

“The New Jim Crow” Discussion Preparation

1. How does the conservative backlash compare and contrast to the conservative backlash during Reconstruction (the Redeemers)?
 - On page 55, Alexander compares the fall of resistance to what she describes as “new system of racialized social control” in the early 1990s to the birth of Jim Crow by writing, “In the 1890s, Populists bucked under the political pressure created by the Redeemers, who had successfully appealed to poor and working-class whites by proposing overtly racist and increasingly absurd Jim Crow laws.” So, essentially, the conservative backlash against the so-called “crime pandemic” was quite effective at crushing vocal opposition to the harsh policies implemented to fight drugs in a similar fashion to how the Bourbon Redeemers—also by emboldening resentful whites—defeated Populists to establish the system of systematic hierarchy that would last for decades.
2. How are the interests of poor whites and blacks set up/become competitive?
 - On page 43, Alexander discusses the appeal of “law and order” rhetoric for poor and working-class whites by writing, “Although law and order rhetoric ultimately failed to prevent the formal dismantling of the Jim Crow system, it proved highly effective in appealing to poor and working-class whites, particularly in the South, who were opposed to integration and frustrated by the Democratic Party’s apparent support for the Civil Rights Movement.” So, because poor Southern whites felt alienated by the liberalism of the Democratic party, which had been growing since the days of the New Deal, they felt drawn to the tough “law and order” sentiments of Republican candidates like Nixon who employed the “Southern Strategy,” which, by its nature, competed with the interests of black Americans.

3. What is Branch's [Alexander's] most convincing evidence that the conservatives were about race inequality rather than crime?
 - Alexander certainly presents a lot of evidence that conservatives cared more about upholding the system of racial hierarchy than actually combating crime including actual quotations from politicians. But, the best evidence I could find is on page 54 where she writes, "The War on Drugs proved popular among key white voters, particularly whites who remained resentful of black progress, civil rights enforcement, and affirmative action. Beginning in the 1970s, researchers found that racial attitudes—not crime rates or likelihood of victimization—are an important determinant of white support for "get tough on crime" and anti-welfare measures." She concludes the paragraph by stating, "The War on Drugs, cloaked in a race-neutral language, offered whites opposed to racial reform a unique opportunity to express their hostility toward blacks and black progress, without being exposed to the charge of racism." So, I mean, the evidence pretty much speaks for itself. There were actual studies that found that conservatives cared more about the racial elevation of whites than actually cracking-down on crack as they proclaimed with such intense rhetoric.
4. How does this process undermine the gains of the Civil Rights Movement?
 - On page 55, Alexander discusses how this new conservative attitude attempted to generate white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement by writing, "The shift to a general attitude of "toughness" toward problems associated with communities of color began in the 1960s, when the gains and goals of the Civil Rights Movement began to require real sacrifices on the part of white Americans, and conservative politicians found they could mobilize white racial resentment by vowing to crack down on crime." So, basically, those who enjoyed the de facto racial caste system found that they could undermine the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement—in its time—without violating the Overton Window by demanding harsher penalties for black criminals with belligerent "law and order" language.

5. How is systematic hierarchy recreated post 1970? How is this similar or different to the Jim Crow triangle? How has hierarchy been perpetuated over time?
 - On page 50, Alexander mentions the effect of the changing economy—specifically the impact of globalization and deindustrialization—on inner-city black communities by referencing the black American sociologist William Julius Wilson’s findings: “The overwhelming majority of African Americans in the 1970s lacked college educations and had attended racially segregated, underfunded schools lacking basic resources. Those residing in ghetto communities were particularly ill equipped to adapt to the seismic changes taking place in the U.S. economy; they were left isolated and jobless.” So, this is one of those factors that despite contributing greatly to the situation at hand, can easily be neglected. The decline in the industrial employment of black men of 42% between 1970 and 1987 further impoverished these communities while increasing incentives to sell drugs as opportunities for legitimate employment dwindled
6. What privileges are given to the people at the top of the hierarchy? How have these privileges been built on over time? (Not just starting in the 1970s/1980s?)
 - Plenty of privileges are given to people at the top of the hierarchy—those being affluent whites. Now, on page 53, Alexander writes about one little detail about Reagan’s anti-drug legislation that cannot be overlooked: “Among other harsh penalties, the legislation included mandatory minimum sentences of the distribution of cocaine, including far more severe punishment for distribution of crack—associated with blacks—than powder cocaine, associated with whites.” Now, of course, it’s true that crack cocaine was the pressing drug concern of the time, but it’s still awfully convenient that the laws worked out to favor those who had traditionally been at the top of the hierarchy due to literally centuries of privilege.

Question: In the 2016 election, we viewed candidate Trump use “law and order” heavily, especially when referring to illegal immigration across our southern border. To what extent do we think that rhetoric is reminiscent of the language used by previous presidents with regard to city crime?