

HOW MASS INCARCERATION TURNED INTO A CASTE SYSTEM by  
Marcia Bailey from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the  
Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander

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Southern planters wanted servants unable to organize. They preferred workers from Africa because they didn't speak English and were more isolated. Planters gave White indentured servants special privileges to drive a wedge between poor Whites and poor Blacks. White supremacy became a religion of sorts. Poor Southern Whites had their White skin as a badge of superiority over Blacks.

After the Civil war, the establishment of a new racial order became the consuming passion for most White Southerners. Under Populism there was a large amount of cooperation between the two races. Planters counteracted with a campaign of White supremacy which was aided by President Rutherford B Hayes' deal to end Reconstruction and pull Federal Troops out of the South if he was chosen as President in 1877. The "Second Reconstruction" occurred because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Civil Rights Act shifted the public debate from segregation to crime. The Southern Strategy, law and order, appealed to working class Whites who competed for jobs with Blacks and whose children were bussed to school.

The Conservative revolution in the Republican Party reached its full development under Reagan. The 1982 drug war was about

race. It came at a time when inner city workers with little formal education were losing jobs to third world countries. Whites could express their racism without being called on it; they could say they are "against crime."

Hugh cash grants were made to law enforcement groups that made drug arrests a priority. Military equipment was justified for hostage crises, but SWAT teams mainly serve search warrants on drug dealers. Arrests for drugs brought in money while other arrests earned nothing, and police kept cash, cars, and homes they seized during raids.

Over the years, SCOTUS has ruled that the state and its officers are immune from suits for damages, that police can use race in deciding which motorists to stop and search, and that claims of racial bias can be disregarded at every stage of the criminal justice process.

Few Americans recognize mass incarceration as the new caste system. Civil rights organizations want to handle issues in legally enforceable terms with victims who are good and respectable, not those who have been in prison. They want cases that are more easily won, but if we don't deal with mass incarceration, there will be no change.

Criminal justice reforms are not enough. We need to release eighty percent of inmates and close prisons, but that would cost rural, union jobs. Seven hundred thousand prison employees represent powerful political opposition to releasing prisoners in custody for months before trial and those serving excessively long sentences. Private prisons are big business, employing one million

people. Other prison profiteers are phone companies, gun manufacturers, private health care providers, the US military (prisons produce gear for soldiers), corporations that use prison labor, politicians, lawyers who set up new prisons, and bankers who finance them.

Selective enforcement and racial impact must be addressed. Public defenders must be plentiful. Mandatory drug sentences must be ended and some drugs legalized.

Reform work must dismantle mass incarceration and change the consensus that supports the new caste system. It must recognize mass incarceration as a racial caste system and not a system of crime control. We need meaningful prisoner re-entry programs with decent jobs, retraining, and drug treatment on demand.

Indifference to the plight of POC caused slavery and Jim Crow. Refusing to care for all people was, and remains, the problem. Highly visible Black successes that often occur as a result of affirmative action help people believe everything is okay. These successes divert attention from how hard it is to provide jobs, housing, and education for the poor.

Human rights include civil rights, and the poor and working classes of all colors need to consider their interests as aligned under the "human rights" banner. Human rights advocates must call for class-based, not simply race-based, affirmative action.