

**Excerpts from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,  
Chapter 1: The Rebirth of Caste by Michelle Alexander (New York: The New Press: 2011)**

Chapter 1 begins our journey. It briefly reviews the history of racialized social control in the United States, answering the basic question: How did we get here?... Time and time again... this feat has been achieved largely by appealing to the racism and vulnerability of lower-class whites, a group of people who are understandably eager to ensure that they never find themselves trapped at the bottom of the American totem pole. This pattern, dating back to slavery, has birthed yet another racial caste system in the United States: mass incarceration.

## 1865 - 1900

“In Wacquant’s words: “Racial division was a consequence, not a precondition of slavery... [Yet] after the death of slavery, the idea of race lived on.”

*Following the civil war, the Reconstruction era included unprecedented civil rights legislation, services to provide for the basic needs of former slaves, and a public education system that “gave many blacks (and poor whites) their first opportunity to learn to read and write.” Federal troops sought to ensure their safety from violence and black men’s voting rights. Many black politicians were elected. But southern conservatives began to fight to “redeem” the south. The resurgent Ku Klux Klan supported the efforts of the wealthy “redeemers” with a terrorist campaign. Federal troops left and funding for earlier programs ended almost entirely.*

...alternative philosophies of race relations were put forward to compete for the region’s support, all of which rejected the doctrines of extreme racism espoused by some Redeemers...

The radical philosophy offered, for many African Americans, the most promise. It was predicated on a searing critique of large corporations, particularly railroads, and the wealthy elite in the North and South. The radicals of the late nineteenth century, who later formed the Populist Party, viewed the privileged classes as conspiring to keep poor whites and blacks locked into a subordinate political and economic position. For many African American voters, the Populist approach was preferable to the paternalism of liberals. Populists preached an “equalitarianism of want and poverty, the kinship of a common grievance, and a common oppressor.” As described by Tom Watson, a prominent Populist leader, in a speech advocating a union between black and white farmers: “You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism that enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.”

In an effort to demonstrate their commitment to a genuinely multiracial, working-class movement against white elites, the Populists made strides toward racial integration, a symbol of their commitment to class-based unity. African Americans throughout the South responded with great hope and enthusiasm, eager to be true partners in a struggle for social justice. According to Woodward, “It is altogether probable that during the brief Populist upheaval in the nineties Negroes and native whites achieved a greater comity of mind and harmony of political purpose than ever before or since in the South.”

The challenges inherent in creating the alliance sought by the Populists were formidable... Nevertheless, the Populist movement initially enjoyed remarkable success in the South, fueled by a wave of discontent aroused by the severe agrarian depression of the 1880s and 1890s. The Populists took direct aim at the conservatives, who were known as comprising a party of privilege, and they achieved a stunning set of political victories throughout the region. Alarmed by the success of the Populists and the apparent potency of the alliance between poor and working-class whites and African Americans, the conservatives raised the cry of white supremacy and resorted to the tactics they had employed in their quest for Redemption, including fraud, intimidation, bribery and terror.

Segregation laws were proposed as part of a deliberate effort to drive a wedge between poor whites and African Americans. These discriminatory barriers were designed to encourage lower-class whites to retain a sense of superiority over blacks, making it far less likely that they would sustain inter-racial political alliances aimed at toppling the white elite. The laws were, in effect, another racial bribe. As William Julius Wilson has noted, "As long as poor whites directed their hatred and frustration against the black competitor, the planters were relieved of class hostility directed against them..."

Ultimately, the Populists caved to the pressure and abandoned their former allies. "While the [Populist] movement was at the peak of zeal, "Woodward observed, "the two races had surprised each other and astonished their opponents by the harmony they achieved and the good will with which they co-operated." But when it became clear that the conservatives would stop at nothing to decimate their alliance, the biracial partnership dissolved, and Populist leaders re-aligned themselves with conservatives. Even Tom Watson... concluded that Populist principles could never be fully embraced by the South until blacks were eliminated from politics....

The New racial order, known as Jim Crow--a term apparently derived from a minstrel show character--was regarded as the "final settlement," the "return to sanity," and the "permanent system."

## 1965 - 2000

Within five years, the effects of the civil rights revolution were undeniable... While dramatic progress was apparent in political and social realms, civil rights activists became increasingly concerned that, without major economic reforms, the vast majority of blacks would remain locked in poverty... The shift in focus served to align the goals of the Civil Rights Movement with key political goals of poor and working-class whites, who were also demanding economic reforms. As the Civil Rights Movement began to evolve into a "Poor People's Movement," it promised to address not only black poverty, but white poverty as well--thus raising the specter of a poor and working-class movement that cut across racial lines. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders made it clear that they viewed the eradication of economic inequality as the next front in the "human rights movement" and made great efforts to build multiracial coalitions that sought economic justice for all. Genuine equality for black people, King reasoned, demanded a radical restructuring of society, one that would address the needs of the black and white poor throughout the country. Shortly before his assassination, he envisioned bringing to Washington, D.C., thousands of the nation's disadvantaged in an interracial alliance that

embraced the rural and ghetto blacks, whites, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans to demand jobs and income--the right to live... King was proposing nothing less than a radical transformation of the Civil Rights Movement into a populist crusade calling for redistribution of economic and political power...

