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Calling Out the Persistence of Racism

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Calling Out the Persistence of Racism

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REVIEW ESSAY

*In this issue New Political Science begins a new tradition, printing an extended review essay of the book that received the Michael Harrington Book Award at the most recent American Political Science Association Meeting. The Michael Harrington Award is given for an outstanding book that demonstrates how scholarships can be used in the struggle for a better world. In 2011, the award went to Michelle Alexander for her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Color-Blindness*. Sanford Schram, a member of the award committee, has contributed the below review.*

Calling Out the Persistence of Racism

A Commentary on Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Color-Blindness*, New York: The New Press, 2010

I can't lie; I am very proud to have recommended this incredibly incisive book for the Michael Harrington Award (offered annually by the Caucus for a *New Political Science* for the best book for promoting social change published in the prior year). *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander reads like truth serum, saying what many of us (including even the author herself, as she poignantly reports) may have been previously reluctant to think explicitly but implicitly sense to be true: racism is why we in the United States continue to create new ways to punish the inner-city black poor for just being who they are—that is, people who are systematically marginalized by how racialized thinking influences public policy responses to social and economic change. After re-reading the book, I know now her formula for making this truth serum so effective: the narrative is so honest, so unpretentious, so highly readable, and so convincing. After re-reading the book, I dare others to refute this argument.

Alexander states that she long avoided confronting this simple truth, even as it kept staring her in the face. It was not an immediate recognition for her; instead it was something she hoped was not true, especially as an African American woman growing up in the post-civil rights society. She so wanted to believe we were now beyond the old racism of the past. And maybe we are. But it turns out that that does not mean that we are now beyond racism. Instead, it just means we have moved to a new racism, a more implicit racism, one that more stealthily relies on racially coded imagery to infiltrate our thinking and public policies. As an idealistic young civil rights lawyer, Alexander resisted until she finally was forced to stare back at the truth her black clients and neighbors showed her about how society was treating them. She reluctantly came to realize that even in post-civil rights America most of us refuse to see the role that racism continues to play in structuring the allocation of life chances in our society, especially the role of race in the treatment of that substantial portion of poor black men who end up with criminal records that make them essentially

unemployable and often strip of them of basic political rights, including especially the right to vote (thereby making it ever harder for them to work with others to change this unjust situation).

Alexander's historical account pivots on the 1980s, when through get-tough criminal justice policies, emanating first and foremost from the War on Drugs, black men started getting locked up at unprecedentedly high rates and increasingly became a disposable population facing the prospect of being bereft of economic opportunities and basic political rights. Alexander notes that when coming out of law school she refused to see the disproportionate imprisonment of young black men as anything more than the product of their making bad choices in a post-civil rights society. Yet, life intruded, and a series of incidents drove home to her that race played a big role in how these men were precariously positioned in the social order, making them vulnerable to taking up a marginalized status that involved engaging in activities (like participating in the drug trade) that were increasingly categorized as deserving the most punitive treatment. Alexander came to appreciate how she herself, even as an idealistic young lawyer, did nonetheless partake of the racialized outlook that had come to dominate society's view of black crime. Although she had chosen to become a civil rights lawyer working on employment discrimination, she realized when it came to thinking about the growing rates of incarceration of black men starting in the 1980s, she was part of the problem by not allowing herself to see how these men had been systematically set up via a not entirely unconscious set of decisions to racialize the issues of deviance, crime, and drug use and to use race to justify the harshest penalties as the primary response.

Eventually Alexander came to see that the disproportionate imprisonment of black men was not what economists call mere "statistical discrimination" (that is, purely the result of the fact that black men were more likely to commit more crimes). Instead, she concluded that this disproportionate rate of incarceration was the systematic result of how racial bias influenced decisions by political elites to manage what had become a disposable population in the most punitive way possible. While not entirely ready, for instance, to say it was the equivalent of a conspiracy (like the one suggested in a rumor that the CIA was working to get black men addicted to drugs), Alexander came to understand that the mass incarceration of black men as part of the War on Drugs was no mere happenstance. Rather, it was the systematic result of racialized thinking (blacks are more deviant) that discouraged efforts to assist black communities and resulted in racialized outcomes (black men end up more likely to be shut out of legitimate labor markets and less likely to be deserving of basic political rights, such as voting).

What this means for Alexander is that we are all vulnerable to being in denial about how the US keeps re-inventing ways to avoid addressing the inequities created by racism and are in even more denial about how we allow racism to prevent us from doing anything about it other than single out the black poor for systematic punishment for the poverty they suffer due to their increased marginalization. We instead use that racial bias as a way of legitimating not only neglect of the social issues it colors (like poverty) but also the very punitive policies that manage the consequences of those festering problems (most especially by criminalizing the poor for their poverty and then stripping them of political rights to do anything about it). As hard as it is to believe, this New Jim Crow, as Alexander calls the new system of racialized punishment, may be worse

than Old Jim Crow (the system of racial apartheid that prevailed in the south circa 1880s–1950s).

For Alexander, what is most disconcerting is that all of this is happening most often without invoking race explicitly, through policies like three strikes you're out, mandatory sentencing, levying adult charges on juveniles, offering tougher penalties for crack relative to powder cocaine, felony disenfranchisement and other ostensibly race-neutral but actually race-coded policies. Alexander effectively demonstrates that these punitive criminal justice policies are the product of how prevailing racial stereotypes infiltrate our thinking to justify the creation of a disposable population, then to criminalize resultant behaviors, and finally to aggressively punish people for those behaviors. The implicit reference, as Alexander eloquently makes clear, is the black drug dealer and the crack whore with the crack baby: all black, all the time, in the mass media-manipulated consciousness of the white mass public. To the degree that we, consciously or unconsciously, allow these racial stereotypes to influence our thinking, they can become the basis for not acting in supportive ways to redress the racial inequities that persist, and even in some cases intensify, in the face of social and economic change. The net result is that we are way beyond the "benign neglect" that Daniel Patrick Moynihan cynically advised President Nixon to follow as a policy for race relations at the height of the civil rights movement. We live in an era of the New Jim Crow, a new regime for using race to first create and then manage the inequity our political economy fosters and needs. When will we learn to see race for what it is: the tool of subordination that makes our capitalist system go round?! We might learn this critical, if basic, insight, if we read and re-read this important book.

