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## How Poor Black Lives Matter to U.S. Capitalism Today

Slavery By Other Means

by PAUL STREET

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### King Cotton

Black lives have always mattered to white America primarily as a source of economic exploitation. And white American authorities have never been particularly squeamish about killing and maiming Black Americans in defense and advance of that exploitation. Untold millions of Black slaves were tortured and murdered so that Southern tobacco, rice, sugar and cotton planters could extract vast quantities of surplus value from them. As the historian Edward Baptist has recently shown, the violence that was systematically inflicted on Blacks in the forced labor camps of U.S. cotton slavery generated much of the economic surplus that drove the United States' emergence as a modern capitalist and industrial state before the U.S. Civil War.

After reformist experiments under northern Union Army occupation during the Reconstruction era (1866-1877), Black cotton servitude was resurrected across what became known as the Jim Crow South. The last thing that Black ex-slaves wanted to do after slavery was go back to work under white rule in Southern cotton fields. But, as the historical sociologist Stephen Steinberg noted thirty-four years ago,

“Though the Civil War had ended slavery, the underlying economic functions that slavery had served were unchanged, and a surrogate system of compulsory paid labor developed in its place...ex-slaves...were forced to struggle for survival as wage laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers in southern agriculture. Once again, black paid the price and carried the burden of the nation’s need for cheap and abundant cotton.”

Many thousands of Black Americans died at the hands of white terrorists and authorities, both private and public, to keep Black lives yoked to cotton toiling for a pittance or worse under white owners during the long Jim Crow era.

### **The Northern Black Proletariat**

During and after World War One and through the 1960s, northern industrial firms’ demand for cheap labor (and often enough for strikebreakers) combined with the growing mechanization of Southern cotton farming to push and pull millions of Blacks out of the South to work in giant steel mills, packinghouses, auto-assembly plants and other mass-production facilities in northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. By 1970, nearly half of the nation’s Black population resided north of the Mason-Dixon Line. This Great Migration was a step toward freedom for Black Americans who escaped the open racial terror and formal segregation and political disenfranchisement of the former slave states.

Still, Black lives mattered to northern white capitalists and authorities mainly as a source of cheap, super-exploited labor. Blacks were kept at the bottom of the northern industrial proletariat by their branded status as racial inferiors. Black workers were concentrated in northern industry’s dirtiest, hottest, most unpleasant, worst-paid and least secure jobs. (In Chicago’s slaughtering and meatpacking industry – a major destination for southern Black migrants from WWI through the 1940s – Black employees’ time-cards were specially marked to make sure that they were the first fired and last re-hired during and after seasonal layoffs and economic downturns.) The northern Black population was penned up in inferior and overcrowded ghetto neighborhoods. “Northern blacks,” historian Thomas Sugrue notes, “lived as second-class citizens, unencumbered by the most blatant of southern-style Jim Crow laws but still trapped in an economic, political, and legal regime that seldom recognized them as equals. In nearly every arena, blacks and whites lived separate, unequal lives.” This *de facto* racial separatism and disparity was sustained and enforced by violence. The agents of white northern repression included street gangs, property associations, city police, and, when deemed necessary – as during the race riots of 1919 (Chicago), 1943 (Detroit), and the 1960s (across urban America) – the National Guard and the U.S. military.

### **Becoming the Raw Material**

Today, as across the long neoliberal era that began in the mid-1970s, millions of Black working-, and lower- class lives still matter to the U.S. power and profits system primarily as subjects for economic exploitation. The exploitation still relies heavily on violence and repression – violence that all too commonly turns lethal, as with the killings of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray and the hundreds of other Black Americans (usually but not always young and male) who are killed each year by mostly white police officers in the U.S. But there’s a key difference now.

Black lives have been largely torn asunder (along, of course, with many white, Latino, and other U.S. lives) from direct engagement in surplus value-generating productive labor.

