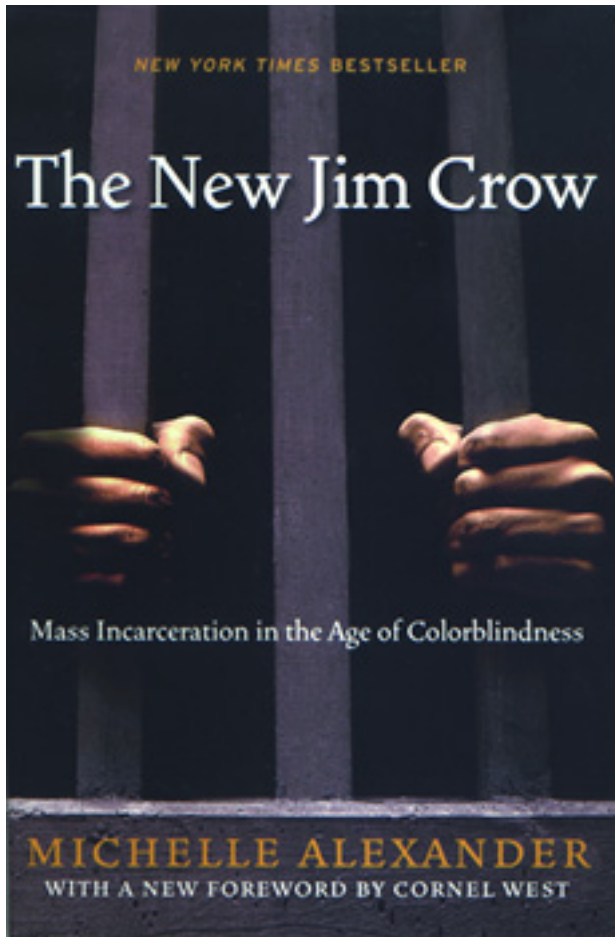


PM: The New Jim Crow  
Part One of a Three-Part Book Review

by Polly Mann

I consider Michelle Alexander's book, subtitled "Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," the most important book dealing with race relations that's been published since Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1865. According to many, even with its flaws in the depiction of African Americans, Stowe's book helped lay the groundwork for the abolition of slavery. Yet racism has not gone away. But I am convinced that if enough white people read Michelle Alexander's book, it could make a severe dint in racism. A professor of law and a civil rights advocate, Alexander has written a stunning book with statistics verifying almost every statement.

In his foreword to the book, the eminent Dr. Cornel West says: "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 rate as young black poor people, black leaders would focus much more on the prison-industrial complex... 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 love and die to make it so!"



*The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander (The New Press, 2010)*

Today's racism, called "Jim Crow," has taken an inhuman and sinister form--"mass incarceration" which affects people of color--Hispanic, Asian, and African Americans--and young men principally. The means is illegal drug usage, manufacture, or sale. Although white people also use drugs under similar circumstances and in similar amounts as people of color, the penalties are different, says Alexander: "The United States has a comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized control, unparalleled in world history that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow... Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. We have not ended racial caste in America, we have merely redesigned it."

For example, in searching neighborhoods for drugs, police typically look in black communities although drugs are used by about the same percentage of the population in white as well as in black communities. A recent study revealed that 15 percent of the New Jersey drivers on the Turnpike were racial minorities, yet 42 percent of all stops and 74 percent of all arrests were racial minorities. Maryland studies showed that although African Americans constituted only 17 percent of drivers along a specified highway, 70 percent of those stopped and searched were

racial minorities. Both studies showed that whites were more likely to be carrying illegal drugs than minorities.

The New York Times reported in 2008 that the New York Police Department stopped 545,000 people, and 80 percent of those were African Americans. On the whole, stop-and-frisk arrests are not productive, and less than 1 percent of motorists stopped resulted in guns being found.

A 2000 study of the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that white students use powdered cocaine at seven times the rate of black students, use crack cocaine at eight times the rate of black students and use heroin at seven times the rate of black students. Still law enforcement, at all levels, concentrates on black communities.

Vagrancy laws and other laws defining activities such as “mischief” and “insulting gestures” as crimes have been enforced vigorously against blacks. The aggressive enforcement of these criminal offenses opened up an enormous market for convict leasing, in which prisoners are contracted out as laborers to the highest bidder.

Review to be continued in the next Women Against Military Madness Newsletter.

Polly Mann is a co-founder of Women Against Military Madness and a regular contributor and columnist for the WAMM newsletter.