

A brief for racial politics

The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander

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The axis of Michelle Alexander's book is clear from its title. In her view, the basic social divide in the United States is race. According to Alexander, the Jim Crow system of second-class citizenship and racial segregation that governed the lives of millions of African-Americans in the states of the former Confederacy for more than three quarters of a century has morphed into a nationwide system of racial control that is quite similar, even if disguised by an official ideology of "colorblindness." The "central claim" of her book, she states, is "that something akin to a racial caste system currently exists in the United States." Its principal instrument is mass incarceration. Several chapters of the book are devoted to an examination of the explosive growth of the American prison system in the past 40 years. The number of inmates of local and county jails and federal and state prisons has more than quintupled in that period, reaching a total that dwarfs that of every other advanced industrial nation in the world. The number of people in prison, on probation or on parole has grown to more than 7 million.

Within this figure, the minority population is disproportionately represented. The so-called war on drugs has had a devastating impact on black men, who are arrested and imprisoned at a rate 6.5 times that of whites. These figures constitute a searing indictment of American capitalism.

Alexander acknowledges at the outset that her book does "not venture into the long-running, vigorous debate in the scholarly literature regarding what does and does not constitute a caste system." Given that her entire argument rests on the contention that a racial caste system exists in contemporary America, this playing fast and loose with historical and scientific terminology is a devastating self-exposure. What intellectual or scholarly credibility can be given to an argument that applies the term "caste" to social relations in the US, without even seeking to define the term or defend its use in this context, and then proceeds to build an entire analysis around the use of the term?

Quite simply, what one has here is an empty tautology.

The core argument of Alexander's book is based on intellectual charlatany. No attempt whatsoever is made to ground the category of caste in anything that resembles a scientific or historical approach. Caste systems historically arose in the pre-capitalist period of human civilization. They are characterized by rigid and hereditary social stratification, and persist today in much attenuated form only in India and few if any other regions of the world. Alexander admits that she is using the caste label loosely. By her logic, racial and religious minorities in every part of the globe could be redefined as castes.

But this intellectual shoddiness serves an ideological purpose. The aim is to highlight and magnify racial differences. This, in turn, serves to cover up the fundamental division in society, that of class.

Some scholars have made the case that Jim Crow segregation was a caste system, and certainly the kind of proscriptions that barred blacks

from using the same schools, hotels, washrooms, drinking fountains and other public accommodations or riding in the same section of buses and trains as whites bore similarities to those faced by oppressed castes in India. Such legally imposed forms of segregation were ended by a series of Supreme Court decisions, most notably *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The forms of social oppression that confront black American workers today—poverty, unemployment, poor housing, education and health care, as well as mass incarceration—have their source not in legally prescribed "caste" restrictions, but in the economic and social relations of the capitalist profit system. As such, they are problems shared in common with many millions of other Americans, and billions of people across the planet. These problems are not amendable to "caste" or racial solutions, but require a revolutionary transformation of the conditions confronting the masses of working people of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

Alexander is a Stanford University law professor and the former director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Racial Justice Project in Northern California. Her book has drawn much media attention since it first appeared more than two years ago. The paperback edition issued early this year has so far spent more than 30 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The problems she examines provoke justifiable anger, and there are undoubtedly readers who turn to her book looking for answers to the social crisis and inequality that characterize the US today.

They will, however, search in vain. An examination of *The New Jim Crow* quickly reveals that Alexander cannot explain the horrors of the prison system or any of the related symptoms of the crisis and decay of American capitalism. Nor can she show any way forward in the struggle against them. Her criticisms, because they remain almost entirely in racial terms, remain firmly within the framework of the capitalist status quo.

In common with all analyses of American society based on race, the book contributes to channeling discontent back into the blind alley of identity politics and support for the Democratic Party.

Ms. Alexander has been lionized in some liberal and "left" circles, including pseudo-socialists such as the International Socialist Organization. These layers of the middle class, prominent in academia and elsewhere, play a major role in propping up the Democrats.

Identity politics is their calling card, counterposing the issues of race, gender and sexual orientation to the interests of the working class as a whole. The pseudo-lefts respond with enthusiasm to Alexander's call for a new civil rights movement, conceived as a vehicle of middle-class protest against what they regard as congenital American racism.

Alexander herself is quite clear on this. The driving force of American history is race, in her view, and certainly not the class struggle. "Since the nation's founding," she writes, "African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs of constraints of the time.

