



The New Jim Crow

Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

MICHELLE ALEXANDER

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Introduction

Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy. Cotton's family tree tells the story of several generations of black men who were born in the United States but who were denied the most basic freedom that democracy promises—the freedom to vote for those who will make the rules and laws that govern one's life. Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.¹

Cotton's story illustrates, in many respects, the old adage "The more things change, the more they remain the same." In each generation, new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals—goals shared by the Founding Fathers. Denying African Americans citizenship was deemed essential to the formation of the original union. Hundreds of years later, America is still not an egalitarian democracy. The arguments and rationalizations that have been trotted out in support of racial exclusion and discrimination in its various forms have changed and evolved, but the outcome has remained largely the same. An extraordinary percentage of black men in the United States are legally barred from voting today, just as they have been throughout most of American history. They are also subject to legalized discrimination in

employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were.

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.

I reached the conclusions presented in this book reluctantly. Ten years ago, I would have argued strenuously against the central claim made here—namely, that something akin to a racial caste system currently exists in the United States. Indeed, if Barack Obama had been elected president back then, I would have argued that his election marked the nation's triumph over racial caste—the final nail in the coffin of Jim Crow. My elation would have been tempered by the distance yet to be traveled to reach the promised land of racial justice in America, but my conviction that nothing remotely similar to Jim Crow exists in this country would have been steadfast.

Today my elation over Obama's election is tempered by a far more sobering awareness. As an African American woman, with three young children who will never know a world in which a black man could not be president of the United States, I was beyond thrilled on election night. Yet when I walked out of the election night party, full of hope and enthusiasm, I was immediately reminded of the harsh realities of the New Jim Crow. A black man was on his knees in the gutter, hands cuffed behind his back, as several police officers stood around him talking, joking, and ignoring his human existence. People poured out of the building; many stared for a moment at the black

man cowering in the street, and then averted their gaze. What did the election of Barack Obama mean for him?

Like many civil rights lawyers, I was inspired to attend law school by the civil rights victories of the 1950s and 1960s. Even in the face of growing social and political opposition to remedial policies such as affirmative action, I clung to the notion that the evils of Jim Crow are behind us and that, while we have a long way to go to fulfill the dream of an egalitarian, multiracial democracy, we have made real progress and are now struggling to hold on to the gains of the past. I thought my job as a civil rights lawyer was to join with the allies of racial progress to resist attacks on affirmative action and to eliminate the vestiges of Jim Crow segregation, including our still separate and unequal system of education. I understood the problems plaguing poor communities of color, including problems associated with crime and rising incarceration rates, to be a function of poverty and lack of access to quality education—the continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. Never did I seriously consider the possibility that a new racial caste system was operating in this country. The new system had been developed and implemented swiftly, and it was largely invisible, even to people, like me, who spent most of their waking hours fighting for justice.

I first encountered the idea of a new racial caste system more than a decade ago, when a bright orange poster caught my eye. I was rushing to catch the bus, and I noticed a sign stapled to a telephone pole that screamed in large bold print: **THE DRUG WAR IS THE NEW JIM CROW**. I paused for a moment and skimmed the text of the flyer. Some radical group was holding a community meeting about police brutality, the new three-strikes law in California, and the expansion of America's prison system. The meeting was being held at a small community church a few blocks away; it had seating capacity for no more than fifty people. I sighed, and muttered to myself something like, "Yeah, the criminal justice system is racist in many ways, but it really doesn't help to make such an absurd comparison. People will just think you're crazy." I then crossed the street and hopped on the bus. I was headed to my new job, director of the Racial Justice Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Northern California.

When I began my work at the ACLU, I assumed that the criminal justice system had problems of racial bias, much in the same way that all major institutions in our society are plagued with problems associated with conscious

and unconscious bias. As a lawyer who had litigated numerous class-action employment-discrimination cases, I understood well the many ways in which racial stereotyping can permeate subjective decision-making processes at all levels of an organization, with devastating consequences. I was familiar with the challenges associated with reforming institutions in which racial stratification is thought to be normal—the natural consequence of differences in education, culture, motivation, and, some still believe, innate ability. While at the ACLU, I shifted my focus from employment discrimination to criminal justice reform and dedicated myself to the task of working with others to identify and eliminate racial bias whenever and wherever it reared its ugly head.

By the time I left the ACLU, I had come to suspect that I was wrong about the criminal justice system. It was not just another institution infected with racial bias but rather a different beast entirely. The activists who posted the sign on the telephone pole were not crazy; nor were the smattering of lawyers and advocates around the country who were beginning to connect the dots between our current system of mass incarceration and earlier forms of social control. Quite belatedly, I came to see that mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.

