

Question 1

The New Jim Crow is written by associate professor of law at Ohio State University and current joint appointee at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Michelle Alexander; she is also a civil rights lawyer and the former director of the ACLU's Racial Justice Project in Northern California.

Based on her experience and collection of information she presents, Alexander is a reliable author and her expertise is the subject she presents in The New Jim Crow in which all of her topics have evidence ranging from court cases such as, for instance, *McCleskey v. Kemp* to actual accounts of victims of the New Jim Crow.

Alexander's point of view changes the reaction to the story because she presents facts, then the counterarguments to those facts, and concludes with the answer to those counter-arguments. For instance, one of the biggest arguments that Alexander presents is that of felons that are released after their sentence in prison only to be branded as second hand citizens; "when a defendant pleads guilty to a minor drug offense [...] [he] may be permanently forfeiting his right to vote as well as his right to serve on a jury--two of the most fundamental rights in any modern democracy" as well as being subjected to legal discrimination in the form of public housing, welfare aid, and employment (Alexander 142-151). The counter-argument Alexander presents is that some will argue that the solution is simple: don't perform criminal acts and that all of the laws that permit these restrictions on felons are in race-neutral terms thus they are not technically discriminatory. Her response to this is that from a statistical perspective, the supposed War on Drugs is responsible for "90 percent of the people arrested and convicted of drug offenses in some states being African American" which is attributed to the beginning of the

War on Drugs. In abridged terms, the government has used incentives (revenue, weaponry, military access, ect.) to deliberately shift the attention of the state and local police to drug related crimes and violations despite the decline of drug related crimes thus outlining that the issue is more complex and dates back much farther than meets the eye (Alexander 78-81, 204).

Not only does Alexander's well founded ethos and indisputable point of view change the reaction to the story but she also manages to inflict sympathy for the subjects of this book: black and brown peoples. She does this by taking real people's stories and asking the reader directly what she would do in their position. One of the stories she presents is that of Erma Faye Stewart who is an African American woman who was arrested as part of a drug sweep despite being innocent; because Stewart was anxious to be released given she had two children waiting for her, she pleaded guilty. Unfortunately, this meant that she was "sentenced to 10 years probation and ordered to pay \$1,000 in fines" along with now being branded a drug felon, losing her government aid and the custody of her children (Alexander 97).

Question 2

Alexander's The New Jim Crow not only opposes and challenges conventional paradigms but she tears them down for good.

A paradigm that Alexander addresses is that of the assumption that crime is coincidental; "We must stop debating crime policy as though it were purely about crime." Her argument is that people fail to understand the unconscious and conscious biases that are existent as well as how "our economic insecurities and racial resentments have been exploited for political gain," meaning that this contributes to the dismissal of the true reasons why crime is still around and wrongly assumed as rising while incarceration rates are actually rising (Alexander 238). One of

the reasons for crime still being an issue despite that “as recently as the mid-1970’s, the most well-respected criminologists were predicting that the prison system would soon fade away,” is that the local and state police are trained to use pre-textual minor traffic violations to perform drug searches that are primarily targeted at African American people, and arrest whoever they can on whatever they can (Alexander 8, 67-71).

Another one of the many subjects that opposes conventional paradigms is that the War on Drugs “is aimed at ridding the nation of drug “kingpins” or big-time dealers;” in actuality, Alexander explains, the majority of people arrested are charged with minor offenses (4 out of 5 arrests being for possession) state prisons hold mostly people who have no history of significant selling activity (Alexander 60).

Alexander also debunks the myth that “the drug war is principally concerned with dangerous drugs” because she explains that arrests for “marijuana possession- a drug less harmful than tobacco or alcohol- accounted for nearly 80 percent of the growth in drug arrests in the 1990’s”(Alexander 60).

Yet another paradigm Alexander addresses is that African Americans are more prone to use, sell, and buy illegal drugs while “whites, on average, are more punitive than blacks, despite the fact that blacks are far more likely to be victims of crime.” This is attributed to the demonization several forms of media sensationalization ranging from President Bush’s antagonizing ads during his presidential campaign to television shows like *Law and Order* (Alexander 54, 59).

Despite the many addressed and disproven paradigms listed, Alexander actually manages to constantly discredit paradigms alike.