"It may be impossible to overstate the significance of race in defining

the basic structure of American society,” she continues, even more categorically.

From the fact that the US Constitution was based on a compromise with slavery, enshrined in the notorious three-fifths rule defining the slave as three-fifths of a man, she concludes that “upon this racist fiction rests the entire structure of American democracy.”

So much for Jefferson, Franklin, Tom Paine and the rest of the leading figures of the American Revolution and the world-shaking impact of that revolution, which reverberated in France barely a decade after the Declaration of Independence.

For Alexander, it is not a matter of exploring the contradiction between the American Revolution’s proclamation of Enlightenment ideals and the continuation of slavery—a contradiction that did not erase the progressive character of the Revolution—but rather a basis for dismissing the ideals themselves as a “racist fiction.”

The second revolution that followed less than a century later, the American Civil War, barely merits a mention. That hundreds of thousands gave their lives to end slavery and uphold the promise that “all men are created equal” is treated as a momentary interruption in the relentless reassertion of American racism.

The rise of Jim Crow is seen as the inevitable expression of an unceasing quest for white supremacy. In fact, Jim Crow was bound up not only with the need to divide the white and black poor in the South, but with the emergence of the working class in the North. The federal government called a halt to Reconstruction in 1877, withdrawing its troops from the South, largely in order to deal with a growing threat from the working class. The great railway strike of that same year saw US troops battling masses of industrial workers and poor in the streets of Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis and many other cities.

Alexander repeatedly places the blame for racism on the “lower class whites,” who are portrayed as a popular base for discriminatory policies devised by the ruling establishment. Her aim is to convince sections of the ruling class, along with the upper-middle class layers with whom she clearly identifies, to take remedial action on the issue of mass imprisonment before it leads to a social explosion.

She discusses the prison system in some detail, dealing with racial profiling, the financial incentives for a burgeoning prison-industrial complex to increase the inmate population, the use of prisons to provide jobs in mainly rural areas with high unemployment, mandatory minimum sentencing laws, denial of adequate legal counsel, and legally authorized discrimination against ex-prisoners on such matters as voting rights, jobs and most other aspects of life. There is more that could be added on the increasing privatization of the prison system and the use of prison labor to generate profit.

From these facts, however, Alexander makes the leap—an unscientific and politically reactionary one—to characterize the African American population today, or at least a substantial section of it, as a “racial caste.”

To sustain this theory of mass incarceration as the basis of a “caste” status for blacks, similar to that which existed under Jim Crow or even slavery, Alexander goes so far as to argue that more than one million people now incarcerated in US prisons and jails—i.e., the majority who are not black—are merely “collateral damage.” Their presence behind bars, she suggests, is nothing more than an elaborate ruse designed to conceal the real nature of the prison system behind a veneer of colorblindness.

The minority workers and youth who continue to be ensnared in the “war on drugs” constitute the most oppressed and vulnerable sections of the working class, not a racial caste. The prison system is a class institution, not a racial one. Moreover, despite the severe consequences of the war on drugs, 75 percent of the prison population is there on other than drug-related charges.

The plight of largely inner-city youth and workers who are jailed on low-level drug charges is inseparably bound up with the decades-long

onslaught on every section of the working class—deindustrialization and the disappearance of good-paying jobs, the wave of union-busting and the integration of the unions into the structure of corporate management, the growth of poverty and inequality, and the attacks on public services and social programs.

Those presiding over these appalling conditions include many thousands of black elected officials, mayors of major cities and state and local officials. In fact, the criminalization of the poor that has led to the vast expansion of the prison population is only one side of the equation. The past 40 years have seen a historically unprecedented stratification of the African American population alongside the immense growth of social inequality in America as a whole.

Alexander writes about Richard Nixon’s law-and-order demagoguery as the genesis of the new “caste” system, but makes no mention of Nixon’s call for “black capitalism” in the early 1970s. This slogan, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s, found a receptive audience among figures like Jesse Jackson and others. Jackson is only one of the more prominent representatives of the petty-bourgeois layer that enriched itself over the ensuing decades. Many ran successfully for political office, not to fight for social equality, but to preside over the attacks on the working class, including the minority workers they claimed to represent.

This development was bound up with other forms of identity politics, as an upper-middle class layer was cultivated for the purpose of stabilizing American politics against the threat raised by the growing capitalist crisis and the movement of the working class. Nixon’s “black capitalism” received bipartisan support and was followed by various affirmative action policies all directed to that same end.

