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Mass Incarceration and White Fear

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In America today, there are many negative racial stereotypes associated with African Americans. For instance, African Americans are perceived to be more prone to criminogenic behaviors than other racial and ethnic groups. In *Democracy in Black*, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. contends that these negative racial stereotypes are expressions of white fear, or the general frame of mind that black individuals are threatening to the overall well-being of society. After reviewing a plethora of sources regarding this issue, I contend that there is an inextricable relationship between white fear and the mass incarceration of African Americans in the twenty-first century. The mass incarceration of African Americans has been rationalized by the assumption that it is an indispensable means of sustaining the well-being of American society. However, the mass incarceration of African Americans is more than an attempt to maintain a safe society.

In a study on the interrelationship between mass incarceration and African Americans, Michelle Alexander unveiled America’s criminal justice system as unjust in its incarceration practices (e.g., laws, and targeted communities). Equally important, stereotypes and negative connotations are perpetually employed to justify the proliferation of black bodies in insalubrious cells. The question is not whether prisons should be obsoleted and or completely eradicated. Rather, how could the economic, social, and political conditions that are inextricably correlated to high crime rates be remedied? This research will not explicitly address that question in full, rather this essay will explicate the interrelationship between mass incarceration and African Americans in the 21st century.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the mass incarceration of African Americans better in the 21st century. I contend that the mass incarceration is part of the long history of placing African Americans into inferior positions by laws and customs. Furthermore, I will interpret mass incarceration as the third racial caste system in America that is upheld by white fear.

A *racial caste system*, as defined by Michelle Alexander in her work, is a system that locks a particular racial group into an inferior position by law and custom.

Given Alexander’s definition of a racial caste system, the mass incarceration of African Americans in the 21st century can be understood as the most recent iteration of racial caste systems in American history. The first two racial caste systems were slavery and Jim Crow laws. By law, enslaved Africans and free black Americans were denied their basic civil rights. Following the abolishment of slavery in December 1865, with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, Jim Crow laws were enforced, thus making African Americans second-class citizens. After Jim Crow laws were ruled unconstitutional in the 1954 US Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka*, a more enduring and inconspicuous racial caste system was then erected. That racial caste system was (and still is) mass incarceration.

To understand the mass incarceration of African Americans better in the 21st century, I intend to explain the relationship between mass incarceration and white fear. I also intend to explain how mass incarceration functions as the most recent racial caste system in America.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.*