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The New Jim Crow



Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

MICHELLE ALEXANDER

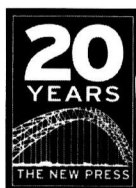
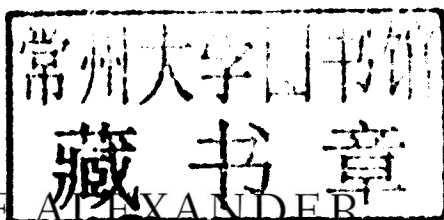
WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY CORNEL WEST

The New Jim Crow

Mass Incarceration in the
Age of Colorblindness

Revised Edition

MICHELLE ALEXANDER



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Permissions Department, The New Press, 38 Greene Street, New York, NY 10013.

Published in the United States by The New Press, New York, 2012

Distributed by Perseus Distribution

ISBN 978-1-59558-643-8 (pbk.)

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Alexander, Michelle.

The new Jim Crow : mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness / Michelle Alexander.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59558-103-7 (hc. : alk. paper)

1. Criminal justice, Administration of—United States.

2. African American prisoners—United States. 3. Race discrimination—
United States. 4. United States—Race relations. I. Title.

HV9950.A437 2010

364.973—dc22

2009022519

The New Press was established in 1990 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large,
commercial publishing houses currently dominating the book publishing industry.
The New Press operates in the public interest rather than for private gain, and
is committed to publishing, in innovative ways, works of educational, cultural,
and community value that are often deemed insufficiently profitable.

www.thenewpress.com

Composition by NK Graphics

This book was set in Fairfield LH Light

Printed in the United States of America

4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

Praise for *The New Jim Crow*

“An instant classic.”

—**Cornel West, from the foreword to the paperback edition**

“[An] extraordinary book. . . . Michelle Alexander has placed a critical spotlight on a reality our nation can’t afford to deny. We ignore her careful research and stay silent about mass incarceration’s devastating effects at our own and our nation’s peril.”

—**Marian Wright Edelman**

“Striking. . . . Alexander deserves to be compared to Du Bois in her ability to distill and lay out as mighty human drama a complex argument and history.”

—**Darryl Pinckney, *The New York Review of Books***

“The Bible of a social movement.”

—***San Francisco Chronicle***

“A devastating account of a legal system doing its job perfectly well. Alexander looks in detail at what economists usually miss, namely the entire legal structure [and] . . . does a fine job of truth-telling, pointing a finger where it rightly should be pointed: at all of us, liberal and conservative, white and black.”

—***Forbes***

“Alexander is absolutely right to fight for what she describes as a ‘much needed conversation’ about the wide-ranging social costs and divisive racial impact of our criminal-justice policies.”

—**Ellis Cose, *Newsweek***

“Invaluable . . . a timely and stunning guide to the labyrinth of propaganda, discrimination, and racist policies masquerading under other names that comprises what we call justice in America.”

—***Daily Kos***

“A troubling and profoundly *necessary* book.”

—***The Miami Herald***

“[An] important book.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

“A stunning debut.”

—*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*

“Many critics have cast doubt on the proclamations of racism’s erasure in the Obama era, but few have presented a case as powerful as Alexander’s.”

—*In These Times*

“[Written] with rare clarity, depth, and candor.”

—*Counterpunch*

“A call to action for everyone concerned with racial justice and an important tool for anyone concerned with understanding and dismantling this oppressive system.”

—*Sojourners*

“Undoubtedly the most important book published in this century about the U.S.”

—*Birmingham News*

“[A] searing indictment of the War on Drugs. . . . If you care even a little about racial justice, *The New Jim Crow* should be on your bookshelf. It is the most important book you will read this year.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“A well-researched book.”

—*Clarence Page, Chicago Tribune*

“Carefully researched, deeply engaging, and thoroughly readable.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“An explosive debut.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"[Alexander's] analysis reflects the passion of an advocate and the intellect of a scholar."

—**Marc Mauer, executive director of The Sentencing Project and the author of *Race to Incarcerate***

"Michelle Alexander argues convincingly that the huge racial disparity of punishment in America is not the mere result of neutral state action. She sees the rise of mass incarceration as opening up a new front in the historic struggle for racial justice. And she's right. If you care about justice in America, you need to read this book!"