In my experience, people who have been incarcerated rarely have difficulty identifying the parallels between these systems of social control. Once they are released, they are often denied the right to vote, excluded from juries, and relegated to a racially segregated and subordinated existence. Through a web of laws, regulations, and informal rules, all of which are powerfully reinforced by social stigma, they are confined to the margins of mainstream society and denied access to the mainstream economy. They are legally denied the ability to obtain employment, housing, and public benefits—much as African Americans were once forced into a segregated, second-class citizenship in the Jim Crow era.

Those of us who have viewed that world from a comfortable distance yet sympathize with the plight of the so-called underclass—tend to interpret the experience of those caught up in the criminal justice system primarily through the lens of popularized social science, attributing the staggering increase in incarceration rates in communities of color to the predictable, though unfortunate, consequences of poverty, racial segregation, unequal

experience of women, Latinos, and immigrants in the criminal justice system, though these groups are particularly vulnerable to the worst abuses and suffer in ways that are important and distinct. This book focuses on the experience of African American men in the new caste system. I hope other scholars and advocates will pick up where the book leaves off and develop the critique more fully or apply the themes sketched here to other groups and other contexts.

What this book is intended to do—the only thing it is intended to do—is to stimulate a much-needed conversation about the role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating racial hierarchy in the United States. The fate of millions of people—indeed the future of the black community itself—may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society. The fact that more than half of the young black men in any large American city are currently under the control of the criminal justice system (or saddled with criminal records) is not—as many argue—just a symptom of poverty or poor choices, but rather evidence of a new racial caste system at work.

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? The chapter describes the control of African Americans through racial caste systems, such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time. As we shall see, there is a certain pattern to the births and deaths of racial caste in America. Time and again, the most ardent proponents of racial hierarchy have succeeded in creating new caste systems by triggering a collapse of resistance across the political spectrum. 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.

The structure of mass incarceration is described in some detail in chapter 2, with a focus on the War on Drugs. Few legal rules meaningfully constrain the police in the drug war, and enormous financial incentives have been granted to law enforcement to engage in mass drug arrests through military-style tactics. Once swept into the system, one's chances of ever being truly

free are slim, often to the vanishing point. Defendants are typically denied meaningful legal representation, pressured by the threat of lengthy sentences into a plea bargain, and then placed under formal control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole. Upon release, ex-offenders are discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives, and most will eventually return to prison. They are members of America's new undercaste.

Chapter 3 turns our attention to the role of race in the U.S. criminal justice system. It describes the method to the madness—how a formally race-neutral criminal justice system can manage to round up, arrest, and imprison an extraordinary number of black and brown men, when people of color are actually no more likely to be guilty of drug crimes and many other offenses than whites. This chapter debunks the notion that rates of black imprisonment can be explained by crime rates and identifies the huge racial disparities at every stage of the criminal justice process—from the initial stop, search, and arrest to the plea bargaining and sentencing phases. In short, the chapter explains how the legal rules that structure the system guarantee discriminatory results. These legal rules ensure that the undercaste is overwhelmingly black and brown.

Chapter 4 considers how the caste system operates once people are released from prison. In many respects, release from prison does not represent the beginning of freedom but instead a cruel new phase of stigmatization and control. Myriad laws, rules, and regulations discriminate against ex-offenders and effectively prevent their meaningful re-integration into the mainstream economy and society. I argue that the shame and stigma of the "prison label" is, in many respects, more damaging to the African American community than the shame and stigma associated with Jim Crow. The criminalization and demonization of black men has turned the black community against itself, unraveling community and family relationships, decimating networks of mutual support, and intensifying the shame and self-hate experienced by the current pariah caste.

The many parallels between mass incarceration and Jim Crow are explored in chapter 5. The most obvious parallel is legalized discrimination. Like Jim Crow, mass incarceration marginalizes large segments of the African American community, segregates them physically (in prisons, jails, and ghettos), and then authorizes discrimination against them in voting, employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service. The federal court system has effectively immunized the current system from challenges on the

grounds of racial bias, much as earlier systems of control were protected and endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The parallels do not end there, however. Mass incarceration, like Jim Crow, helps to define the meaning and significance of race in America. Indeed, the stigma of criminality functions in much the same way that the stigma of race once did. It justifies a legal, social, and economic boundary between “us” and “them.” Chapter 5 also explores some of the differences among slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, most significantly the fact that mass incarceration is designed to warehouse a population deemed disposable—unnecessary to the functioning of the new global economy—while earlier systems of control were designed to exploit and control black labor. In addition, the chapter discusses the experience of white people in this new caste system; although they have not been the primary targets of the drug war, they have been harmed by it—a powerful illustration of how a racial state can harm people of all colors. Finally, this chapter responds to skeptics who claim that mass incarceration cannot be understood as a racial caste system because many “get tough on crime” policies are supported by African Americans. Many of these claims, I note, are no more persuasive today than arguments made a hundred years ago by blacks and whites who claimed that racial segregation simply reflected “reality,” not racial animus, and that African Americans would be better off not challenging the Jim Crow system but should focus instead on improving themselves within it. Throughout our history, there have been African Americans who, for a variety of reasons, have defended or been complicit with the prevailing system of control.

