

Old Jim Crow

<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>

Summary of The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

More African Americans are under the control of the criminal justice system today – in prison or jail, on probation or parole – than were enslaved in 1850. Discrimination in housing, education, employment, and voting rights, which many Americans thought was wiped out by the civil rights laws of the 1960s, is now perfectly legal against anyone labeled a “felon.” And since many more people of color than whites are made felons by the entire system of mass incarceration, racial discrimination remains as powerful as it was under slavery or under the post-slavery era of Jim Crow segregation.

This is the premise of a book which has sparked a new social movement: Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, New York 2010). Alexander describes how mass incarceration today serves the same purpose as pre-Civil War slavery and the post-Civil War Jim Crow laws: to maintain a racial caste system. Alexander defines “racial caste” as a racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom. She asserts that Jim Crow and slavery were caste systems, and that our current system of mass incarceration is also a caste system: “The New Jim Crow.” The original Jim Crow laws, after slavery ended, promoted racial discrimination in public housing, employment, voting, and education.

The powerful Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s seemingly ended the Jim Crow era by winning the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The book demonstrates, however, that the racial caste system has not ended; it has simply been redesigned.

Alexander explains how the criminal justice system functions as a new system of racial control by targeting black men through the “War on Drugs.” The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, for example, included far more severe punishment for distribution

of crack (associated with blacks) than powder cocaine (associated with whites). Civil penalties, such as not being able to live in public housing and not being able to get student loans, have been added to the already harsh prison sentences.

“Today,” says Alexander, “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.”

The author argues that nothing short of a major social movement can end the new caste system. Alexander challenges us to establish a grass-roots movement to deal with the very foundation of the mass incarceration system: “If the movement that emerges to end mass incarceration does not meaningfully address the racial divisions and resentments that gave rise to mass incarceration, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being – of every class, race, and nationality – within our nation’s borders, including poor whites, who are often pitted against poor people of color, the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge ... No task is more urgent for racial justice today than ensuring that America’s current racial caste system is its last.”

Alexander’s call is being answered through the rise of a new movement to end mass incarceration and its racial underpinnings. The New Jim Crow movement is formed of loosely-linked local study groups reading and discussing *The New Jim Crow*, and beginning to develop a grass-roots strategy first for exposing the injustice of mass incarceration, and then for challenging and ultimately ending it. At this moment of global awakening in the face of injustice, the focus on mass incarceration and racial injustice could not be more timely.

The White Space by Elijah Anderson

https://sociology.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pages_from_sre-11_rev5_printer_files.pdf

An excerpt from Waking Up White by Debby Irving

Ch. 7 THE GI BILL: Discovering the meaning of unearned privilege.

RETURNING TO WHEELLOCK week after week to study the history of industry, immigration, law, policy, education, and scientific and social beliefs from a variety of perspectives added multiple dimensions to my worldview. Some classes left me with a sense of relief, an Aha, that explains that feeling. Other classes hit me like a ton of bricks, a Damn, this cannot be true! reaction. There was no moment more profound or life altering, however, than the night I learned about the GI Bill.

On April 9, 2009, I raced into class, arriving just in time. I took a deep breath, relieved to see a television set in the corner of the room. Great— we get to watch a movie, I thought. About a half hour into the film, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, the focus turns to the GI Bill. I remember thinking, Hmm, my father and uncles talked about that bill, about how great it felt to win the war and come home to free education and a housing loan. My father's law school education had been paid for by that bill. My parents' first home had been subsidized by it. In 1975, when Vietnam vets came home to a cruel reception, my father expressed his outrage by contrasting it to the enthusiastic welcome he'd gotten in 1944. He pointed to the GI Bill as proof.

But all of a sudden, the film starts talking about the bill not being accessible to black Americans. An elderly black couple, Mr. and Mrs. Burnett, appear on the screen, speaking about the day half a century earlier that they'd excitedly driven out to a New York suburb, Levittown, to look for a home. Mr. Burnett, a returning GI, and his wife drove through a neighborhood and toured a house, imagining themselves living there. They were convinced: this was the lifestyle they wanted. When Mr. Burnett approached the realtor, expressing his interest and inquiring about the purchase procedure, the realtor sheepishly told him he couldn't sell to Negroes. "It's not me," he explained. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) had warned the town's developers that even one or two nonwhite families could topple the kind of values necessary to profit from their enterprise. The Burnetts were crushed.