—**Glenn C. Loury, professor of economics at Brown University and author of *Race, Incarceration, and American Values***



Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate, and legal scholar. As an associate professor of law at Stanford Law School, she directed the Civil Rights Clinic and pursued a research agenda focused on the intersection of race and criminal justice. In 2005, Alexander won a Soros Justice Fellowship that supported the writing of *The New Jim Crow* and accepted a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and the Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University, where she currently serves as an associate professor of law. Prior to joining academia, Alexander engaged in civil rights litigation in both the private and nonprofit sector, ultimately serving as the director of the Racial Justice Project for the ACLU of Northern California, where she helped to launch a national campaign against racial profiling. Currently she devotes much of her time to freelance writing, public speaking, supporting groups and organizations engaged in movement-building to end mass incarceration, and caring for her three young children.

Alexander is a graduate of Stanford Law School and Vanderbilt University. She has clerked for Justice Harry A. Blackmun on the U.S. Supreme Court and for Chief Judge Abner Mikva on the D.C. Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals, and has appeared as a commentator on CNN and MSNBC, among other media outlets. *The New Jim Crow* is her first book. For more information, visit www.newjimcrow.com. (Photo courtesy of Zócalo Public Square, zocalopublicsquare.org.)

The New Jim Crow

For Nicole, Jonathan, and Corinne

Foreword

CORNEL WEST

Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* is the secular bible for a new social movement in early twenty-first-century America. Like C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*—a book Martin Luther King Jr. called “the historical bible of the Civil Rights Movement”—we are witnessing the unique union of a powerful and poignant text with a democratic awakening focused on the poor and vulnerable in American society. *The New Jim Crow* is an instant classic because it captures the emerging spirit of our age. For too long, there has been no mass fight back against the multileveled assault on poor and vulnerable people, despite the heroic work of intellectual freedom fighters including Marian Wright Edelman, Angela Davis, Loïc Wacquant, Glenn Loury, Marc Mauer, and others. Yet the sleepwalking is slowly but surely coming to a close as more and more fellow citizens realize that the iron cage they inhabit—maybe even a golden cage for the affluent—is still a form of bondage. *The New Jim Crow* is a grand wake-up call in the midst of a long slumber of indifference to the poor and vulnerable. This indifference promotes a superficial ethic of success—money, fame, and pleasure—that leaves too many well-adjusted to injustice. In short, this book is a genuine resurrection of the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. amid the confusion of the Age of Obama.

While the Age of Obama is a time of historic breakthroughs at the level of racial symbols and political surfaces, Michelle Alexander's magisterial work takes us beyond these breakthroughs to the systemic breakdown of black

and poor communities devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, economic abandonment, and intense police surveillance. Her subtle analysis shifts our attention from the racial symbol of America's achievement to the actual substance of America's shame: the massive use of state power to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of precious poor, black, male (and, increasingly, female) young people in the name of a bogus "War on Drugs." And her nuanced historical narrative tracing the unconscionable treatment and brutal control of black people—slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration—takes us beneath the political surfaces and lays bare the structures of a racial caste system alive and well in the age of colorblindness. In fact, the very discourse of colorblindness—created by neoconservatives and neoliberals in order to trivialize and disguise the depths of black suffering in the 1980s and '90s—has left America blind to the New Jim Crow. How sad it is that this blindness has persisted under both Republican and Democratic administrations and remains to this day hardly acknowledged or examined in our nation's public discourse.

The New Jim Crow shatters this silence. Once you read it, you have crossed the Rubicon and there is no return to sleepwalking. You are now awakened to a dark and ugly reality that has been in place for decades and that is continuous with the racist underside of American history from the advent of slavery onward. There is no doubt that if young white people were incarcerated at the same rates as young black people, the issue would be a national emergency. But it is also true that if young black middle- and upper-class people were incarcerated at the same rates as young black poor people, black leaders would focus much more on the prison-industrial complex. Again, Michelle Alexander has exposed the class bias of much of black leadership as well as the racial bias of American leadership, for whom the poor and vulnerable of all colors are a low priority. As Alexander puts it in her fiery and bold last chapter, "The Fire This Time" (with echoes from the great James Baldwin!), "It is this failure to care, really care across color lines, that lies at the core of this system of control and every racial caste system that has existed in the United States or anywhere else in the world."

Martin Luther King Jr. called for us to be lovestruck with each other, not colorblind toward each other. To be lovestruck is to care, to have deep compassion, and to be concerned for each and every individual, including the

poor and vulnerable. The social movement fanned and fueled by this historic book is a democratic awakening that says we do care, that the racial caste system must be dismantled, that we need a revolution in our warped priorities, a transfer of power from oligarchs to the people—and that we are willing to live and die to make it so!