Already, by the late 1950s, Black northern industrial workers experienced significant jobs losses due to automation and the flight of capital and jobs to whiter and more union-free regions of the country (the great Black-employing Chicago packinghouses Armour's, Swift's, and Wilson's were all closed by the end of that decade, for example). "Deindustrialization" hit the Northern black ghettos earlier and harder than it hit other predominantly working class neighborhoods and communities across the north and the nation.

Mass Black joblessness in what would become known as "the Rustbelt" was a major factor beneath the remarkable wave of race riots that washed across northern U.S. cities in the "long hot summers" of 1966 and 1967 and (following the murder of Martin Luther King) the spring of 1968. The eviction of Black lives from production only deepened with the finance capital-led dismantlement of American manufacturing and heavy industry that took off and flowered in the 1970s and 1980s, carried yet further through the next decade by the arch-global-corporatist North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Concentrated in rotting, deeply immiserated ghettos as members of a lumpen-proletarianized "underclass," millions of Black Americans learned that they no longer mattered to white authorities and U.S. capitalism as producers working with industrial or agricultural materials. Their new leading role was now instead to function themselves as raw material – as the critical ingredient for the nation's giant new "criminal [in]justice" system of racially hyper-disparate mass surveillance, mass arrest, mass sentencing, mass incarceration, mass parole, mass probation, and mass felony-marking.

Between the late 1960s and 2000, the number of prisoners in the U.S. rose from roughly 300,000 to more than 2 million with non-violent drug offenders making up most of the enormous new U.S. inmate population. The nation that proclaimed itself the homeland and headquarters of global liberty contained 5 percent of the world's population but now kept more than 25 percent of the world's prisoners. To confine this giant new captive population generated by the so-called War on Drugs, the U.S. built more than 3200 prisons at a cost of \$27 billion during the 1990s alone. On top of those behind bars, by the turn of the millennium, more than four and half million Americans were on parole or probation, "doing time on the outside." Twelve percent of the nation's adult population now possessed a felony record – a major barrier to employment and to numerous other "opportunities," including the right to vote (for what that's really worth anymore under the nation's unelected dictatorship of money) in many states.

Beyond sheer magnitude, the most striking thing about the new U.S. prison state was its heavily racialized nature. By 2001, Blacks comprised 12 percent of the U.S. population but nearly half of its 2 million prisoners. Between 1980 and 2002, the number of Black men in U.S. jails and prisons (mainly for nonviolent drug crimes) grew five-fold. Consider the following comparative incarceration rates at the turn of the millennium: Japan (40 per 100,000), Sweden (60 per 100,000), England (125), South Africa (400), Russia (675), U.S. (690), and Black adult U.S. men (4,848 per 100,000). More than a tenth of all prisoners on Earth is a Black U.S. "citizen" (ex-citizen). There are more black men behind bars than enrolled in colleges or universities in the

U.S. By 2007 there were more Black under criminal supervision – in prison or jail, on probation or parole – than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War. A shocking 1 in every 3 Black adult males is now branded by the lifelong stigma of a felony record. That's no small white-supremacist "law and order" payback for the great Black U.S. urban uprisings of the 190s.

It all reflects wild racial disparities in the enforcement of the nation's drug laws – disparities that mock the notion of a "color-blind" and "post-racial America." Whites use and sell illegal drugs – the main crimes driving U.S. mass incarceration – every bit as much as Blacks and Latinos. The vast majority of the nation's drug users and dealers are white. Still, Blacks and Latinos together make up three-fourths of those sent to prison for drug offenses in the U.S.

