

The old, evil idea of humans as units of production

When people's value is reduced to their economic contributions, they are dehumanized.

by [Whitney Wilkinson Arreche](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



A slave auction block at Greenhill Plantation, Campbell County, Virginia. Photo from the Historic American Building Survey, Library of Congress.

My grandmother is 92 and lives in a memory care facility that is, thankfully, closed to outside visitors as a result of COVID-19. She is feisty, resilient, frail, and occasionally as grumpy as the rest of us. She has to have her coffee every morning (and afternoon, if she had her way). Her name is Jackie. She used to call me chickadee, and I miss that.

She's part of the population in our country that is most vulnerable to COVID-19. This is the population Dan Patrick sees as a small, necessary sacrifice to the economic stability that the lieutenant governor of Texas, where I live, calls "The American Dream." Speaking to Tucker Carlson in March, Patrick fervently preached:

No one reached out to me and said, as a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren? And if that's the exchange, I'm all in... The legacy of our country is at risk... Those of us who are 70-plus, we'll take care of ourselves—but don't sacrifice the country. Don't do that. Don't ruin this great American dream.

I, like many, received Patrick's words as salt in the already inflamed wound of worry for my grandmother. She is not a pawn for the American dream. She is not a worthy sacrifice for the economy. Her life is not up for exchange as payment for business as usual. She is a human being, not a unit of economic production.

I was outraged at Patrick's words, at his vision of the American economy as a god demanding the sacrifice of our most vulnerable. I also believe that the fact that I am white has the potential to prevent me from seeing—and more importantly, feeling—the true implications of his argument.

This argument is nothing new in the history of the United States economy. This has been made painfully obvious as the realities of racial inequity have led to higher COVID-19 death rates in communities of color. Patrick gestures at heroically sacrificing his own life for the economy, but it will not likely be his own life that's sacrificed.

We know from history that when people's value is reduced to what they can contribute to the economy, they are dehumanized. They become “producers” and “products.” They become a means to an end, profit in the eyes of the powerful. The particular, unique, made-in-God's-image human is rendered abstract, invisible, and disposable. Historian Stephanie Smallwood writes that such an understanding creates “marks where human beings once stood.” That is, it fits an entire, complex, free life into a unit of currency—listed in slaveholding ledgers as an asset alongside cotton, sugar, and coffee, or listed in our current COVID-19 narratives as an expendable statistic worth risking.

This listing—this reduction of the human to a unit of currency—undergirds the entire United States economy. The chattel enslavement of Africans and their descendants was the foundation of our national economy. Narratives of the American dream function to help us white people forget that, while this country was indeed built upon hard work, much of that work was the forced labor of enslaved humans who were

understood as interchangeable property. Marks where human beings once stood.

One such human being was Will Adams, born into enslavement to slave owner Dave Cavin in 1857 in Harrison County, Texas. Adams was interviewed in 1937, as recorded in George P. Rawick's *The American Slave* series. He reveals that the treatment of a human being as currency was not some abstract idea, but a concrete reality woven into the everyday experience of the enslaved person:

He [the master] was sho that pot-licker pot was filled as long as the darkies wanted to eat. One day a white man and his wife was with him when he come to the "quarters" at dinner. The lady say, "It looks like Mr. Dave thinks lots of his N—s." The man say, "I reckon he do, *that's his money.*"

Adams recalled his grandmother Mariah (also enslaved by Cavin) saying the same thing: that their master took care of them because they were "his money." When humans become units of economic production, their well-being only matters insofar as it furthers that economy. Feed them only if it feeds the bottom line. Clothe them only if it covers your costs of production. Of course, other slaveholders did not treat their human money even this well. But there was no fair or humane treatment when it came to slavery. A dehumanizing system reliant upon the economic exchange of human flesh could never be capable of such. It was (and is) evil. As Christians, we name it sin.