The chilling reality is that while the American dream fell into the laps of millions of

Americans, making the GI Bill the great equalizer for the range of white ethnicities in the melting pot, Americans of color, including the one million black GIs who'd risked their lives in the war, were largely excluded. The same GI Bill that had given white families like mine a socioeconomic rocket boost had left people of color out to dry. I'd been reaping the benefits of being a white person without even knowing it. I felt duped and alarmed.

Watching this film was like driving by a grotesque car crash— transfixed, I couldn't turn away, yet what I was taking in was literally making me nauseated and short of breath. My thoughts raced with the notion that racism was frightfully bigger and more sinister than I'd ever understood— and hardest for me, that people like my own family and friends, people in charge, must have understood this to a certain degree, if not had a hand in its orchestration. This was intentional. This was manipulative. This was not freedom for all.

Though black GIs were technically eligible for the bill's benefits, in reality our higher education, finance, and housing systems made it difficult if not impossible for African American GIs to access them. On the education front, most colleges and universities used a quota system, limiting the number of black students accepted each year. There were not enough "black seats" available to allow in the one million returning black GIs. In addition, many black families, already caught in a cycle of poverty from earlier discriminatory laws and policies, needed their men to produce income, not go off to school. In the end, a mere 4 percent of black GIs were able to access the bill's offer of free education. Meanwhile, the bill allowed my father to go to law school without paying a dime, assured that his white parents could retire comfortably with the aid of the Social Security program, an earlier government program tilted heavily in favor of white people.

On the housing front, it got worse. A set of policies created by the FHA, and implemented by lenders and realtors, mapped out neighborhoods according to the skin color of residents. This national Neighborhoods inhabited by blacks or other people of color were outlined in red, the color in the legend next to the word

“Hazardous” (investment). Towns like Winchester, far from Boston’s redlined neighborhoods, would have been outlined in green and noted as “Best.” The higher the rating, the lower the interest rate on the loan, and the greater the appreciation in home values.

Bluelined (“Still Desirable”) and *yellowlined* (“Declining”) areas attracted realtors eager to fill their pockets by leveraging the notion of “marginal” neighborhoods. Going door to door, these fear-inciting salesmen promoted the idea of black residents as dangerous for neighborhood values. In a practice known as blockbusting, the strategy was to scare white homeowners into selling their homes quickly at fire-sale prices before black folks moved in and dragged down property values. Then realtors would turn around and sell that same home at an inflated value to a black customer, who had effectively just bought a home in a neighborhood about to lose its value because of their purchase.

Not only was blockbusting a moment of sordid greed on the realtors’ part; it was the catalyst for a racial wealth and trust divide that continues today. Home values in black neighborhoods plummeted, while those in white-only areas rose, with an FHA and lending- institution color-coded map spelling out exactly which was which. On top of leaving black people owing years of mortgage payments on a declining asset while funneling white people into homes whose equity grew steadily over time, the twin terrors of redlining and blockbusting fueled white fear and resentment of black people, who could “destroy” a neighborhood just by moving in.

As houses were bought and sold according to skin color and loans were rated and made based on skin color, black folks were left to make do with the remains of city housing, under assault by another federal effort, the Urban Renewal Program. Dubbed by James Baldwin as the “Negro Removal Program,” it involved demolishing entire neighborhoods in part to make room for ramps and highways to provide car-owning, professional, white suburbanites easy access to and from the city. The program’s promise to replace the razed neighborhoods with new and improved housing never materialized. With 90 percent of low-income housing destroyed, what

remained were rental properties— housing without pride of ownership or equity-building opportunity. This critical juncture in American history created a housing footprint that fossilized our communities into skin-color-coded haves and have-nots, reaffirming segregation and provoking increased mistrust between the races.

Between 1934 and 1962 the federal government underwrote \$ 120 billion in new housing, less than 2 percent of which went to people of color. America's largest single investment in its people, through an intertwined structure of housing and banking systems, gave whites a lifestyle and financial boost that would accrue in the decades to come while driving blacks and other minority populations into a downward spiral. Discriminatory practices among colleges, universities, banks, and realtors created an impenetrable barrier to the GI Bill's promise, turning America's golden opportunity to right its racially imbalanced ship into an acceleration of its listing. From the perspective of Americans excluded from this massive leg-up policy, the GI Bill is one of the best examples of affirmative action for white people.

