, labor, and trade laws meant that an economy that used to look like a football, fatter in the middle, was shaped like a bow tie by my own eighteenth birthday, with a narrow middle class and bulging ends of high- and low-income households.

This is the Inequality Era. Even in the supposedly good economic times before the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, 40 percent of adults were not paid enough to reliably meet their needs for housing, food, healthcare, and utilities. Only about two out of three workers had jobs with basic benefits: health insurance, a retirement account (even one they had to fund themselves), or paid time off for illness or caregiving. Upward mobility, the very essence of the American idea, has become stagnant, and many of our global competitors are now performing far better on what we have long considered to be the American Dream. On the other end, money is still being made: the 350 biggest corporations pay their CEOs 278 times what they pay

their average workers, up from a 58-to-1 ratio in 1989, and nearly two dozen companies have CEO-to-worker pay gaps of over 1,000 to 1. The richest 1 percent own as much wealth as the entire middle class.

I learned how to track these numbers in my early days working at a think tank, but what I was still asking when I decided to leave it fifteen years later was: Why? Why was there a constituency at all for policies that would make it harder for more people to have a decent life? And why did so many people seem to blame the last folks in line for the American Dream—Black and brown people and new immigrants who had just started to glimpse it when it became harder to reach—for economic decisions they had no power to influence? When I came across a study by two Boston-based scholars, titled “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” something clicked. I decided to pay the study authors a visit.

It was a hot late-summer day when I walked into the inner courtyard at Harvard Business School to meet with Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers, two tall and lean professors of business and psychology, respectively. Harvard Business School is where some of the wealthiest people in America cemented their pedigrees and became indoctrinated in today’s winner-take-all version of capitalism. It is an overwhelmingly white club, admittance to which all but guarantees admittance to all other elite clubs. Nonetheless, that’s where we sat as these two academics explained to me how, according to the people they’d surveyed, whites were now the subjugated race in America.

Norton and Sommers had begun their research during the first Obama administration, when a white Tea Party movement drove a backlash against the first Black president’s policy agenda. They had been interested in why so many white Americans felt they were getting left behind, despite the reality of continued white dominance in U.S. life, from corporations to government. (Notwithstanding the Black president, 90 percent of state, local, and federal elected officials were white in the mid-2010s.) What Norton and Sommers found in their research grabbed headlines: the white survey respondents

rated anti-white bias as more prevalent in society than anti-Black bias. On a scale of 1 to 10, the average white scoring of anti-Black bias was 3.6, but whites rated anti-white bias as a 4.7, and opined that anti-white bias had accelerated sharply in the mid-1970s.

"We were shocked. It's so contrary to the facts, of course, but here we are, getting calls and emails from white people who saw the headlines and thanked us for revealing the truth about racism in America!" said Norton with a dry laugh.

"It turns out that the average white person views racism as a zero-sum game," added Sommers. "If things are getting better for Black people, it must be at the expense of white people."

"But that's not the way Black people see it, right?" I asked.

"Exactly. For Black respondents, better outcomes for them don't necessarily mean worse outcomes for white people. It's *not* a zero sum," said Norton.

As to why white Americans, who have thirteen times the median household wealth of Black Americans, feel threatened by diminished discrimination against Black people, neither Sommers nor Norton had an answer that was satisfying to any of us.

"There's not really an explanation," said Professor Sommers.

I NEEDED TO find out. I sensed that this core idea that's so resonant with many white Americans—there's an us and a them, and what's good for them is bad for us—was at the root of our country's dysfunction. One might assume that this kind of competitiveness is human nature, but I don't buy it: for one thing, it's more prevalent among white people than other Americans. If it's not human nature, if it's an idea that we've chosen to adopt, that means it's one that we can choose to abandon. But if we are ever to uproot this zero-sum idea, we'll need first to understand when, and why, it was planted. So to begin my journey, I immersed myself in an unvarnished history of our country's birth.

THE STORY OF this country's rise from a starving colony to a world superpower is one that can't be told without the central character of race—specifically, the creation of a “racial” hierarchy to justify the theft of Indigenous land and the enslavement of African and Indigenous people. I use quotes around the word *racial* when referring to the earliest years of the European colonialization of the Americas, because back then, the illusory concept of race was just being formed. In the seventeenth century, influential Europeans were starting to create taxonomies of human beings based on skin color, religion, culture, and geography, aiming not just to differentiate but to rank humanity in terms of inherent worth. This hierarchy—backed by pseudo-scientists, explorers, and even clergy—gave Europeans moral permission to exploit and enslave. So, from the United States' colonial beginnings, progress for those considered white did come directly at the expense of people considered nonwhite. The U.S. economy depended on systems of exploitation—on literally taking land and labor from racialized others to enrich white colonizers and slaveholders. This made it easy for the powerful to sell the idea that the inverse was also true: that liberation or justice for people of color would necessarily require taking something away from white people.

