How can we break the cycle of social construction?

——Reflection of *The New Jim Crow*

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Under Jim Crow laws, black Americans were relegated to a subordinate status for decades. Under the New Jim Crow, millions of them arrested for minor crimes remain marginalized and disfranchised, trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons and denies them basic rights and opportunities. This book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, demonstrated this caste-like system in the United States from the aspects of history, structure, operation, tactics, etc. and raised up this issue to us: For decades we have been fighting over the race discrimination, however we are still hundreds of miles away. What’s worse is that we have entered in a colorblind age which made us much more difficult to recognize the racial issue.

Nowadays we don’t talk about race bias or discriminations for we believe we have got the “triumph over race”, especially with the election of Barack Obama. But the truth is that the majority of black man in major urban areas are under correctional control or saddled with criminal records for life. Approximately 80-90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison are African Americans whereas the surveys showed that whites are more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than people of color. The colorblind environment made the word “race” become a taboo that everyone keeps themselves innocent and far away from it. But it didn’t solve the problem at all. According to implicit bias tests, 95% of respondents pictured a black drug dealer and more black targets were shot by mistaken in the videogames. People who took the tests were not racist from the self-report, but racial bias and discriminations still showed up unconsciously and implicitly. And the negative influence of colorblindness is making them more unconscious and implicit and making people connect their opinions with elements like low-income, high-criminal rate instead of race.

It just makes a “perfect” cycle of social construction. Firstly, the police checks and arrests more African Americans in the War of Drug because of their bias on race or because they can easily achieve their “work load” by checking blacks in poor districts. Thus, it turns out that there are more blacks behind the bar than whites. Then people got the idea that the black have higher criminal rates than the white, which leads to more checking and arresting of the black by police.

When I am reading the book, I keep thinking of how to break this cycle? We cannot tell the police to check more whites because that’s also a bias. The New Jim Crow is much more difficult to solve not only because the court would not admit the

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discrimination in mass incarceration without explicit evidence, but also because the word “criminal” makes African Americans couldn’t unite together like they did in the Jim Crow era. The scorn and contempt those labeled criminals met is not just by employers, welfare workers or housing officials, but also by their own neighbors, teachers and even members of families. After they return to their communities, they are separated mentally with the “criminal” label. They cannot get support from their own community, nor can all of blacks united together to fight for this system.

The author didn’t give her solution neither. However, she has emphasized that the movement that emerges to end mass incarceration may not meaningfully address the racial divisions and resentments behind it and what must be done is laying down the racial bribes, joining hands with people of all colors and marching for “accept all of us or none”3. She mentioned only a few of “us” is truly accepted by the politics nowadays while many still being excluded. To change the system is important, but to change the beliefs is the only way to guarantee the new system would be fair and inclusive.

I was surprised by how pessimistic Michelle Alexander see our future, as written at the end of Introduction:

“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.”4

But going through the whole book, I have to agree with her. If we couldn’t root out the deep, unconscious, implicit bias and discrimination of race in many people’s heart, the racial caste will never disappear. Although the public view of a group of people is social constructed, in the individual level one’s opinion towards others is formed at the beginning part of their lives. I believe understanding is the basis of eliminating bias, and educational integration certainly contribute to better understanding among young students of different race. Also, education is the most effective way to cultivate the next generation with fair values and ideologies, let alone to narrow achievement gap and promote social class mobility. From this point of view, maybe the solution could be found with further implementation of educational integration.