Preface

This book is not for everyone. I have a specific audience in mind—people who care deeply about racial justice but who, for any number of reasons, do not yet appreciate the magnitude of the crisis faced by communities of color as a result of mass incarceration. In other words, I am writing this book for people like me—the person I was ten years ago. I am also writing it for another audience—those who have been struggling to persuade their friends, neighbors, relatives, teachers, co-workers, or political representatives that something is eerily familiar about the way our criminal justice system operates, something that looks and feels a lot like an era we supposedly left behind, but who have lacked the facts and data to back up their claims. It is my hope and prayer that this book empowers you and allows you to speak your truth with greater conviction, credibility, and courage. Last, but definitely not least, I am writing this book for all those trapped within America's latest caste system. You may be locked up or locked out of mainstream society, but you are not forgotten.

Acknowledgments

It is often said, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In my case, it has taken a village to write this book. I gave birth to three children in four years, and in the middle of this burst of joyous activity in our home, I decided to write this book. It was written while feeding babies and during nap times. It was written at odd hours and often when I (and everyone else in the household) had little sleep. Quitting the endeavor was tempting, as writing the book proved far more challenging than I expected. But just when I felt it was too much or too hard, someone I loved would surprise me with generosity and unconditional support; and just when I started to believe the book was not worth the effort, I would receive—out of the blue—a letter from someone behind bars who would remind me of all the reasons that I could not possibly quit, and how fortunate I was to be sitting in the comfort of my home or my office, rather than in a prison cell. My colleagues and publisher supported this effort, too, in ways that far exceeded the call of duty. I want to begin, then, by acknowledging those people who made sure I did not give up—the people who made sure this important story got told.

First on this list is Nancy Rogers, who was dean of the Moritz College of Law at Ohio State University until 2008. Nancy exemplifies outstanding leadership. I will always remember her steadfast encouragement, support, and flexibility, as I labored to juggle my commitments to work and family. Thank you, Nancy, for your faith in me. In this regard, I also want to thank John Powell, director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and

Ethnicity. He immediately understood what I hoped to accomplish with this book and provided critical institutional support.

My husband, Carter Stewart, has been my rock. Without ever once uttering a word of complaint, he has read and reread drafts and rearranged his schedule countless times to care for our children, so that I could make progress with my writing. As a federal prosecutor, he does not share my views about the criminal justice system, but his different worldview has not, even for a moment, compromised his ability to support me, lovingly, at every turn in my efforts to share my truth. I made the best decision of my life when I married him.

My mother and sister, too, have been blessings in my life. Determined to ensure that I actually finished this book, they have exhausted themselves chasing after the little people in my home, who are bundles of joy (and more than a little tiring). Their love and good humor have been food for my soul. Special thanks is also owed Nicole Hanft, whose loving kindness in caring for our children will forever be appreciated.

I deeply regret that I may never be able to thank, in person, Timothy Demetrius Johnson, Tawan Childs, Jacob McNary, Timothy Anderson, and Larry Brown-Austin, who are currently incarcerated. Their kind letters and expressions of gratitude for my work motivated me more than they could possibly know, reminding me that I could not rest until this book was done.

I am also grateful for the support of the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation, as well as for the generosity of the many people who have reviewed and commented on portions of the manuscript or contributed to it in some way, including Sharon Davies, Andrew Grant-Thomas, Eavon Mobley, Marc Mauer, Elaine Elinson, Johanna Wu, Steve Menendian, Hiram José Irizarry Osorio, Ruth Peterson, Hasan Jeffries, Shauna Marshall, and Tobias Wolff. My dear friend Maya Harris is owed special thanks for reading multiple drafts of various chapters, never tiring of the revision process. Lucky for me, my sister, Leslie Alexander, is an African American history scholar, so I benefited from her knowledge and critical perspective regarding our nation's racial history. Any errors in fact or judgment are entirely my own, of course. I also want to express my appreciation to my outstanding editor and publisher, Diane Wachtell of The New Press, who believed in this book before I had even written a word (and waited very patiently for the final word to be written).

A number of my former students have made important contributions to this book, including Guylando Moreno, Monica Ramirez, Stephanie Beckstrom, Lacy Sales, Yolanda Miller, Rashida Edmonson, Tanisha Wilburn, Ryan King, Allison Lammers, Danny Goldman, Stephen Kane, Anu Menon, and Lenza McElrath. Many of them worked without pay, simply wanting to contribute to this effort in some way.

I cannot close without acknowledging the invaluable gifts I received from my parents, who ultimately made this book possible by raising me. I inherited determination from my mother, Sandy Alexander, who astounds me with her ability to overcome extraordinary obstacles and meet each day with fresh optimism. I owe my vision for social justice to my father, John Alexander, who was a dreamer and never ceased to challenge me to probe deeper, for greater truth. I wish he were still alive to see this book; though I suspect he knows something of it still. This book is for you, too, Dad. May you rest in peace.

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