European invaders of the New World believed that war was the only sure way to separate Indigenous people from the lands they coveted. Their version of settler colonialism set up a zero-sum competition for land that would shape the American economy to the present day, at an unforgivable cost. The death toll of South and North American Indigenous people in the century after first contact was so massive—an estimated 56 million lives, or 90 percent of all the lands' original inhabitants, through either war or disease—that it changed the amount of carbon in the atmosphere.

Such atrocities needed justification. The European invaders and their descendants used religious prejudices: the natives were incurable heathens and incompatible with the civilized peoples of Europe. Another stereotype that served the European profit motive was that Indigenous people wasted their land, so it would be better off if cultivated by productive settlers. Whatever form these rationales took,

colonizers shaped their racist ideologies to fit the bill. The motive was greed; cultivated hatred followed. The result was a near genocide that laid waste to rich native cultures in order to fill European treasuries, particularly in Portugal, Spain, and England—and this later fed the individual wealth of white Americans who received the ill-gotten land for free.

Colonial slavery set up a zero-sum relationship between master and enslaved as well. The formula for profit is revenue minus costs, and American colonial slaveholders happened upon the world's most winning version of the formula to date. Land was cheap to free in the colonies, and although the initial cost of buying a captured African person was high, the lifetime of labor, of course, was free. Under slavery's formative capitalist logic, an enslaved man or woman was both a worker and an appreciating asset. Recounts economic historian Caitlin Rosenthal, "Thomas Jefferson described the appreciation of slaves as a 'silent profit' of between 5 and 10 percent annually, and he advised friends to invest accordingly."

With sexual violence, a white male owner could literally create even more free labor, indefinitely, even though that meant enslaving his own children. The ongoing costs of slave ownership were negligible: just food and shelter, and even these could be minimized. Take the record of Robert Carter of the Nomini Hall plantation in early 1700s Virginia: He fed his enslaved workers "less than they needed and required them to fill out their diet by keeping chickens and by working Sundays in small gardens attached to their cabins. Their cabins, too, he made them build and repair on Sundays." It stands to reason that the less the slaveholder expended making his bound laborers' lives sustainable, the more profit he had. The only limit to this zero-sum incentive to immiserate other human beings was total incapacity or death; at that point, theoretically, Black pain was no longer profitable.

Then again, by the nineteenth century, owners could purchase life insurance on their slaves (from some of the most reputable insurance companies in the country) and be paid three-quarters of their market value upon their death. These insurance companies, includ-

ing modern household names New York Life, Aetna, and U.S. Life, were just some of the many northern corporations whose fortunes were bound up with slavery. All the original thirteen colonies had slavery, and slavery legally persisted in the North all the way up to 1846, the year that New Jersey passed a formal emancipation law. Even after that, the North-South distinction meant little to the flow of profits and capital in and out of the slave economy. Wealth wrung from Black hands launched the fortunes of northeastern port cities in Rhode Island; filled the Massachusetts textile mills with cotton; and capitalized the future Wall Street banks through loans that accepted enslaved people as collateral. In 1860, the four million human beings in the domestic slave trade had a market value of \$3 billion. In fact, by the time war loomed, New York merchants had gotten so rich from the slave economy—40 percent of the city's exporting businesses through warehousing, shipping insurance, and sales were Southern cotton exports—that the mayor of New York advocated that his city secede along with the South.

In very stark and quantifiable terms, the exploitation, enslavement, and murder of African and Indigenous American people turned blood into wealth for the white power structure. Those who profited made no room for the oppressed to share in the rewards from their lands or labor; what others had, they took. The racial zero sum was crafted in the cradle of the New World.

OF COURSE, CHATTEL slavery is no longer our economic model. Today, the zero-sum paradigm lingers as more than a story justifying an economic order; it also animates many people's sense of who is an American, and whether more rights for other people will come at the expense of their own. It helped me understand our current moment when I learned that the zero sum was never solely material; it was also personal and social, shaping both colonists' notions of themselves and the young nation's ideas of citizenship and self-governance.