### **Disturbing Parallels**

The resulting giant army of Black prisoners and "ex-offenders" constitutes a criminalized "underclass" that cycles back and forth between the nation's worst-off jobless and high-poverty ghetto zip-codes and a sprawling archipelago of high-tech mass confinement holding pens that are mainly located in predominantly white and rural parts of the nation. The prison construction and operation boom – fed by the rising "market" of Black drug criminals – has been a significant source of jobs, tax dollars, and associated local economic "multipliers" for mostly rural ("downstate" in Illinois, "upstate" in New York and Michigan) prison towns. As the distinguished criminologist Todd Clear noted nearly 20 years ago, "Each prisoner represents an economic asset that has been removed from that community and placed elsewhere [and]... represents as much as \$25,000 in income for the community in which the prison is located, not to mention the value of constructing the prison facility in the first place. This can be a massive transfer of value: A young male worth a few thousand dollars of support to children and local purchases is transformed into a \$25,000 financial asset to a rural prison community."

A July 2001 story in the *Detroit News* was titled "Ionia Finds Stability in Prisons." It reported that the "upstate" Michigan town of Ionia had become one of the state's fastest growing and "most improved" cities thanks to its five thriving penitentiaries, whose 1600 workers collectively made \$102 million. "The state's urban centers dump their felons," the *News* reported, "in prison towns and forget about them. Suburbs balks at housing felons...But Ionia sees things from the other end of the spectrum. The prisons bring, of all things, security."

Not surprisingly, prison-hosting communities, themselves often gravely challenged by the deindustrializing and (family-) farm-destroying gales of neoliberal capitalism, became part of a prison-industrial lobby that pushed for tougher drug and other laws and sentences to bring them more and more captive Black people from distant urban ghettos. The communities commonly show up in the U.S. Census as half or more Black but when you visit their downtown business districts and adjacent neighborhoods they look lily-white. The explanation, of course, is that their Black populations are almost entirely incarcerated.

Consider the different racial meanings attached to the phrase "going downstate" by young white and Black high school students in the Chicago area. Beyond the shared favorable suggestion of a trip to the state's high school basketball tournament, the connotations are sharply skin-colored. For many white youths, the phrase evokes the image of a trip with Mom and Dad to begin

academic careers at the University of Illinois or one of the state's other public universities. But for Chicago area teens and young adults, "going downstate" typically means a trip under armed guard to take up residence at one of the state's more than thirty prisons.

It's a disturbing picture with unsettling parallels to chattel slavery: young Black men involuntarily removed as economic assets from Black communities to distant rural destinations where they are kept under lock and key by predominantly white overseers. Considering also the enhanced voting clout that disenfranchised prisoners bring rural communities (along with tax dollars and census count), another unpleasant historical parallel is with the U.S. Constitution's notorious Three-Fifths Clause (whereby three-fifths of the South's slaves population counted towards the congressional representation of the Slave states).

### **A Public-Private System That Kills**

The economic scale of the nation's system of racially disparate mass arrest, prosecution, sentencing, incarceration, and felony-marking is considerable. A 2007 report by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service found that criminal justice expenditures on "police, corrections, judicial, and legal services" had reached \$228 billion per year, up by 171% since 1982. The number of Americans employed in these activities rose by 92%, from 1.3 million to 2.5 million (the nation's largest corporate employer, Wal-Mart, has 1.3 million American workers today) over the same years.

It's not just cops and prison guards who find reasonably remunerative employment in neoliberal America's new "correctional" Leviathan. The nation's 2.5 million criminal justice employees include prosecutors, court clerks, public defenders, parole officers, probation officers, prison medical staff, prison administrators, criminal justice instructors, correctional facilities managers, police identification and records officers, juvenile court counselors, medical examiners, court reporters, judges and magistrates, bailiffs, forensic science technicians, correctional treatment specialists, wardens, law librarians, law enforcement instructors, and...the list goes on.

