

Dismantling the Zero-Sum Game to Co-Create a New Community with Solidarity Dividends and No Prisons

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Why can't we have nice things? In her first book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, Heather McGhee, a leader in the field of social and economic policy analysis, interviewed individuals across the United States to answer this question. Her extensive research reveals the answer—zero-sum thinking. Zero-sum-thinking, she argues, is the reason why we can't have nice pools, distributed wealth, sustainable natural environments, universal health care, affordable housing, strong public education, fair terms on mortgage loans, and other benefits.

Racial zero-sum-thinking is the idea that benefits for People of Color (POC) must come at white people's loss. In each chapter, McGhee offers clear and painful evidence of the ways in which white citizens relinquish benefits to prevent Black and Brown prosperity. One clear example of this logic is the draining of public pools that occurred in the mid-20th century. Public pools in the 1930s and 40s were, "glittering symbols of a new commitment by local officials to the quality of life of their residents (p. 23)." In the 1950s, local governments drained or sold their pools to prevent Black individuals from enjoying them. She adds, "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 (p. 14)."

McGhee emphasizes that while Black Americans are disproportionately affected by zero-sum-thinking, such racist ideologies lead to a systemic degradation of public goods that harm most white individuals. When white Americans refuse goods, they self-inflict pain and further disadvantage themselves to preserve what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "psychological wage" of whiteness. The psychological wage of whiteness is a valuable social status attached to their categorization as "not-black." According to McGhee, whiteness is a social construct created by white elites to create division between the masses of working class people. Whiteness, she convincingly states, diverts attention from the true source of white suffering, white elites and big money industries' reliance on exploitative labor and divide-and-conquer strategies.

McGhee explains that the falsehood of zero-sum thinking distracts white Americans from understanding that white elites exploit and dehumanize not just the descendants of enslaved people, but everyone else. She indicates that "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 (p. 14-5)." Time and time again, her book makes the reader pause and consider, who truly benefits from anti-union legislation, blocking

voting access, and predatory lending across race and ethnicity? Her answer is clear: those most opposed to unions and cross-racial solidarity are individuals and industries in positions of power. Their power, which is preserved through the use of tactics that give birth to fear and division, reflect the capitalist, colonial, and racialized nature of white supremacy.

So, how *can* we have nice things? McGhee compellingly explains that to have nice things, Americans have to reject the zero-sum structures ingrained in American culture. It is with an emotional and urgent tone in her writing that she challenges us to be critical of hegemonic perspectives and “demand changes to the rules in order to disrupt the very notion that those who have more money are worth more in our democracy and our economy (p. 289).” She adds that we must believe in a positive-sum narrative that proposes that our wellbeing is entangled with the wellbeing of others. McGhee shares hopeful stories of individuals and communities that have replaced zero-sum games with cooperation and accompaniment. One example is Lewiston, Maine, which has revitalized the local community by welcoming Somali refugees. She makes the case that like Lewiston, the rest of us can also unlock solidarity dividends through social cooperation.

This book challenged me to reflect on the racist ideologies and profit interests that drive disadvantaged white individuals to reinforce the hegemony of white and wealthy Americans through carceral violence. My work as a licensed psychologist is grounded in the emancipatory framework of abolition feminism. I view prisons as one manifestation of the zero-sum game. Abolition feminists have taught me that prisons are a set of gendered, racial, and class relationships across and beyond the carceral space through which the state’s capacities of containment, displacement, and dispossession are put to work for racial capitalism”(Gruber, 2020; Story, 2019). I have learned from Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore that the carceral space protects racial capitalism or the interests of the white elite and submits POC to forced forms of labor. Although McGhee’s book does not specifically discuss prisons as a manifestation of divide-and-conquer strategies, her book offers a framework that helps me to understand how zero-sum thinking contributes to the subjugated positions that POC are forced into within the racial and ethnic hierarchies of the United States. Her book implicitly reinforces ideas endorsed by abolition feminists—that the white elite uses surveillance, control, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to preserve their economic, social and political profit and interests. In other words, prisons result in capital accumulation and the political success of the white elite (Grosfoguel, 2003).

Reading McGhee’s book may better position those struggling for prison abolition and liberation to understand and confront the ways in which prisons maintain the oppressive influences of today’s racial capitalist and colonial system. I believe that from her book, the following questions emerge— What would the solidarity dividend be if we:

- 1) resisted the zero-sum game and worked together to nurture relationships, health, and the environment
- 2) broke out of bystander postures that strengthen oppressors and centered the interests of those most marginalized
- 3) opposed carceral violence and pursued investment in social programs rather than imprisonment
- 4) constantly dreamt about a community without prisons

McGhee's book energized me to resist the oppressive political-economic processes of racial capitalism that dispossess POC and profit the white elite. I couldn't help but dream about the solidarity dividends that exist beyond dominant imaginaries. This book may help to further ground others in the values of abolition feminism and reflect on the importance of taking responsibility for others with political will and steadfast commitment. McGhee's book is an essential and provocative reading for those looking to further understand the divide-and-conquer strategies that shape and reinforce today's racial hierarchy and carceral system.

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