The book's argument is therefore simple but profound. At some level of consciousness, including implicit biases, but also at times explicit ones as well, we rely on race to avoid addressing the structural inequities of our market-centered society that have devastated inner-city black communities. We rely on race to excuse the worst forms of neglect and the worse still forms of malign treatment, especially by the police and others who make and implement criminal justice policy. In the wake of imploding manual labor job markets and the rise of mass unemployment in this population, we neither turned to public policies to improve the human capital of these young men through education and training, nor did we embark on a massive job creation effort to ensure that once they became employable there would be jobs for them to take. Instead, we allowed race to be the pretext for neglecting the problem; then, when the drug trade and other illegal activities became a flash point in political discourse, we targeted those behaviors while continuing to neglect the poverty of the participants in that underground economy. As a result, we moved to a program of mass incarceration, while promulgating such tough policies regarding the non-rights of ex-felons so that the black men swept up in this system would have no hope of ever achieving membership in mainstream society.

Alexander forces us to own this sad state of affairs. The book's central argument is designed to get us to confront the distinct possibility that we have fallen into this racialized system of mass incarceration not by accident but systematically. We have chosen mass incarceration of black men as a systematic way of dealing with their becoming a disposable population which has been passed over by the changing political and economic system. The punitive turn to penalizing drug use with imprisonment was not a social, political, or economic

necessity; instead it was a choice elites made that they championed to get the mass public to support using racialized imagery to legitimate this draconian approach to punishing deviant behavior. The mass incarceration of black men was meant to be a way to manage their marginalization in the crudest terms possible as an alternative to addressing it in more supportive ways that would lead to their integration into mainstream society.

Alexander shows that an alternative to the prevailing racially biased understanding of the problem was possible but ignored. She highlights how racism led to ignoring the direct connection of the drug culture to the implosion of manual labor markets. Racism reinforced misunderstandings about the relationship of crime to unemployment and made it easier to imagine that blacks are more likely to engage in criminal activity as a result of their just being different in ways that were specific to them, their background, or their culture. Yet, it turns out that blacks do not commit crimes at higher rates than whites at given levels of unemployment. For instance, it is not that black men are preternaturally more criminal; it is that they are more likely to be unemployed. And their unemployment is not the result of some inborn laziness, as another prominent stereotype suggests. Instead, their higher level of unemployment is the result of non-decisions at the highest levels of government to allow the changing economy to pass by segregated, black, inner city, poor neighborhoods. Systematic disinvestment in schools and jobs for those communities was furthered by allowing race to influence the neglect reflected in educational and jobs policy. And resistance to integration that allowed for the increased concentration of poverty along racialized lines helped to further facilitate this neglect. As a result, it is difficult to see how race is not constitutive of the sources of the problems of higher poverty rates in segregated black communities and the corresponding higher rates of crime.

Alexander's narrative eventually focuses on how race affects the implementation of the carceral system that grew up to manage the resulting problems born of white neglect. Police profiling it turns out involves more explicit race bias of the old sort, further compounding the racialization of criminal justice policy implementation. Once young black men come within the cross-hairs of policing, the cops are all too frequently more than willing to act on the most biased of assumptions. The implicit racism of public policy creates opportunities for the exercise of explicit forms of racism.

Alexander ultimately shows how the New Jim Crow system becomes self-reinforcing on multiple levels: (1) black men with criminal records are made permanently unemployable leaving little choice but to return to the underground economy of illicit behavior in ways that increasingly ensure they recidivate back into prison; (2) black youth increasingly have little choice but to embrace the identity as the street tough as the only viable option for personal identity that garners respect among peers and offers some prospect of economic advancement; and (3) police and other officials are encouraged to profile young black men in ways that only increase their chances of being singled out for criminalization. The New Jim Crow now runs of its own accord and even if we want to stop it, we will find it hard to shut it down. Alexander is perhaps her most incisive when she highlights the difficulties of reversing this shift to a new system of exclusion, especially when she shows how we have come to include the stripping away of political rights for those with criminal records, including most prominently felony disenfranchisement laws.

Even arguments about the expense of mass incarceration fall on deaf ears. Part of the reason, I would add, is that while it costs more to imprison than employ the black poor that get caught up in the get-tough criminal justice system, it probably costs less than creating decent jobs for the all black poor that need work. Mass incarceration is expensive but probably not as expensive as mass employment on the scale that is needed. Be that as it may, I am prepared to concede that mass incarceration is not a rational policy on any level. It is one grounded in the irrationalities of racial prejudice, as Alexander so effectively demonstrates.

In the end, her analysis forces Alexander to discourage incremental tinkering and instead call for a mass social movement to rise up to call out the racist character of this new system of exclusion. Alexander here is perhaps more right than she suggests: mass incarceration, I would argue, is part of a broader shift toward a more disciplinary approach to managing the poverty population more generally and involves changes in social welfare as well as criminal justice policy. Alexander is right though that this juggernaut needs to be confronted head on as the new way of perpetuating that old moral scourge staining our nation's reputation: the color line still systematically works to promote marginalization that leads to mass immiseration. And today mass incarceration is a big part of that process.

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