

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together

by Heather McGhee

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Reviewed by Jim McConnell

Heather C. McGhee's remarkable book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, asks a painful but necessary question: Why does the United States, the richest nation on earth, so often fail to provide decent health care, education, childcare, housing, and public infrastructure for its people?

For instance, my daughter-in-law, Pilar, is Spanish. When she was growing up her family was of modest means, yet she was able to attend college and earn a Ph.D. in microbiology, all on society's dime. She now teaches and conducts research at the University of Notre Dame. She was able to do this because Spain invested in her and in the common good through social programs that far exceed what we have here in America.

In Spain, for instance, everyone is entitled to health care. According to rankings from the World Health Organization, Spain has long ranked dramatically higher than the United States in health outcomes while spending far less per person. (Spain ranks 7th, the US 37th in quality of care.) Spaniards live four to five years longer on average, and their health care costs are only a fraction of ours per capita (about a third of U.S. costs). Even undocumented immigrants are covered under Spain's national health care system.

So why can't we have this in America? Heather McGhee's answer is both unsettling and persuasive: **racism**.

McGhee argues that racism has not only harmed people of color, it has also damaged the well-being of white Americans themselves. Again and again, America has chosen to destroy or underfund public goods rather than share them equally across racial lines. We have embraced what McGhee calls the "drained pool politics" of division, fear, and resentment.

One of the most striking examples in the book involves public swimming pools. During the segregation era, many American towns built large, beautiful public pools funded by taxpayer dollars. They were gathering places where white families could cool off during hot summers. But when courts ordered integration, many white communities chose not to share these pools with Black citizens. Instead of integrating them, towns across America literally drained the pools, filled them in, and closed them entirely. Rather than allow everyone to enjoy a public good together, they destroyed the good itself.

It is hard to imagine a clearer example of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. McGhee provides many other examples. She discusses how resistance to labor unions was fueled by racial division, weakening the economic power of workers of every race. She examines how public universities became more expensive after desegregation, as support for taxpayer-funded higher education declined once Black students gained greater access. She explores the politics of health care, where racial fear has repeatedly undermined efforts to create universal systems that would benefit millions of Americans.

Again and again, the pattern repeats itself. The politics of racial resentment convinces ordinary people to oppose programs that would improve their own lives because they fear someone else might benefit too.

What makes McGhee's book especially powerful is that it is not written in a spirit of condemnation. It is deeply researched, but also deeply humane. She travels the country listening

to people, hearing their fears and hopes, and discovering places where multiracial coalitions are already working together for the common good.

The title itself, ***The Sum of Us***, points toward her central insight: when we invest in one another, everybody gains. Healthy children, educated citizens, decent wages, clean water, accessible health care, and functioning infrastructure are not “handouts.” They are the foundations of a thriving democracy and a meaningful civilization.

This book reminded me of an old spiritual truth: fear shrinks the soul, while love expands it. Racism diminishes not only those who are targeted by it but also those who cling to it. It narrows the imagination and makes people suspicious of generosity itself. A society trapped in fear becomes incapable of creating beauty together.

But McGhee also offers hope. We are not doomed to remain trapped in this cycle. Awareness matters. Honest conversations matter. Learning to recognize the ways racism distorts our policies and poisons our public life matters. When people begin to see that their futures are tied together, new possibilities emerge.

If you have the time, I strongly encourage you to read Heather McGhee’s important and compassionate book. If you do not have time to read it, I highly recommend listening to her TED Talk, “*Racism Has a Cost for Everyone*.” It is one of the clearest and most compelling presentations of how division harms us all and how solidarity can help us build a healthier, more humane society.

Perhaps then we may finally begin creating the kind of civilized society that values all of its people.