

## Own Goal Politics in the United States

Keally McBride  
University of San Francisco  
Department of Politics

*The Sum of Us* tells the story of shrinking government benefits and increasing inequality over the past forty years in the United States from the bottom up. Analysts of neoliberalism often describe this shift in governing and economic strategies as a more or less conscious choice on the part of ruling elites. It is easy to see why powerful elites would embrace this turn; why the working classes would embrace their increased immiseration is a matter of debate and confusion. Thomas Frank's, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* offered the explanation that the polarizing cultural wars led voters towards more conservative politicians, but this was published in 2004, before the Obama presidency. Rather than signaling the end of racialized politics in the US, his two-term in the White House accelerated racial dividing lines. In *The Sum of Us*, Heather McGhee offers a pointed and detailed explication of how racial hierarchies have naturalized the increasing meanness of the American polity over the past forty years, pointing to the common understanding of white votes that any gains on the part of other races or ethnicities must create a loss for themselves.

McGhee's argument is based upon behavioral research, public policy formation, and interviews to illuminate the narratives about worth, scarcity and fear spun by Americans of all races. In the end, these narratives justify policies which overtly harm all citizens. The book maintains a faith that unmasking these destructive narratives will help us overcome them, as if our self-interest has been misidentified and a proper perception will correct our path. If only it were that easy! Ideologies operate in subtle ways, and history displays many instances in which preconceptions—even harmful ones—are impossible to dislodge.

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* delves into the complexities of "the structure of feeling"—a term first used by Raymond Williams to explain how hegemony becomes part of our lived, embodied experience. Berlant is also looking closely at how people experience and explain their own lives under neoliberal regimes, and how even striving for improvement can be the ultimate cruel hoax in a world that is certain to deny it. "I have argued throughout this book that an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it." (227) It may be that white citizens yearn for the security of times past when there was a brief period of social and economic stability underwritten by the state. But the desire to return to a past of more exclusive privilege is exactly what prevents the development of policies that would deliver such protections in the future. McGhee seems to assume that once we understand this dynamic, we will be able to stop this

self-defeating behavior, but this ignores the constellation of feelings and attachments embedded in the continually disappointed desires that many continue to express. We articulate alternatives, already knowing that they will be dismissed. The rage that comes with the disappointment in itself becomes addictive. Keeping this dynamic in mind can help make sense of the increasing fury of both right and left-wing movements that double down with the same strategies instead of pivoting when met with resistance or defeat.

Nor is this dynamic unique to the neoliberal era. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the sharpest observers of the effects of social inequities, argued that we gravitate towards domination of others instead of protecting our own freedom. Citizens “pay more attention to what is below them than to what is above, domination becomes dearer to them than independence, and they consent to wear chains so that they may give them in turn to others.” (Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*. 52) This perspective suggests that white citizens might not be able to be coaxed out of their self-defeating positions; in the end, their own suffering is less important to them than the pain of others.

## References

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “Discourse on Inequality” in *Rousseau’s Political Writings*. Ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.

Keally McBride is a Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco. She has published four books, and is currently working on racial capitalism, ecology and primitive accumulation in California.