Question 3

The title of The New Jim Crow is very significant in that it formulates the theme of the comparison between the Jim Crow era and now.

Alexander explains that she learned of the term “The New Jim Crow” and seriously considered the possibility of something remotely similar to the Jim Crow laws happening today when she saw it on a poster. That fact in itself, that she as a civil rights lawyer was coming to realize that this is a society that resembles more than not an era that was supposedly dead just in a new form, is enough to indicate the significance of the title. Formulating the accusation that we are living “The New Jim Crow” is severe but, placed aside the facts, is not unreasonable because most people do not think twice at the idea that our society is better off because of the elimination of slavery, the elimination of Jim Crow, and the many Civil Rights movements that have come and gone.

In one of the chapters, titled “The New Jim Crow,” outlines step by step the many comparisons between the Jim Crow era and now. The historical parallel that “both caste systems were born, in part, due to a desire among white elites to exploit the resentments, vulnerabilities, and racial biases of poor and working-class whites for political or economic gain” is only one similarity (Alexander 191). Legalized discrimination is another similarity between both then and now; today, Alexander argues, discrimination is thought of as a thing of the past, or at least not as clear as it was during the Jim Crow era but the truth is that discrimination is still very real, through the discrimination that criminals receive after prison (Alexander 191-192) . Racial segregation in both eras is also discussed by Alexander through residential segregation, as

mandated by the Jim Crow Laws and also today by the residential segregation today through taxes and residential segregation of prisoners (Alexander 195). Alexander presents many more parallels between them that further her claim.

By giving the book a title with such strong accusations and expectations, it reflects the strong argument that Alexander presents and supports while explaining the severity of the present.

Question 4

Alexander is extremely focused on developing the theme of the novel, which is the defining and validation of the existence of “The New Jim Crow” and thus the entity of her book helps develop her theme.

A motif that Alexander uses to further her pith about structural racism is through theorist Iris Marion Young’s birdcage metaphor explained “if one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure that it cannot escape”(Alexander 184). This metaphor helps create the understanding of structural racism in that it is not just one aspect but an entire construct and this analogy helps in directing the reader’s thoughts to Alexander’s vision.

Another memorable passage that directs to the theme is basic common sense that “by locking millions of people out of the mainstream legal economy, by making it difficult or impossible for people to find housing or feed themselves, and by destroying familial bonds by warehousing millions for minor crimes, we make crime more-not less-likely in the most

vulnerable communities” (Alexander 237). By appealing to the common sense of these people being neglected not out of the ordinary things but just the means of basic survival in this country addresses the absurdity of what is happening and validates Alexander’s point.

The theme of the book does reinforce the values that I hold because it is a logical argument that stands by the fact that these issues are more complex than they are made to be, especially by the media. The mere idea that there are people in this world, nay, this country that are being deprived of basic needs for survival while others sit comfortably in their fog of chosen ignorance of the real world is absurd.

Question 5

The central conflict that Alexander wants to address is the issue of mass-incarceration that plagues the whole of American society.

Part of this conflict arises between people. For instance, the repetition of history with the idea of the white planter/ elite population using the mechanism of providing the poor white class with a sense of superiority to separate a potential coalition between the entity of the poor class is a type of people vs. people conflict; it correlates to mass incarceration in that it adds to the construct of racism which in turn yields the fuel for African Americans being the target of the face of the War on Drugs and as such mass incarceration (Alexander 30).

The subsequent result of this is that it provides for conflict between the victims of mass incarceration and the social world. For one, African Americans are antagonized and demonized in every which way the media can manage for example, as previously mentioned, in Bush’s presidential campaign ads. This imagery, in turn creates for a false image that contributes to the facility of targeting African Americans as the main victims of mass incarceration (Alexander 54).

But the conflicts between these people and society have formed in even smaller ways; within their own communities. Because the person convicted as felon is made to believe that in this case, she is “a criminal, nothing but a criminal. [She is] a no good criminal,” it is reasonable that that shame is passed down onto their families who avoid talking about the issue of mass incarceration directly affecting them because pluralistic ignorance; this creates a community that ignores convicted felons and creates internal conflict by encouraging these families the War on Drugs and police enforcement because they do not want it in their communities mass incarceration (Alexander 165-166).

