



13th Group Discussion Guide

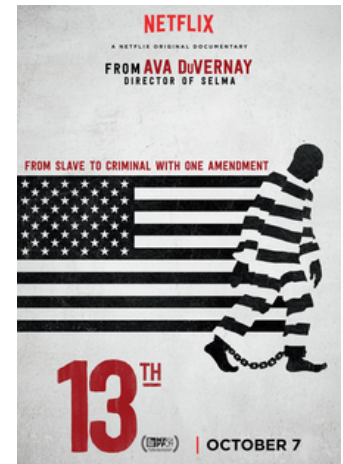
Dive into this month's *Conscious Conversation* with these questions about Ava DuVernay's documentary.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your group's discussion of *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Ava DuVernay's powerful documentary *13th* introduces the words of the thirteenth amendment of the United States Constitution: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." *13th* argues that although slavery was ostensibly abolished in 1865, this clause of the thirteenth amendment legally embedded and allowed a pernicious form of enslavement into American institutions. This loophole has since been wielded as a devastating political tool in the form of mass incarceration and criminalization.



13th is a sweeping historical survey that directly links slavery to today's prison-industrial complex. The film unpacks how the amendment loophole was exploited immediately following the Civil War, as African Americans were arrested en masse for extremely minor crimes in order to ensure that the economic system of free labor in the South could, in effect, remain intact. Culturally, this era also saw the beginning of a "mythology of black criminality" that persists to this day.

Featuring a wide range of interviewees including civil rights activist Angela Davis, "The New Jim Crow" author Michelle Alexander, regular New Yorker reporter and professor Jelani Cobb, social justice author and attorney Van Jones, and many more, *13th* moves from the media-induced criminalization of Black persons to the corporate privatization of prisons with eloquence, poise, and a cavalcade of statistics to back up its thesis on the dehumanization of Black people in America.

While sobering in its historical recontextualization of race in America, DuVernay's film remains hopeful in acknowledging her fellow African Americans' diligence and grace in their fight for equality under intolerable conditions. No one knows how bright or dark the future of America will be, but as Jones vigilantly states, "It will be."



13th Discussion Topics

1. How did you feel after viewing *13th*? Did you feel helpless, inspired, stirred to action, or a combination of all three? Do you think the message of the film was ultimately hopeful? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever had to confront direct or systemic racism in your life? If so, how were you affected?
3. Do you ever reflect upon the systematic privileges you may or may not experience because of race, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, physical/mental abilities, etc.?
4. This documentary emphasizes that the current crisis of mass incarceration is directly tied to our country's legacy and history of slavery. By showing how slavery shifted to convict leasing, to Jim Crow segregation, to the war on drugs, *13th* argues that "systems of oppression are durable and they often reinvent themselves." As Angela Davis stated in the film, "Historically, when one looks at efforts to create reform, they inevitable lead to more repression." What are ways we can work to end this cycle? What do you think are some of the factors that allowed this system of racial control to simply evolve and replicate itself for the past 150 years?
5. How did this film shape your understanding of the prison system? Was there a particular case or series that altered or changed any of your pre-existing views?
6. How do you think media and popular culture representations of Black Americans, particularly of Black men, have contributed to a dangerous climate of white fear and anxiety? (Think back to the way George Zimmerman was heard describing Trayvon Martin, or the media frenzy around the Central Park Five that resulted in their wrongful imprisonment.) How can we challenge these instances of racism and dehumanization?
7. How much did you know about the war on drugs and war on crime before watching this film? Were you surprised to learn about the racial underpinnings of these legislative policies, and the active role of the state in criminalizing and targeting communities of color?
8. How can you be more vigilant against institutional racism? Thinking about your community, what kinds of changes would you like to see?

AFTER YOUR CONVERSATION

We would love to hear about your conversation. If you would like to share any of your discussion notes, comments or photos with Legacy Foundation, please send them to mfishback@legacyfdn.org