

Elizabeth Hinton. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America.* Harvard University Press 2016. 464 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674737235); \$18.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780674979826).

Is ‘war’ the right word when trying to solve the problems of poverty, crime, drugs, terror? The word comes fairly easy off politicians’ lips, and that may be part of the problem. Fortunately, Elizabeth Hinton’s predominantly historical accounting of how the War on Poverty became absorbed into the War on Crime provides the painstaking details to help answer such questions. For those who have read Michelle Alexander’s best-selling *The New Jim Crow* (2012), Hinton’s book will tread some familiar ground, though fleshing out Alexander’s text with (almost an overabundance) of historical facts, government agencies, and internal memoranda. While Hinton notes that the War on Drugs has its roots in the 1930s, her work predominantly examines the period from the (perhaps) well-meaning Kennedy administration’s attempt to tackle poverty into the nadir of the Regan years.

The main and convincing thesis is that when governments try to tackle poverty with links and connections to policing, or attempt to anticipate or thwart perceived likely crime, crime rises. Increased surveillance (without rooting out causes and supporting greater community involvement and opportunities) does not work. Instead, we see the labelling of certain kinds of kids (read: black, inner-city) as ‘at-risk’ or ‘potentially delinquent’ (222). A line is also blurred between police officers as protectors and quasi-social workers, but thereby increasing greater contact between an oppressed people and those perceived as linked to why they are oppressed. While such tactics may lower crime (mostly because more and more people are locked up or given a criminal record), it does little to restore or sustain a safe, welcoming community. Hinton thus argues that government policies of the 1960s to combat poverty supported and created the conditions that only (or primarily) law enforcement could best tackle the related problem of inner-city crimes (310). Such policies led to more surveillance, more shootings, and more jails being built—while the War on Poverty seemed to fade in the distance.

According to Hinton, one major carry-over of the success of the Civil Rights Movement was a concomitant increase in the War on Crime, which all governments, whether Democratic or Republican, viewed as a problem predominantly caused by young black males. Nixon and Reagan’s laws and policies were more draconian than Carter’s, for example, but the general outline and aims remained fairly uncontested (281). Hinton writes that Carter’s ‘punitive urban policy firmly institutionalized the carceral state in segregated urban neighborhoods’ (281). Though outside the historical window of Hinton’s book, remember that democratic President Bill Clinton, deeply supported by many black US citizens, wanted to be seen as hard on crime (to garner possible undecided or weaker Republican voters) and issued the 3 strikes you’re out and the welfare to work policies. Both have since been deemed to have horrific effects on poor and struggling black Americans in particular.

As Hinton reminds us, roughly seven months after President Lyndon Johnson banned discrimination and Jim Crow segregation in signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he ‘called the federal government’s War on Crime’ (56). The immediate reasons were the uprisings (deemed riots) due to police killings (deemed justified) of black citizens (sound familiar?) and the spreading joblessness and minimal future prospects. Causes were never and have never been sufficiently addressed by government commissions, while successful grassroots movements and organizations (like black Vietnam-Vet Tom Black’s New Pride program) become underfunded and isolated (245-247). Even the liberal and initially well-received Kerner Commission in 1968 called for a ‘50

billion federal urban police program,' though interestingly one to be paid by 'pulling out of Vietnam' (125).

President Johnson pledged his administration 'will not permit any part of America to become a jungle' (56). The racial overtones are, at the least, implicit. From Johnson's standpoint, the ending of Jim Crow officially should have pacified any black unrest or riots. When this did not happen, the War on Crime had fertile ground to grow. The *Safe Streets Act* became law in 1968 and according to Hinton, was part of 'a punitive revolution' against the gains in the Civil Rights Movement (133).

The growth in incarceration and criminalization of black citizens, as Michelle Alexander argues, is a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, so that with the exponential rise of prisons, and the higher proportion of black men who fill them, it became business as usual, creating a 'new caste,' in her language. What slavery and lynching had once 'accomplished' is now provided through prisons (and other legal means like rezoning voting districts or setbacks in legislation like the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Economically, the carceral business expanded, filling state coffers. The War on Crime similarly benefitted, as federal funding militarized urban police forces (113) and the War on Drugs was used to justify bloated police budgets. Throughout these 'wars,' crime sometimes appreciably lowered, but the causes remain debateable.

As a child in New York in the 70s and early 80s, I still remember the fear my parents had when we were lost in Manhattan. My dad was raised in Brooklyn (Bay Ridge) and my mother, Queens (Astoria), but having moved to Long Island, subways and Central Park were no-go areas. Their fears, though, were not ungrounded. Flash-forward to 2002 when I was in an unfamiliar (and once deemed dangerous) area of Brooklyn. I asked a police officer whether it was 'safe.' He laughed: 'This is New York: everywhere is safe now!' Such was only a part-truth, but a truth nonetheless. The question, again, was why? Giuliani and others praised their stop-and-frisk techniques and the broken windows theory. Structural and historical causes remained unanswered, as did the greater aim for community and liveability, exacerbated by exorbitant rents and gentrification. Many of the poor were moved out, though lower crime statistics were touted as gains for all. Subsequent rise in crimes in some outer suburbs remain unaddressed.

The story has also gotten more complicated. In *Locking Up Our Own* (2017), James Forman Jr. traces many leaders in the African American communities in the 1970s and 1980s who supported the harsher criminalization of drugs as violence in the inner-city had to stop. David Cole in *The New York Review of Books* and Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic* both remind us that even if we released drug offenders from prison, the US would still remain with the most citizens locked-up of any country.

Hinton's book obviously has a compelling and important message, though its clunky style, with a surfeit of details and government acronyms, may turn away many otherwise interested readers from reading cover-to-cover. Here is a representative sentence: 'To lead the National Institute of Justice, established by the *Safe Streets Act* as the research division of the LEAA, Nixon appointed Henry S. Ruth Jr., the former assistant director of the Crime Commission and a University of Pennsylvania law professor' (145). There is a lot of information here, but to what end? The work could have used more lively and engrossing narrative arcs; missed opportunities were often evident, especially with material like the interesting success of New Pride or the controversial 'Operation Sting,' involving US officers and agents pretending to be 'Mafia' characters to lure out and catch black criminals and drug dealers in Washington DC in 1976. The wars, though, continue.

Ultimately, the problem with war imagery and metaphors for domestic policy (especially when they become literal) is a failure always to address root causes. All these wars America are

raging are also wars within, built into the fabric, structure, and white-washed history which many of my fellow Americans are taught, work within, and support. Wars are often projections of ourselves onto some other, and even when a war may be just, rarely does an assessment examine how we (even in some small way) may have contributed to its reality. A government riddled with a history of racism and classism is hardly in a position to root out the societal and cultural suffering it has unleashed—at least without the deep, unvarnished reckoning that a James Baldwin, or more recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates, justly demand.

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