The zero sum was personal because the revolutionary ideal of being a free person (a radical, aspirational concept with no contem-

porary parallel) was abstract only until it was contrasted with what it meant to be absolutely unfree. According to historian Greg Grandin:

At a time when most men and nearly all women lived in some form of unfreedom, tied to one thing or another, to an indenture, an apprentice contract, land rent, a mill, a work house or prison, a husband or father, saying what freedom was could be difficult. Saying what it wasn't, though, was easy: "a very Guinea slave."

The colonists in America created their concept of freedom largely by defining it against the bondage of the Africans among them. In the early colonial years, most European newcomers were people at the bottom of the social hierarchy back home, sent to these shores as servants from orphanages, debtors' prisons, or poorhouses. Even those born in America had little of what we currently conceive of as freedom: to choose their own work and education or to move at will. But as the threat of cross-racial servant uprisings became real in the late 1600s—particularly after the bloody Bacon's Rebellion, in which a Black and white rebel army burned the capital of colonial Virginia to the ground—colonial governments began to separate the servant class based on skin color.

A look through the colonial laws of the 1680s and early 1700s reveals a deliberate effort to legislate a new hierarchy between poor whites and the "basically uncivil, unchristian, and above all, unwhite Native and African laborers." Many of the laws oppressing workers of color did so to the direct benefit of poor whites, creating a zero-sum relationship between these two parts of the colonial underclass. In 1705, a new Virginia law granted title and protection to the little property that any white servant may have accumulated—and simultaneously confiscated the personal property of all the enslaved people in the colony. The zero sum was made quite literal when, by the same law, the church in each parish sold the slaves' confiscated property and gave the "profits to the poor of the parish," by which they meant, of course, the white poor.

Just how unfree were the enslaved Africans in early America? The lack of freedom extended to every aspect of life: body, mind, and spirit; it invaded their family, faith, and home. The women could not refuse the sexual advances of their masters, and any children born from these rapes would be slaves the masters wouldn't have to purchase at market. Physical abuse was common, of course, and even murder was legal. A 1669 Virginia colony law deemed that killing one's slave could not amount to murder, because the law would assume no malice or intent to "destroy his own estate."

In a land marked by the yearning for religious freedom, enslaved people were forbidden from practicing their own religions. The Christianity they were allowed to practice was no spiritual safe haven; the Church condoned their subjugation and participated in their enslavement. (In colonial Virginia, the names of slaves suspected of aiding runaways were posted on church doors.) Black people in bondage were not allowed the freedom to marry legally and had no rights to keep their families intact. Tearing apart families by selling children from parents was so common that after Emancipation, classified ads of Black people seeking relatives buoyed the newspaper industry. In sum, the life of a Black American under slavery was the living antithesis of freedom, with Black people subject to daily bodily and spiritual tyranny by man and by state. And alongside this exemplar of subjugation, the white American yearning for freedom was born.

Most Euro-Americans were not, and would likely never be, the wealthy aristocrat who had every social and economic privilege in Europe. Eternal slavery provided a new caste that even the poorest white-skinned person could hover above and define himself against. Just imagine the psychic benefit of being elevated from the bottom of a rigid class hierarchy to a higher place in a new "racial" hierarchy by dint of something as immutable as your skin color. You can imagine how, whether or not you owned slaves yourself, you might willingly buy into a zero-sum model to gain the sense of freedom that rises with the subordination of others.

Racial hierarchy offered white people a reprieve from the class

hierarchy and gave white women an escape valve from gender oppression. White women in slaveholding communities considered their slaves "their freedom," liberating them from farming, housework, child rearing, nursing, and even the sexual demands of their husbands. Historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers's *They Were Her Property: White Women Slaveholders in the American South* reveals the economic stake that white women had in chattel slavery. In a society where the law traditionally considered married women unable to own property separate from their husbands', these women were often able to keep financial assets in human beings independent of their husbands' estates (and debts). In addition to relative financial freedom, slavery gave these women carte blanche to use and abuse other humans. *They Were Her Property* recounts stories of white women reveling in cruelties of the most intimate and perverse sort, belying the myth of the innocent belle and betraying any assumption that womanhood or motherhood would temper depravity, even toward children. An image that will never leave my mind is Professor Jones-Rogers's description of a white mother rocking her chair across the head of a little enslaved girl for about an hour, while her daughter whipped the child, until the Black girl's face was so mangled that she would never again in life eat solid food.