Daina Ramey Berry explores this sinful institution in *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*. Those in power saw enslaved people as exchangeable commodities, specimens, and human chattel. Beginning at the moment of birth, their entire lives were defined by their financial value. Birth announcements were ledger entries. Baby showers were instead auctions of human property for sale. Humans appreciated in value until adulthood and then depreciated as they aged. They were flesh that could be bought, sold, traded, and discarded.

Berry invites us into an uncomfortable truth: despite the seductions of the so-called American dream, our particular economy in the United States wasn't born of grit, gumption, and freedom. It was born of humans who were violently rendered into units of property and economic production. This poisonous root of our economy continues not only to fund white supremacy in this country (Will Adams died just 70 years ago, when my grandmother was a young woman) but also to shape our

imagination of what the United States economy even is.

What Dan Patrick called the American dream has been informed, both directly and indirectly, by this damning history that used human life as payment for the economic success of the powerful. Fears of the collapse of our economy are real and valid. But equally real and valid are the ways our imagination of what the economy even is has been collapsed by its evil foundations: chattel slavery.

The impulse to think of human life as money is as old as our country, woven into the very fabric of our political imagination. COVID-19 did not generate this impulse in Dan Patrick and so many others. Rather, COVID-19 has, like any trauma, tapped into deep-seated anxieties. Anxiety often brings with it reversion: reverting back into past habits, comfortable patterns of behavior. The anxiety of this pandemic is causing some of us to revert back to the sinful foundations of our economy: humans as units of economic production.

To be clear, current conversations about sacrificing the vulnerable for the economy are not the same thing as chattel slavery. But the logic being exposed— a logic that has poisoned our imagination of what economic health looks like, and who is disposable to achieve it—cannot be divorced from our not-so-distant history.

Can we imagine an economy that does not require cannibalistic capitalism to survive, or human life that's irreducible to units of production? Can we imagine the American dream apart from the ongoing struggle of people of African descent to survive in an economy where the average white family has seven times the wealth of the average African American family?

Honestly, I don't know if we white people are capable of imagining a different economy. But I like to think that, with God's help and an honest accounting of our past, it could be possible. I find hope in the reality that the reduction of human life to units of production was never complete. Like water lapping over a dam that could not contain it, there were spillages of human life that could not be reconciled in a ledger book. There was human goodness that escaped the unjust listing of humans as goods. There were stolen-away moments in the hush harbors of secret worship where souls found freedom that could never be chained. There were spillages of humanity that resolutely refused commodification and captivity. There still are.

My grandmother isn't really worth all that much as a unit of economic production. I do see how someone with a certain kind of limited imagination might believe that

she's a fair exchange for healthy, young life to flourish. But I see her with a different sort of imagination, one in which she's irreducible to the economic. I can't put a price on her moments of clarity when she speaks my name or says she loves me, or on her nonverbal communication when the words just aren't coming in time. I can't put a price on serving her communion and having her drift off into the most contented sleep afterwards. And the point is, I don't have to.

If my choices are between letting the economy crumble or letting the most vulnerable take their chances with this horrific disease, I choose neither. The tyranny of such a binary is itself a product of a political imagination informed by the poisonous roots of slavery. I choose instead the spillages: the existence irreducible to the economic, the wastefully nonproductive, the value of a human life that refuses valuation. I choose a different sort of economy, and perhaps not an economy at all: an anti-economic salvation where no one has to pay with their life or their business for the survival of another. A salvation in which the great wealth of this country—wealth that itself was produced through the reduction of humans into units of production—is shared with equity in mind.

This sort of generosity is only possible with a different sort of political and theological imagination: one attending to the spillages of life that reject being economically valued. This looks like the opposite of the chattel slave economy, in which human life and well-being mattered only insofar as the return on that investment was guaranteed. It looks like the absurdly wealthy being wastefully, justly generous, like the financially fraught being generous in ways that go beyond the economic. It looks like feeding people because they are creatures made in God's image, not units of production. And it looks like a repentant reckoning with the sinful foundations of our political economy.

Sacrificing our economy and sacrificing human life are not our only choices. To believe that they are is a failure of imagination.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "At what cost?"