

DuVernay, Ava (2016) 13th a documentary film Netflix <https://www.netflix.com> 13th 80091741

I highly recommend the film, as a way to integrate one's understanding of history along racial lines from the time of slavery to the present. The movie spells out the various iterations of the oppression of African- Americans in economic, political, social, and legislative terms.

"13th" delves into the intersection of race, justice, and mass incarceration of black men in the United States. After slavery was "abolished," post-Civil War racist legislation criminalized minor behaviors. When fines could not be paid by the black men, they were sentenced to forced labor. "Convict leasing" became the new form of institutionalized slavery, leading to an economic incentive to criminalize more behavior. At the turn of the century and for decades after, lynching of blacks by white mobs became commonplace. Jim Crow legislation legalized segregation and the suppression of an entire minority.

I learned a tremendous amount about the intricacies of the late 20th century "war on drugs," which was essentially a war on poor, desperate people, economically marginalized and then imprisoned for long terms for possession of marijuana as their only crime. Despite gradually falling crime statistics through the later 1900's, the mass incarceration of predominantly black men grew, especially as private prisons expanded and there were, once again, economic incentives to criminalize minor infractions.

I had not known much about ALEC before watching this film, which is another reason to recommend it strongly. ALEC stands for the American Legislative Exchange Council and is backed by many big corporations that support federal legislators in writing laws to feed the prison system and keep it a thriving business. Hispanics are also deeply affected in this demonization of the minority poor. Images of these men, along with African-Americans as dangerous, beastly threats to society have prevailed in the media. The use of cellphone videos, demonstrating police prejudice and brutality in minority neighborhoods, have not been able to win convictions of police misconduct, yet another iteration of oppression.

The film has won multiple awards, including Best Documentary Feature at the Academy Awards. It spotlights knowledgeable spokesman from both sides: Van Jones, Angela Davis, Newt Gingrich, Bryan Stevenson, Cory Booker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., etc.

This film teaches in detail the long history of oppression for minorities. It has the power to sensitize others, to the fury, hopelessness, and other emotions emerging from a vastly different life experience.

Robin Good, Ph.D., CGP, FAGPA