The "correctional Keynesian" job programs is not limited to the public sector. On top of the millions employed directly in governmental criminal justice occupations, untold millions work in a vast network of private sector firms contracting with the mass arrest and incarceration system. From the building equipping, and maintenance of police stations, jails, prisons, and courts to running programs for "offender" counseling and rehabilitation to evaluating parolees drug tests countless other collateral tasks and services that are subcontracted out to private firms (including the big telecommunications firms that charge inmates and their families absurdly inflated rates for phone calls into and out of prison) by criminal justice offices, the prison-industrial complex built upon the nation's giant army of disproportionately Black drug inmates and felons generates considerable employment and revenue beyond the public sector.

The disproportionately nonwhite criminal class generates proceeds in other ways. It is charged, often at exorbitant rates, for various criminal justice processes and services, including court-ordered treatment programs. Local law enforcement agencies have taken billions of dollars in wealth through "asset forfeiture" laws that permit police to seize the property of accused drug

offenders – curious form of primitive accumulation for correctional state capitalism in the neoliberal era.

The endemic police killings of mostly young Black men that sparked the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement are one terrible reflection of this vicious and parasitic system. Hundreds of Black Americans die each year as heavily armed police try to round them up to serve as the critical human component for the mass incarceration, criminal supervision, and felony-marking regime – a system that keeps its victims either in prison or jail or stuck without remotely decent employment, housing, educational, financial, and political opportunities while “on the outside.” Like slavery and its Jim Crow successor regime in the U.S. South, it’s a system that does not shirk from killing its Black human profit sources when “necessary.”

It’s telling that one of the frequent causes of fatal police shootings is flight. Few things do more to provoke a U.S. police officer into using lethal force than a potential prisoner trying to run away. (Never mind that, legally speaking, police are permitted to use such force only in cases where they reasonably sense that their own lives or the lives of others are in imminent danger.) Running from a contemporary mass-incarcerationist prisoner-catcher – a badge-brandishing “peace officer” trained to “shoot to kill” – gets young poor Black (and poor white and Latino) men killed with chilling regularity in the U.S. today.

### **“Jim Crow” New and Old**

In her justly heralded book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Ohio State law professor Michelle Alexander made a compelling case for seeing the nation’s multitude of criminally marked Black prisoners and felons as victims of a new system of racial caste suited to the ostensibly color-blind post-Civil Rights era. Provocatively timed with the recent ascendancy of a first technically Black U.S. President, her book noted a curious irony:

“As the United States celebrates the nation’s ‘triumph over race’ with the election of Barack Obama, the majority of young black men in major American cities are locked behind bars or labeled felons for life. Jim Crow laws were wiped off the books decades ago, but today an astounding percentage of the African American community is warehoused in prisons or trapped in permanent, second-class status, much like their grandparents before them, who lived under and explicit system of control....We have not ended racial caste in America: we have simply redesigned it... In the current era, it is no longer permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. Yet it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. The old forms of discrimination – discrimination in employment, housing, education, and public benefits; denial of the right to vote; and exclusion from jury duty – are suddenly legal once you’ve been labeled as felon.”

Alexander provided abundant evidence for her argument that the new Black criminal underclass is subjected to a type of de facto caste-like status in the U.S. today – a status that is commonly enforced through savage and ever-more militarized police-state violence.

Still, there are significant difficulties, historically speaking, with description of the neoliberal era's racist mass imprisonment and criminal-marking order as a "Jim Crow" system new or old. The original Jim Crow regime was imposed on all Black people, regardless of wealth and status, and specifically in the former slave and Confederacy states of the U.S. South. It was dedicated to keeping Southern Blacks working under whites, sunup to sundown, primarily in cotton fields –as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, debt peons, wage-earners, prisoners, and even as flat-out slaves. The real Jim Crow sat atop a cotton production-ist regime in a time when Southern white authorities and owners were (after the collapse of Reconstruction) given the right to reconstitute Black cotton servitude" and national authorities agreed that Black lives were for the most to be restricted to the South in the interest of cheap cotton.