With the success of the Civil Rights Movement and the launching of the Poor People's Movement, it was apparent to all that a major disruption in the nation's racial equilibrium had occurred... Conservative whites began once again, to search for a new racial order that would conform to the needs and constraints of the time. This process took place with the understanding that whatever the new order would be... it could not involve explicit or clearly intentional race discrimination... A new race-neutral language was developed for appealing to old racist sentiments... Proponents of racial hierarchy found they could install a new racial caste system without violating the law or the new limits of acceptable political discourse, by demanding "law and order" rather than "segregation forever."

...it proved highly effective in appealing to poor and working-class whites... [These tactics were implemented within] what has come to be known as the Southern Strategy... appealing to racial fears and antagonisms was central... Nixon dedicated seventeen speeches solely to the topic of law and order, and one of his television ads explicitly called on voters to reject the lawlessness of civil rights activists and embrace "order" in the United States... Viewing his own campaign ad, Nixon reportedly remarked with glee that the ad "hits it right on the nose. It's all about those damn Negro--Puerto Rican groups out there."...

Race had become, yet again, a powerful wedge, breaking up what had been a solid liberal coalition based on economic interests of the poor and the working and lower-middle classes... The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the dramatic erosion in the belief among working-class whites that the condition of the poor, or those who fail to prosper, was the result of a faulty economic system that needed to be challenged. As the Edsalls explain, "the pitting of whites and blacks at the low end of the income distribution against each other intensified the view among many whites that the condition of life for the disadvantaged--particularly for disadvantaged blacks--is the responsibility of those afflicted, and not the responsibility of the larger society..."

The conservative revolution that took root within the Republican Party in the 1960s did not reach its full development until the election of 1980... Condemning "welfare queens and criminal predators" Reagan rode into office with the strong support of disaffected whites... [In] October 1982, President Reagan officially announced his administration's War on Drugs. At the time he declared this new war, less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation... Almost immediately after crack appeared, the Reagan administration leaped at the opportunity to publicize crack cocaine in an effort to build support for its drug war... The strategy bore fruit... Thousands of stories about the crack crisis flooded the airwaves and newsstands, and the stories had a clear racial subtext. The articles typically featured black "crack whores," crack babies," and "gangbangers," reinforcing already prevalent racial stereotypes of black women as irresponsible, selfish "welfare queens" and black men as predators--part of an inferior and criminal subculture. [As Reagan rose to power with racist scapegoating he brought the top income tax rate from 70% down to 28% and, as with his

*successors, imposed a pro-corporate agenda unlike any in recent decades that economically harmed people of all races and made inequality skyrocket*].

Reagan's successor, President George Bush, Sr., did not hesitate to employ implicit racial appeals, having learned from the success of other conservative politicians that subtle negative references to race could mobilize poor and working-class whites who once were loyal to the Democratic Party. Bush's most famous racial appeal, the Willie Horton ad, featured a dark-skinned black man, a convicted murderer who escaped while on a work furlough and then raped and murdered a white woman in her home. The ad blamed Bush's opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, for the death of the white woman, because he approved the furlough program... President Bush characterized drug use as "the most pressing problem facing the nation." Shortly thereafter, a New York Times/CBS News Poll reported that 64 percent of [people]--the highest percentage ever recorded--now thought that drugs were the most significant problem in the United States... In 1991, the Sentencing Project reported that the number of people behind bars in the United States was unprecedented in world history, and that one fourth of voting-age African American men were now under the control of the criminal justice system.

...in 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton vowed that he would never permit any Republican to be perceived as tougher on crime than he... Once elected, Clinton endorsed the idea of a federal "three strikes and you're out" law... The \$30 billion crime bill sent to President Clinton on August 1994 was hailed as a victory for the Democrats, who were able to wrest the crime issue from the Republicans and make it their own... Clinton escalated the drug war beyond what conservatives had imagined possible a decade earlier. As the Justice Policy Institute has observed, "the Clinton Administration's 'tough on crime' policies resulted in the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history..."

Clinton eventually moved beyond crime and capitulated to the conservative racial agenda on welfare. This move, like his "get tough" rhetoric and policies, was part of a grand strategy articulated by the "new Democrats" to appeal to the elusive white swing voters. In so doing, Clinton--more than any other president--created the current racial undercaste. He... imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare assistance, as well as a permanent, lifetime ban on eligibility for welfare and food stamps to anyone convicted of a felony drug offense--including simple possession of marijuana... During Clinton's tenure, Washington slashed funding for public housing by \$17 billion (a reduction of 61 percent) and boosted corrections by \$19 billion (an increase of 171 percent), "effectively making the construction of prisons the nation's main housing program for the urban poor"...

Once again, in response to a major disruption in the prevailing racial order--this time the civil rights gains of the 1960s--a new system of racialized social control was created by exploiting the vulnerabilities and racial resentments of poor and working class whites. More than 2 million people found themselves behind bars at the turn of the twenty-first century, and millions more were relegated to the margins of mainstream society, banished to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment, housing, and access to education was perfectly legal, and where they could be denied the right to vote... the mass incarceration of communities of color was explained in race-neutral terms, an adaptation to the needs and demands of the current political climate. The New Jim Crow was born.