



Book Review & Resources

Book Review: The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

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Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (Revised ed.). New York, NY: The New Press. ISBN-13:978-1595586438

Arguably, Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* is the most significant work on incarceration in the United States in the last ten years. Consequently, a review of the book is warranted in light of its influence on the discourse of incarceration and social justice, as well as the increased awareness of the topic in the public mindset. Alexander's purpose in writing the book was "to stimulate a much-needed conversation about the role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating racial hierarchy in the United States" (p. 16). Its presence on the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* bestseller lists, over 3,200 reviews on the www.goodreads.com website, and more than 4,200 citations on Google Scholar tracking indicate her purpose has been accomplished. The book continues to be a resource and inspiration for debate in both academic and public arenas, including the focus of this issue on incarceration and adult education.

In chapter 1, Alexander draws upon the history of race relations in the United States to establish mass incarceration as a form of social control similar to Jim Crow that is targeted toward African Americans; a racial caste system that adapts to meet the needs of the time by engendering support of the poor and working class white population. Chapter 2 lays out the political and judicial framework of the War on Drugs that underpins mass incarceration, and chapter 3 shows how concepts of race promoted a discriminatory criminal justice system that ensured the imprisonment of primarily Black men. In chapter 4, Alexander discusses the laws that control the lives of ex-offenders hindering re-integration into local communities and society at large by taking away citizenship rights, drastically limiting access to job opportunities, and thereby, devastating the fragile structure of impoverished communities. Chapter 5 establishes legalized discrimination as the parallel between mass incarceration, Jim Crow, and slavery with the ultimate purpose of

controlling and exploiting black labor. The book concludes with chapter 6, which offers suggestions for foundational approaches to bring about substantive change.

Alexander makes a strong argument for challenging the underlying public consensus that allows the system of mass incarceration to thrive and the ideology of colorblindness that obscures the role of race in our society. In essence, current social justice approaches are inadequate to bring about change. The assumption of the Trump presidency has made evident the hidden racial fractures that has persisted under the promotion of a colorblind society and raises questions about its impact on the current and future state of the political, judicial, and social environment of people of color. More specifically, how might a seemingly hostile political environment to social justice initiatives be co-opted to garner public awareness of as well as legal and moral support for dismantling the system of mass incarceration? Alexander also calls for changes to the drug laws that would drastically reduce incarceration rates. The current response to the opiate epidemic (the populations affected, the discourse that promotes addiction as a disease and not a lack of character and calls for cures instead of imprisonment, the policies and funding being employed to address it, and how it shapes the lives of offenders) offers a new context for examining the discriminatory nature of our justice system. The book calls for an understanding of men of color as people to be cared for and allowed every opportunity to maximize their potential to be creative, productive members of society. From a theoretical and practical perspective, the book continues to demonstrate the need for and the explanatory power of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) for understanding the relationship between persistent unemployment and underemployment among men of color, their impoverished communities, and the state of the penal colony in the United States.

References

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.



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