Chapter 6 reflects on what acknowledging the presence of the New Jim Crow means for the future of civil rights advocacy. I argue that nothing short of a major social movement can successfully dismantle the new caste system. Meaningful reforms can be achieved without such a movement, but unless the public consensus supporting the current system is completely overturned, the basic structure of the new caste system will remain intact. Building a broad-based social movement, however, is not enough. It is not nearly enough to persuade mainstream voters that we have relied too heavily on incarceration or that drug abuse is a public health problem, not a crime. If the movement that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society, 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—one that we cannot foresee, just as the current system of mass incarceration was not predicted by anyone thirty years ago. No task is more urgent for racial justice advocates today than ensuring that America's current racial caste system is its last.

Another clue that mass incarceration, as we know it, would not exist but for the race of the imagined enemy can be found in the history of drug-law enforcement in the United States. Yale historian David Musto and other scholars have documented a disturbing, though unsurprising pattern: punishment becomes more severe when drug use is associated with people of color but softens when it is associated with whites.⁶⁶ The history of marijuana policy is a good example. In the early 1900s, marijuana was perceived—rightly or wrongly—as a drug used by blacks and Mexican Americans, leading to the Boggs Act of the 1950s, penalizing first-time possession of marijuana with a sentence of two to five years in prison.⁶⁷ In the 1960s, though, when marijuana became associated with the white middle class and college kids, commissions were promptly created to study whether marijuana was really as harmful as once thought. By 1970, the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act differentiated marijuana from other narcotics and lowered federal penalties.⁶⁸ The same drug that had been considered fearsome twenty years earlier, when associated with African Americans and Latinos, was refashioned as a relatively harmless drug when associated with whites.

In view of the nation's treatment of predominately white drunk drivers and drug offenders, it is extremely difficult to imagine that our nation would have declared all-out war on drug offenders if the enemy had been defined in the public imagination as white. It was the conflation of blackness and crime in the media and political discourse that made the drug war and the sudden, massive expansion of our prison system possible. White drug "criminals" are collateral damage in the War on Drugs because they have been harmed by a war declared with blacks in mind. While this circumstance is horribly unfortunate for them, it does create important opportunities for a multiracial, bottom-up resistance movement, one in which people of all races can claim a clear stake. For the first time in our nation's history, it may become readily apparent to whites how they, too, can be harmed by anti-black racism—a fact that, until now, has been difficult for many to grasp.

Black support for "get tough" policies. Yet another notable difference between Jim Crow and mass incarceration is that many African Americans seem to support the current system of control, while most believe the same could not be said of Jim Crow. It is frequently argued in defense of mass incarceration that African Americans want more police and more prisons because crime is so bad in some ghetto communities. It is wrong, these

defenders claim, for the tactics of mass incarceration—such as the concentration of law enforcement in poor communities of color, the stop-and-frisk programs that have proliferated nationwide, the eviction of drug offenders and their families from public housing, and the drug sweeps of ghetto neighborhoods—to be characterized as racially discriminatory, because those programs and policies have been adopted for the benefit of African American communities and are supported by many ghetto residents.⁶⁹ Ignoring rampant crime in ghetto communities would be racially discriminatory, they say; responding forcefully to it is not.

This argument, on the surface, seems relatively straightforward, but there are actually many layers to it, some of which are quite problematic. To begin with, the argument implies that African Americans prefer harsh criminal justice policies to other forms of governmental intervention, such as job creation, economic development, educational reform, and restorative justice programs, as the long-term solution to problems associated with crime. There is no evidence to support such a claim. To the contrary, surveys consistently show that African Americans are generally less supportive of harsh criminal justice policies than whites, even though blacks are far more likely to be victims of crime.⁷⁰ This pattern is particularly remarkable in that less educated people tend to be more punitive and blacks on average are less educated than whites.⁷¹

The notion that African Americans support “get tough” approaches to crime is further complicated by the fact that “crime” is not a generic category. There are many different types of crime, and violent crime tends to provoke the most visceral and punitive response. Yet as we have seen in chapter 2, the drug war has not been aimed at rooting out the most violent drug traffickers, or so-called kingpins. The vast majority of those arrested for drug crimes are *not* charged with serious offenses, and most of the people in state prison on drug charges have no history of violence or significant selling activity. Those who are “kingpins” are often able to buy their freedom by forfeiting their assets, snitching on other dealers, or becoming paid government informants. Thus, to the extent that some African Americans support harsh policies aimed at violent offenders, they cannot be said to support the War on Drugs, which has been waged primarily against nonviolent, low-level offenders in poor communities of color.