These internal conflicts are arguably the most disheartening. For one, the “gangsta rap and culture of violence that has been embraced by so many black youth” is a conflict with themselves because, even if they have committed no crime, the mentality that creates these ideas is that if these youths are going to be treated like criminals by police and stereotyped by their teachers, why not become the criminal they are expected to be? Because they are not taught of another way out (Alexander 170). The other aspect of the conflict with the self is that of felons who are marginalized and ostracized by society, certain people, and ultimately, themselves because their lives are ruined; if and when they are released, they are typically homeless, jobless, they are not really citizens anymore (Alexander 158-161).

Question 6

Alexander creates more of a sense of anger than suspense throughout her book. The small portion of suspense, if at all, is created by the hope that maybe something in the past three decades proves to be a substantial improvement from the shameful history of the United States but, spoiler alert, nothing really is.

Besides the recollection of the history of slavery and the Jim Crow laws, there is a lot of information that Alexander provides, that is unknown to most people, about, for instance, the extent to which police can legally bend around the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens if it is a matter of drugs. For starters, the fact the “CIA admitted in 1998 that guerrilla armies were actively supported in Nicaragua were smuggling illegal drugs into the United States-drugs that were making their way onto the streets of inner-city black neighborhoods in the form of crack cocaine” and the CIA’s lack of moral consideration to do stop this is something that might inflict anger in people, especially when this majorly contributes to the reason why drugs became such a big problem when it was starting to die down in the 1980s; in conclusion, it was deliberate by the government (Alexander 6). Returning to the police, many court cases have led the path to our current police system. In *California v. Acevedo*, the fourth amendment, which protects against unreasonable and unwarranted searches, was upheld constitutional for an unwarranted search of a bag locked in a motorist’s trunk (Alexander 62). In *Florida v. Bostick*, the constitutionality of yet another unwarranted search was upheld on the bases of “consent,” which has become an absurd idea with the “constitutionality” of probable cause (Alexander 64-66).

The incentive to learn more about what is legal in this country and what is not is what, arguably, drives the reader to keep reading; to learn about which of their rights they still have.

Question 7

One of the aspects of human psychology that Alexander touches upon is that of the impact of mass incarceration on the families of felons; “pluralistic ignorance [is when] people misjudge the norm” like when, for instance, freshman in college overestimate the amount of alcohol other freshman drink. This psychological phenomenon, driven by shame, is very

common in these impacted families in that they don't tend to talk about these problems out of the assumption that it is not common (Alexander 166).

Felons themselves face many psychological conflicts which are actually not so much about shame but are rather attributed to "severe isolation, distrust, and alienation created by mass incarceration" along with the constant reminder that they are branded a criminal, a second citizen, for life. "The anger and frustration directed at young black men returning home from prison is understandable, given that they are returning to communities that are hurt by joblessness and crime" for a crime that in all likelihood, would not have impacted a white man in the same position (Alexander 165).

A similar frustration is felt by ghetto youth that are not motivated to deal drugs and succumb to the risk of it by anger or shame or even extra money but "are often [motivated by] a means of survival, a means of helping to feed and clothe themselves and their families." That psychology is terribly anchoring especially on a youth that had to do what they had to without choice (Alexander 209).

In another psychology, which is that of investors in the big business of prisons and private prisons which is motivated by greed. The people who make up the prison market are unfortunately not willing to lose their investments and so they encourage the round up of people, who are mostly African American, into prison by any means necessary, even if unjust (Alexander 230).

Question 8

I chose this book because first, it's been on my personal reading list since it came out but I had not gotten around to it and second, because I have a very large interest in social justice and human rights issues.

In sight of the recent events like the murder of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and the many other black men (women and all peoples of color, that goes unreported) who have been unjustly murdered along with the recently publicized police brutality like that in Ferguson Missouri, I have become more interested in not only how most of the policemen who commit such acts are not indicted but also the reactions of my peers. It's interesting to see how so many people that I encounter everyday at school like my classmates and teachers are still rely on solely sensationalized television media like Fox News and CNN instead of exploring the means of social media that provide a new perspective that has never before been so widely available.