I saw myself in this story. I saw Winchester, my house, my parents' giddy parties with only white people. I saw the stretch of towns between the nearest black neighborhood and mine. I saw my father's law degree, neatly framed above his desk. I saw my isolation. I saw the redlined neighborhoods' isolation. I thought of the house I live in now, partially paid for with money my parents accumulated through their GI Bill—subsidized education and purchase of "Best" white real estate. I thought of how the leg-up the government gave my family had compounded into wealth my parents had passed on to me and my white siblings, a phenomenon duplicated in white families coast to coast. Though I would go on to discover many more similarly divisive laws and policies throughout US history, this was the first one I came to know, and it hit me hard. I felt overcome with emptiness that my parents were no longer alive, because more than anything, I wanted to ask them, "Did you know?" I thought of my father's plea to us at the end of his life, as he gave us his funeral and estate preferences. In a rare display of anger and disgust he admonished us, "Don't use a realtor. Find another way to sell this place. A sealed bid, anything. Realtors are low-lives."

When the class ended, I called my husband, Bruce. “I need to drive around for a while,” I told him. “Can you get the kids to bed?” “Are you okay? You sound terrible.” “It was an upsetting class.” I couldn’t put words to what I was feeling. My head spun and my chest burned. “I’ll tell you more when I’ve had a chance to collect my thoughts.” I shook as I drove through the manicured neighborhoods of Belmont, Lexington, and Arlington, the white towns I’d lived in and around most of my life. I drove out to Winchester and parked in front of my childhood home. My life here had felt so innocent, the world such a safe and joyful place. My house stood before me, no longer as a symbol of my happy childhood but as a sinister representation of a social- engineering scheme in which I’d been an unwitting player. I couldn’t shake the duped feeling— duped and infuriated to have inherited a legacy that contaminated me with injustice. I felt overcome with a sense of participation and responsibility. For the first time I understood that a tragedy had been staged under my nose, a tragedy in which I played the part of a deluded and unknowing beneficiary.

Prior to the Wheelock course, my attempts to make sense of racism had been akin to trying to understand a game just by watching the players. I made guesses based on what I could see. In contrast, the course asked me to study the rules— centuries of law and policy— to see how players had gotten into their present positions. Suddenly, every player appeared in a different light.

The game, it turns out, offers different rules and different starting points for different people. It’s a drastically uneven contest in which I am among the more advantaged players. Advantage in the game can take several forms: male trumps female, straight trumps LGBT, able- bodied trumps disabled, Western religions trump Eastern religions, higher class trumps lower class, and so on. But nowhere, as far as I can see, is any advantage as hard-hitting and enduring as skin color. My white skin, an epidermal gold card, has greased the skids for a life full of opportunities and rewards that I was sure were available to everyone. My notions that America offered a level playing field disintegrated. I thought of how hypocritical my belief in small government was, now that I understood how well big government had served me through programs and policies such as those entwined in the GI Bill.

I ruminated on this question: If my childhood of racially organized comfort and opportunity had made me feel like the master of my own destiny, full of confidence, and certain of a bright future, what did this imply about people on the flip side of the coin—people who'd been shut out of a world of comfort and opportunity? How does one construct dreams about the future under those conditions? How can one bear to watch TV shows depicting lives of comfort and ease for people with a skin color you don't share? When I got home that night, Bruce was in bed reading. He put down his book and took off his glasses. "What the hell's going on?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I sat down on the bed next to him. "What do you know about the GI Bill?"

"Um, that was the policy after World War II that helped guys coming back from the war. Free education, low-rate mortgages, maybe down payments? Right?" He looked unsure about why I was asking. "Who do you think was eligible?" I asked. "Anyone who'd served. Where is this going?" I told him about what I'd learned and about how shaken up I was. Bruce, one of the smartest people I know, knew nothing of the GI Bill's inequities. "Are you sure? That can't be true," he said, getting out of bed to retrieve his laptop. I guessed from his expression that the idea of a twentieth-century federal policy screwing black people seemed as unimaginable to him as it had been to me. I looked around our bedroom and thought of how my parents had helped us with the down payment for our house. I thought of the subsidized housing community two blocks away, full of financially struggling people, mostly people of color, whose parents had no money to lend. Suddenly, it felt criminal to feel comfortable in my own house. "Holy shit, Deb. This is amazing." A quick Internet search had turned up article after article about the subject. We looked at each other. This wasn't history locked up in a drawer somewhere; this was public record. "This changes everything," I said, before laying my head on the pillow for the first of many sleepless nights, wondering, *What else don't I know?*

Irving, Debby. Waking Up White: and Finding Myself in the Story of Race, Elephant Room Press.