The one thing that is clear from the survey data and ethnographic research is that African Americans in ghetto communities experience an intense “dual

frustration” regarding crime and law enforcement. As Glenn Loury explained more than a decade ago, when violent crime rates were making headlines, “The young black men wreaking havoc in the ghetto are still ‘our youngsters’ in the eyes of many of the decent poor and working-class black people who sometimes are their victims.”⁷² Throughout the black community, there is widespread awareness that black ghetto youth have few, if any, realistic options, and therefore dealing drugs can be an irresistible temptation. Suburban white youth may deal drugs to their friends and acquaintances as a form of recreation and extra cash, but for ghetto youth, drug sales—though rarely lucrative—are often a means of survival, a means of helping to feed and clothe themselves and their families. The fact that this “career” path leads almost inevitably to jail is often understood as an unfortunate fact of life, part of what it means to be black in America.

Women, in particular, express complicated, conflicted views about crime, because they love their sons, husbands, and partners and understand their plight as current and future members of the racial undercaste. At the same time, though, they abhor gangs and the violence associated with inner-city life. One commentator explained, “African American women in poor neighborhoods are torn. They worry about their young sons getting involved in gang activity. They worry about their sons possibly selling or using drugs. They worry about their children getting caught in the crossfire of warring gangs. . . . These mothers want better crime and law enforcement. Yet, they understand that increased levels of law enforcement potentially saddle their children with a felony conviction—a mark that can ensure economic and social marginalization.”⁷³

Given the dilemma facing poor black communities, it is inaccurate to say that black people “support” mass incarceration or “get tough” policies. The fact that some black people endorse harsh responses to crime is best understood as a form of *complicity* with mass incarceration—not support for it. This complicity is perfectly understandable, for the threat posed by crime—particularly violent crime—is real, not imagined. Although African Americans do not engage in drug crime at significantly higher rates than whites, black men do have much higher rates of violent crime, and violent crime is concentrated in ghetto communities. Studies have shown that joblessness—not race or black culture—explains the high rates of violent crime in poor black communities. When researchers have controlled for joblessness, differences in violent crime rates between young black and white men disappear.⁷⁴

Regardless, the reality for poor blacks trapped in ghettos remains the same: they must live in a state of perpetual insecurity and fear. It is perfectly understandable, then, that some African Americans would be complicit with the system of mass incarceration, even if they oppose, as a matter of social policy, the creation of racially isolated ghettos and the subsequent transfer of black youth from underfunded, crumbling schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons. In the era of mass incarceration, poor African Americans are not given the option of great schools, community investment, and job training. Instead, they are offered police and prisons. If the only choice that is offered blacks is rampant crime or more prisons, the predictable (and understandable) answer will be “more prisons.”

The predicament African Americans find themselves in today is not altogether different from the situation they faced during Jim Crow. Jim Crow, as oppressive as it was, offered a measure of security for blacks who were willing to play by its rules. Those who flouted the rules or resisted them risked the terror of the Klan. Cooperation with the Jim Crow system often seemed far more likely to increase or maintain one's security than any alternative. That reality helps to explain why African American leaders such as Booker T. Washington urged blacks to focus on improving themselves rather than on challenging racial discrimination. It is also why the Civil Rights Movement initially met significant resistance among some African Americans in the South. Civil rights advocates strenuously argued that it was the mentality and ideology that gave rise to Jim Crow that was the real source of the danger experienced by blacks. Of course they were right. But it is understandable why some blacks believed their immediate safety and security could best be protected by cooperation with the prevailing caste system. The fact that black people during Jim Crow were often complicit with the system of control did not mean they supported racial oppression.