I think this book was a good choice because, despite it being very frustrating to read about how little I knew and still know about things like my basic rights or lack thereof, I am more informed and aware of what is happening. I now have more information to lean back on when confronting fellow classmates on their intentional or unintentional racism and/or incorrect information, thus spreading the knowledge I now have, one peer at a time.

This book most definitely met my expectations and beyond; there were a few times when I questioned Michelle Alexander's claims but was later eased by her explanations. I now know so much, like how much of what the police do is actually perfectly legal and how I am a product of this society that is constantly antagonizing black people; for example, when I was around 6

years old, I remember watching COPS, the television show (which is not really a children's television show but anyway...) with my dad and now realize that it was really racist.

Another reason why I really enjoyed this book was because I spent some time in New York City over the summer and had the privilege to listen to Cornel West, Carl Dix, and Sunsara Taylor who are activist for the the Stop Mass Incarceration Movement, Black Lives Matter, and Stop the Patriarchy organization. Watching and listening to these speakers is truly inspiring because they are out there, in the world, making a difference in any way possible. I want to make a difference and this book has given me the hope that I can.

Question 9

Alexander's purpose was to reveal the pressing problem of mass incarceration that is neglected but is no less important than the assumed biggest problems like the economy, racism, and drugs. Alexander was trying to get her audience to understand the untold side of the story of the War on Drugs and reveal the still very evident racism, discrimination, and segregation that has plagued this country since the European settlement and ambition set foot on it.

Alexander is a very reliable source given that she is well informed on the subjects because she is a civil rights lawyer. Alexander does display bias but it is virtually impossible to write a book on such a misunderstood topic otherwise.

She was successful in that she informs about how mass incarceration came to be as a product of slavery and Jim Crow laws, she explains how it is being maintained by incentives by the government and antagonization of African Americans, and she presses at the fact that something must be done, but it needs to be of primary importance and it will not be easy.

If all of the information were in act, I don't really think that it would have mattered had the book been written by a different author because only someone with the same background and strive as Alexander would have been able to replicate this book. Had the same topic been written about by a different author however, the outcome could have been catastrophic in that it could have been written based on the many paradigms that run through our society. Also, it could have been written to further blind the perception many Americans have on the criminal justice system and thus create more distractions from the fact that more than 15 % of Americans are locked up in prisons, not including those who have been released but are subjected to a practically impossible means of living.

Question 10

The subject of the novel is the pressing issue of mass incarceration that has formulated a New Jim Crow system that is prevalent today.

In order to understand the severity of this issue, one must first understand the myth of the War on Drugs; in actuality, the War on Drugs started by the government's aid to infect inner city neighborhoods with drugs and then fail to stop it; as well as, the incentives given by the government in the form of revenue, weaponry, and military arms access to shift the focus from rape, murder, and other violent crimes to drugs with the intention to once again limit the black population from jeopardizing the white elite (Alexander 69-71).

After understanding this, it is important to understand that since the 1980's, police have been trained to use race neutral terminology and minor traffic violations/minor drug violations to round up more people into prisons, where they are virtually stripped of their rights as American citizens (Alexander 81-83).

While police are legally allowed to do almost anything that is commonly mistaken as illegal, like search people without a warrant and confiscate property as well as arrest people on solely probable cause, the lives of unjustly convicted felons are then antagonized and marginalized (Alexander 93). Even if and when these convicted felons are released, they are subject to legal discrimination and are denied public housing, employment, welfare aid, and the right to vote (Alexander 95).

There are many comparisons made between then and now but the fact of the matter is that there are millions of people that are being fed into this unjust system for the economic and political gain of some; the fact that most people can read this book and go back to their privileged lives without giving it a second thought is outrageous. Who do we think we are, the people whose petty problems absorb our lives while there are people who can't turn to the supposed public safety committee for help, who have lost their children,, whose lives are ruined because of a system that repeats history? Who do we think we are to sit back comfortably and watch while people, even 20 minutes away in "Chiraq", die everyday and we are desensitized to it? Who are we to ignore and be a part of this system? What gives us the right? The fact that we have different colored skin? The fact that we were born in the privileged world of Suburbia? Yes.

Works Cited

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

Revised ed. New York: New, 2011. Print.