

Reviews

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The New Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness

By MICHELLE ALEXANDER (New York and London, New Press, 2010),
290 pp. £19.99.

On 9 December 2010, inmates in seven prisons in the state of Georgia launched the largest prison strike in US history. Communicating through cellphones purchased from guards and co-ordinating their messaging with former Black Panther party leader Elaine Brown, African American, Latino and white prisoners joined together in a refusal to leave their cells and report for work for which they received no pay at all. They demanded a living wage, an end to abusive treatment, decent food, health care, educational opportunities and the recognition of their human rights. The strike, which was largely ignored by the mainstream media, continued for a week in a state in which one in thirteen adults are either in prison, jail, on probation or on parole. Across the country, that rate is one in every thirty-one adults (which is six to ten times the rate in other industrialised countries), with a staggering one in nine Black men between the ages of 20–35 behind bars in 2006.

How did it come to pass that the incarceration rate within the US accelerated upwards in the closing decades of the twentieth century, even as its crime rate at times fell below the international norm? Michelle Alexander, a civil rights attorney and law professor, has written an utterly compelling book that describes how mass incarceration 'emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow'. If the Jim Crow system of segregation was designed to ensure that Black people would continue to be subjugated after the end of slavery, the 'mass incarceration' system has played a similar role after the civil rights movement brought an end to Jim Crow.

Alexander, a product of the civil rights era who worked in the trenches as the director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California's Racial Justice Project, had for years fought for affirmative action and against bias and

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discrimination in employment, education, housing and the criminal justice system. Then came her 'eureka' moment, when she understood that 'we have not ended racial caste in America: we have merely redesigned it'. While she was fighting the old civil rights battles, something new had been born – a largely invisible caste system for a neutral 'colourblind' era, with 'crime' (not race) bestowing a badge of inferiority for life.

In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander describes how, 'for reasons largely unrelated to actual crime trends, the American penal system has emerged as a system of social control unparalleled in world history'. Late in 1982, as globalisation began to empty the cities of industrial jobs, President Ronald Reagan declared a war on drugs. He made his pronouncement *before* the crack cocaine epidemic and at a time when less than 2 per cent of the public thought drugs were the most important issue facing the country. The ensuing media frenzy, huge infusion of tax dollars, draconian drug laws and discretionary targeting of Black neighbourhoods gave a 'law and order' face to what was actually a war on people of colour. The mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinos was presented in race-neutral terms. As the police became a paramilitary occupying force in Black communities, white Americans sold and used drugs at the same rate as African Americans without facing the same penalties. The impact of the war on drugs on Black communities has been dealt with in other books. But no other author has so lucidly made the case that 'like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race'.

She examines the court decisions that have given the police a (colourblind) licence to discriminate, making it largely impossible to bring legal challenges to racial profiling, while immunising the criminal justice system from claims of racial bias. She details the raft of Jim Crow-like consequences of being once labelled a 'felon', from being barred access to public housing, federal benefits, jobs and student loans, to being stripped of the vote. And, for former felons, the prison door can open repeatedly without a new crime being committed. All it takes to re-enter the revolving door is missing an appointment with a parole officer or being unable to pay a court fee. 'Today a criminal freed from prison has scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a freed slave or a black person living "free" in Mississippi at the height of Jim Crow', she writes.

Those released from prison on parole can be stopped and searched by the police for any reason, or no reason at all, and returned to prison for the most minor of infractions. Even when released from the system's formal control, the stigma of criminality lingers. Police supervision, monitoring and harassment are facts of life not only for all those labelled criminals, but for all those who 'look like' criminals. Lynch mobs may be long gone, but the threat of police violence is ever present. A wrong move or sudden gesture could mean massive retaliation by the police. A wallet could be mistaken for a gun. The 'whites only' signs may be gone, but new signs have gone up: notices placed in job applications, rental agreements, loan applications, forms for welfare benefits, school

applications and petitions for licences informing the general public that ‘felons’ are not wanted here.

Thus, at a time when the US elects its first Black president and celebrates its coming of age as a ‘colourblind’ society, there are more African Americans in prison than at any other time in American history and more are disenfranchised today than in 1870. Alexander is insightful about the way that highly visible examples of Black success help sustain ‘the new normal, the new racial equilibrium’ that mass incarceration represents. And she has no illusions about what it will take to dismantle this latest racial caste system, given the extent to which Black males in particular have been so ‘criminalised’ in the public mind and even in the ranks of civil rights activists.

The New Jim Crow is a seminal work of analysis and a demand for action. In its closing pages, Alexander calls for a new movement that recognises both ‘the deeply flawed nature of colorblindness, as a governing principle’ and the central importance of racial caste in the structuring of American society and institutions, from the earliest days of its history to the present. She forcefully critiques the prevailing civil rights advocacy in which she herself has played a pivotal role. Invoking the words and final deeds of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, she makes the case that the time has come to shift from a civil rights to a human rights paradigm:

If we want to do more than just end mass incarceration – if we want to put an end to the history of racial caste in America – we must lay down our racial bribes, join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to trickle down, and say to those who would stand in our way: Accept all of us or none.

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Waging War in Waziristan: the British struggle in the land of Bin Laden 1849–1947

By ANDREW M. ROE (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2010), 313 pp. £31.50.

Counter-insurgency studies are back with a vengeance. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have revived interest in counter-insurgency on a scale not seen since the Vietnam war and its aftermath. There are already an army of memoirs telling tales of these conflicts, but these books have been reinforced by a growing number of academic studies covering what has been described as the military industrial academic complex. There are not just an increasing number of volumes on the ‘war on terror’, but past conflicts are also being conscripted into providing lessons for today’s colonial warriors. Inevitably, the British military experience on the Northwest Frontier and in Afghanistan is of compelling interest. What must be troubling, of course, is that, by and large, it is an experience of failure, sometimes of catastrophic failure. And, as far as one can learn