Today complicity with the system of mass incarceration may seem like the best option for African Americans, though in reality it is no option at all. We declared a war on people residing in racially segregated ghettos just at the moment their economies had collapsed rather than providing community investment, quality education, and job training when work disappeared. Of course those communities are suffering from serious crime today. Did we expect otherwise? Did we think that, miraculously, they would thrive? And now, having waged this war for decades, we claim some blacks “support” mass incarceration, as though they would rather have their young men ware-

housed in prison than going off to college. As political theorist Tommie Shelby has observed, “Individuals are forced to make choices in an environment they did not choose. They would surely prefer to have a broader array of good opportunities. The question we should be asking—not instead of but in addition to questions about penal policy—is whether the denizens of the ghetto are entitled to a better set of options, and if so, whose responsibility it is to provide them.”⁷⁵

Clearly a much better set of options could be provided to African Americans—and poor people of all colors—today. As historian Lerone Bennett Jr. eloquently reminds us, “a nation is a choice.” We could choose to be a nation that extends care, compassion, and concern to those who are locked up and locked out or headed for prison before they are old enough to vote. We could seek for them the same opportunities we seek for our own children; we could treat them like one of “us.” We could do that. Or we can choose to be a nation that shames and blames its most vulnerable, affixes badges of dishonor upon them at young ages, and then relegates them to a permanent second-class status for life. That is the path we have chosen, and it leads to a familiar place.

We faced a fork in the road one decade after Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were laid to rest. As described in chapter 1, during the late 1970s, jobs had suddenly disappeared from urban areas across America, and unemployment rates had skyrocketed. In 1954, black and white youth unemployment rates in America were equal, with blacks actually having a slightly higher rate of employment in the age group sixteen to nineteen. By 1984, however, the black unemployment rate had nearly quadrupled, while the white rate had increased only marginally.⁷⁶ This was *not* due to a major change in black values or black culture; this dramatic shift was the result of deindustrialization, globalization, and technological advancement. Urban factories shut down as our nation transitioned to a service economy. Suddenly African Americans were trapped in jobless ghettos, desperate for work.

The economic collapse of inner-city black communities could have inspired a national outpouring of compassion and support. A new War on Poverty could have been launched. Economic stimulus packages could have sailed through Congress to bail out those trapped in jobless ghettos through no fault of their own. Education, job training, public transportation, and relocation assistance could have been provided, so that youth of color would

have been able to survive the rough transition to a new global economy and secure jobs in distant suburbs. Constructive interventions would have been good not only for African Americans trapped in ghettos, but also for blue-collar workers of all colors, many of whom were suffering too, if less severely. A wave of compassion and concern could have flooded poor and working-class communities, in honor of the late Martin Luther King Jr. All of this could have happened, but it didn't. Instead we declared a War on Drugs.

The collapse of inner-city economies coincided with the conservative backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, resulting in the perfect storm. Almost overnight, black men found themselves unnecessary to the American economy and demonized by mainstream society. No longer needed to pick cotton in the fields or labor in factories, lower-class black men were hauled off to prison in droves. They were vilified in the media and condemned for their condition as part of a well-orchestrated political campaign to build a new white, Republican majority in the South. Decades later, curious onlookers in the grips of denial would wonder aloud, "Where have all the black men gone?"

No one has made this point better than sociologist Loïc Wacquant. Wacquant has written extensively about the cyclical nature of racial caste in America. He emphasizes that the one thing that makes the current penal apparatus strikingly different from previous racial caste systems is that "it does not carry out the positive economic mission of recruitment and disciplining of the workforce."⁷⁷ Instead it serves only to warehouse poor black and brown people for increasingly lengthy periods of time, often until old age. The new system does not seek primarily to benefit unfairly from black labor, as earlier caste systems have, but instead views African Americans as largely irrelevant and unnecessary to the newly structured economy—an economy that is no longer driven by unskilled labor.

It is fair to say that we have witnessed an evolution in the United States from a racial caste system based entirely on exploitation (slavery), to one based largely on subordination (Jim Crow), to one defined by marginalization (mass incarceration). While marginalization may sound far preferable to exploitation, it may prove to be even more dangerous. Extreme marginalization, as we have seen throughout world history, poses the risk of extermination. Tragedies such as the Holocaust in Germany or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia are traceable to the extreme marginalization and stigmatization of

racial and ethnic groups. As legal scholar John A. Powell once commented, only half in jest, “It’s actually better to be exploited than marginalized, in some respects, because if you’re exploited presumably you’re still needed.”⁷⁸

Viewed in this light, the frantic accusations of genocide by poor blacks in the early years of the War on Drugs seem less paranoid. The intuition of those residing in ghetto communities that they had suddenly become disposable was rooted in real changes in the economy—changes that have been devastating to poor black communities as factories have closed, low-skill jobs have disappeared, and all those who had the means to flee the ghetto did. The sense among those left behind that society no longer has use for them, and that the government now aims simply to get rid of them, reflects a reality that many of us who claim to care prefer to avoid simply by changing channels.