Alexander’s discussion of mass incarceration generally ignores this social and political context. But it is not merely incomplete; it is dishonest.

She devotes nearly ten pages of her book, for instance, to trying to explain why the civil rights establishment and the Congressional Black Caucus have been “relative[ly] quiet” on the subject of mass incarceration. She admits that President Bill Clinton escalated the war on drugs, and that Barack Obama has continued these policies, increasing spending for police even as social programs are ruthlessly slashed.

The best explanation she can offer is that “[C]ivil rights organizations—like all institutions—are comprised of fallible human beings.” These organizations became “professionalized,” “top heavy with lawyers,” and so forth.

She cannot mention the obvious fact of the class outlook and class role of these leaderships. They know perfectly well what has happened to black workers and youth over the past several decades, and they share responsibility for it. As social conditions for black workers continued to worsen, these “professionalized” and lawyer-ridden organizations concentrated on the defense of affirmative action programs aimed at benefiting a thin layer of the minority population, while leaving the oppression of the majority untouched.

Alexander is herself part of this privileged layer. She served as a law clerk under Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun and received financial support for her writing from a Soros Justice Fellowship, funded by George Soros, the liberal billionaire supporter of the Democratic Party. It goes without saying that this sort of assistance, along with the other opportunities granted to Alexander, constitute recognition not only of her legal and writing talent, but also her utility in defending the profit system.

Acknowledging herself to be a beneficiary of affirmative action, she describes the policy as a “racial bribe” designed to create “‘cosmetic’ racial diversity... in exchange for the abandonment of a more radical movement that promised to alter the nation’s economic and social structure.”

She makes a rhetorical suggestion that civil rights advocates renounce

support for affirmative action—which she compares to unspecified “racial bribes” supposedly offered to white workers—on the grounds that it has “helped to render a new caste system largely invisible.” In fact, the emergence of a layer of black CEOs, top government officials, including the US president, and a significant layer of the comfortable upper-middle class, under conditions in which grinding poverty dominates in predominantly black urban neighborhoods, disproves her caste theory and constitutes a facet of the glaring class divide in the United States.

“Let’s talk about race,” says Alexander in her concluding chapter. “Racial differences will *always* exist among us.” [Emphasis in the original] While admitting that white workers also suffer at a time of mass unemployment, rampant foreclosures and growing hunger and poverty, she insists that, “whites should... be willing to sacrifice their racial privilege.”

For all of the radical-sounding talk of a new Jim Crow, Alexander shows very clearly where she stands when she makes the plea that “there must be a change within the culture of law enforcement.”

She wants the police to be more compassionate toward the urban poor, embracing a “method of engagement that promotes trust, healing and genuine partnership.” In other words, the ruling class must display greater empathy for its victims.

She warns that we will always have a racial caste system as long as there is a “failure to care, really care across color lines.” The book makes no mention of the relentless concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial oligarchy at the expense of the vast majority of the population, workers of all races, who have seen their living standards steadily slashed.

The call for “caring” is really what one is left with at the end of this book. There is no proposal for any specific program or action to change social conditions. As a means of ameliorating the effects of class oppression, such a proposal is not merely nonsense, but the expression of a class outlook that is opposed to the unification of the working class in struggle against capitalism. When pseudo-left groups like the ISO hail Alexander’s book, they are declaring their agreement with this reactionary perspective and underscoring their role as the left flank of the ruling establishment.

The benefit of Alexander’s book is that it reveals the reactionary implications of identity politics and a fixation on race. The real lessons of the history of the civil rights movement lead to exactly the opposite conclusion from the one she has drawn. Jim Crow was vanquished and it has not returned. The gains of the civil rights struggle were real, but limited. The elimination of legal racial barriers in schools and elsewhere revealed all the more sharply the class barriers to genuine equality.

Martin Luther King, Jr. began to consider some of the class issues when he tried to organize his Poor People’s Campaign in the weeks and months before he was murdered in April 1968. King remained a reformist, however. What is needed today is not a new civil rights movement. Indeed, the failure of the Poor People’s Campaign and the betrayal of the hopes of the civil rights struggle over subsequent years show this quite clearly.

The enemy of social equality is not a new Jim Crow, but the capitalist system and its representatives, including the Democratic Party and the advocates of identity politics that are among its most fervent defenders. Today, more than ever, what is needed is revolutionary leadership, a leadership that will not protest and plead for reforms, but mobilize the working class politically in the struggle for socialism.



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