FROM THE ECONOMY to the most personal of relationships to the revolution itself, early America relied on a zero-sum model of freedom built on slavery. The colonies would not have been able to afford their War of Independence were it not for the aid provided by the French, who did so in exchange for tobacco grown by enslaved people. Edmund S. Morgan, author of *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, wrote "To a large degree it may be said that Americans bought their independence with slave labor." Its freedom purchased, the newborn nation found itself on the verge of creating something entirely novel in the world and not at all guaranteed to succeed: a new nation of many nations, made chiefly of peo-

ple from European communities that had long been at war. To forge a common basis for citizenship in this conglomerate country, a new, superseding identity would need to emerge. This citizenship would guarantee freedom from exercises of state power against one's home or religion, free movement and assembly, speech, and most significantly, property. Citizenship, in other words, meant freedom.

And freedom meant whiteness. In the founding era, northerners' ambiguity about slavery in their own states didn't stop them from profiting from the slave economy—or from protecting its survival in the Constitution. Ten out of the eleven passages in the U.S. Constitution that referred to slavery were pro-slavery. The founders designed the new U.S. Congress so that slave states gained bonus political power commensurate with three-fifths of their enslaved population, without, of course, acknowledging the voice or even the humanity of those people. It was to this slavocratic body that the Constitution delegated the question of who could be an American citizen and under what terms. The First Congress's answer, in the 1790 Naturalization Act, was to confine citizenship to "free white persons," encoding its cultural understanding of whiteness as free—in opposition to Blackness, which would be forever unfree. Though people of African descent were nearly one-fifth of the population at the first Census, most founders did not intend for them to be American. For the common white American, the presence of Blackness—imagined as naturally enslaved, with no agency or reason, denied each and every one of the enumerated freedoms—gave daily shape to the confines of a new identity just cohering at the end of the eighteenth century: white, free, citizen. It was as if they couldn't imagine a world where nobody escaped the tyranny they had known in the Old World; if it could be Blacks, it wouldn't have to be whites.

WITH EACH GENERATION, the specter of the founding zero sum has found its way back into the American story. It's hard for me to stand here as a descendant of enslaved people and say that the zero sum

wasn't true, that the immiseration of people of color did not benefit white people. But I have to remind myself that it was true only in the sense that it is what happened—it didn't have to happen that way. It would have been better for the sum of us if we'd had a different model. Yes, the zero-sum story of racial hierarchy was born along with the country, but it is an invention of the worst elements of our society: people who gained power through ruthless exploitation and kept it by sowing constant division. It has always optimally benefited only the few while limiting the potential of the rest of us, and therefore the whole.

In decade after decade, threats of job competition—between men and women, immigrants and native born, Black and white—have perennially revived the fear of loss at another's gain. The people setting up the competition and spreading these fears were never the needy job seekers, but the elite. (Consider the *New York Herald's* publishing tycoon, James Gordon Bennett Sr., who warned the city's white working classes during the 1860 election that “if Lincoln is elected, you will have to compete with the labor of four million emancipated negroes.”) The zero sum is a story sold by wealthy interests for their own profit, and its persistence requires people desperate enough to buy it.

THAT SAID, WHENEVER the interests of white people have been pitted against those of people of color, structural racism has called the winner. So, how is it that white people in 2011, when Norton and Sommers conducted their research, believed that whites were the victims? I tried to give their perspective the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps it was affirmative action. The idea of affirmative action looms large in the white imagination and has been a passion among conservative activists. Some white people even believe that Black people get to go to college for free—when the reality is, Black students on average wind up paying more for college through interest-bearing student loans over their lifetimes because they don't have the passed-down

wealth that even poorer white students often have. And in selective college admissions, any given white person is far more likely to be competing with another white person than with one of the under-represented people of color in the applicant pool.

Is it welfare? The characters of the white taxpayer and the free-loading person of color are recurring tropes for people like Norton and Sommers's survey respondents. But the majority of people receiving government assistance, like the majority of people in poverty, are white; and people of color pay taxes, too. The zero-sum idea that white people are now suffering due to gains among people of color has taken on the features of myth: it lies, but it says so much.

The narrative that white people should see the well-being of people of color as a threat to their own is one of the most powerful subterranean stories in America. Until we destroy the idea, opponents of progress can always unearth it and use it to block any collective action that benefits us all. Today, the racial zero-sum story is resurgent because there is a political movement invested in ginning up white resentment toward lateral scapegoats (similarly or worse-situated people of color) to escape accountability for a massive redistribution of wealth from the many to the few. For four years, a tax-cutting and self-dealing millionaire trumpeted the zero-sum story from the White House, but the Trump presidency was in many ways brought to us by two decades of zero-sum propaganda on the ubiquitous cable news network owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch. This divide-and-conquer strategy has been essential to the creation and maintenance of the Inequality Era's other most defining feature: the hollowing out of the goods we share.