The mass incarceration "new Jim Crow" regime is a nationwide phenomenon with primarily Northern origins in the "law and order" campaign and related Drug War that emerged after Jim Crow's final abolition and in response to the related Black urban uprisings and youth counter-culture that arose in the 1960s. While many members of the Black professional and upper classes (which have expanded significantly since and thanks to the Civil Rights era) can tell disturbing personal stories about white bias and harassment within and beyond the criminal justice system, the "new Jim Crow" and the terrible violence associated with it (including the police killings that have received so much media attention in the last year) are directed mainly at working and lower-class Blacks. Much of the new Black elite is less likely to be arrested, incarcerated, and shot by U.S. criminal justice authorities than the worst-off sections of the white working and lower classes.

The "new Jim Crow" emerged in a time when swaths of the U.S. Black population had long been removed not just from the agricultural toil of old but also from the industrial work that all-too transiently provided employment for millions of Black Americans in the North. While southern Black chain-gang Black prisoners (slaves for all intents and purposes) under the real Jim Crow regime commonly labored under the whip in cotton fields or other miserable production realms in the South, today's nationwide Black (and white and Latino) U.S. prisoners are being warehoused, not worked, to death. Their Black lower- and working class lives matter to the U.S. state capitalist system not because of their capacity to labor in the handling of agricultural or industrial materials – cotton, sugar, tobacco, rice, animals and carcasses (on plantations or up on industrial killing floors), coal, steel, automobile frames, electrical wire, etc. – but rather as the critical raw material for the vast new social and spiritual Death Row that is the modern U.S. prison-industrial complex.

The original Jim Crow was about reconstituting and controlling a mostly unfree black cotton proletariat in the South and yoking it back to the hated crop. The "new Jim Crow" is about disciplining a deindustrialized Black lumpen proletariat and turning it into a largely inert, deindustrialized profit-source whose "value added" comes mainly from the mere fact of its captive existence. It is a curious kind of neo-slavery or "new Jim Crow": a system without any cotton or any other raw material to be worked upon by a slave or a sharecropper or a convict lease prisoner or a debt peon or a wage-earner in a field or a mine or a slaughterhouse or a mill or a factory. Reflecting the reconstitution of racial caste in an age when finance capital has overseen the dismantlement of the nation's manufacturing base, it's a system in which poor Black Americans themselves are the key raw material. This is how their Black lives matter to

authorities atop an ostensibly color-blind but still richly white-supremacist state-capitalist power structure whose mostly white gendarmes all too commonly end Black lives as punishment for an understandable “crime”: running away.

### **A Nation That Will “Thingify” Poor Blacks**

It probably makes more sense call this “the new slavery” than it does to call it “the new Jim Crow,” though neither phrase quite captures the current neoliberal reality. The question of historical or sociological nomenclature is perhaps mainly academic. Whatever we want to call it, it seems clear that this at once new and old system of race and class oppression – traceable on numerous levels to the still relevant and savagely uncompensated crime of Black chattel slavery – is not about to go away because some cops and prison guards are equipped with body cameras and sent to “diversity training” workshops any more than slavery would have disappeared if some plantation overseers had been sent to Quaker Sunday schools. In this as in other areas (e.g., the crisis of livable ecology), a whole new and different and democratic political economy is required, one that takes us beyond the amoral socio-pathology of the profits system.

“A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years,” the great democratic socialist Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in 1967 (as violence erupted across the nation’s largely jobless northern ghettos) “will ‘thingify’ them – make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.”

Had he lived into the neoliberal era of “racially disparate [racist] mass incarceration” – an era that arose on the ashes of his efforts to build a great poor people’s movement to end poverty in America – King would certainly have updated this passage to make room for “the new Jim Crow.” He would put the mass imprisonment regime criminal warehousing and branding that arose in the wake of his assassination (or execution) and the brave new militarized police state that feeds that regime (often with weapons and methods applied from the American Empire abroad) at the heart of his understanding of how America has “thingified” poor Black lives and how American has betrayed its grand promises of freedom and liberty.