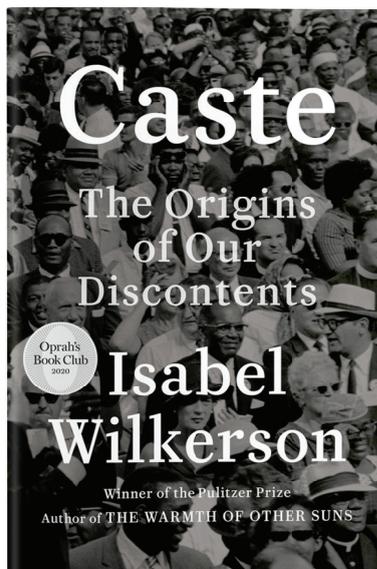


Title: *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

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Isabel Wilkerson, in her latest book *Caste: The origins of our discontents*, is not the first to draw comparisons between the norms and rules that regulated and perpetuated exclusion of Dalits in Hinduism and of enslaved African Americans and their descendants. Nor is *Caste* the first to examine the philosophy, systems, and regulations that legitimized the dehumanization and murder of Jews and others in the shorter lived Third Reich.

The audience for this book is clearly the citizenry of the United States—particularly white Americans, but it has lessons for all humans who are appalled by the inhumanities we as humans can wreak on our peers. Why does this happen, why does it persist, and what can we, should we, be doing? Wilkerson wants white Americans to confront, not to be silent on, these issues. She wants us to understand, at a deep level, how we benefit from our upper caste status in large ways yes, but also in the subtle ways of which we are not aware. The confrontation she urges holds true for upper caste Hindus, and for any human living amidst antisemitism or other embedded exclusion.

The timing of the publication of *Caste* brings a new urgency to the examination of these cruelties. *Caste's* release coincides with three larger trends. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India has fostered a surge of Hindu nationalism and accompanying violence. Donald Trump's presidency has reignited white supremacist activism and legitimized antisemitism, as we have seen in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and across the U.S. Neo-Nazis are re-emerging in Germany, despite the efforts, which Wilkerson describes, to

address the horrors of the holocaust. This moment calls for a renewed examination of why the cruelties exacted by historical exclusion of and violence against Dalits, African Americans, and Jews continues, even as national laws have outlawed caste and exclusion and as the world has committed to international standards of human rights.

To engage with this book requires the reader to grapple with and accept the concept of *caste* as the analytical framework and to understand the distinctive difference between caste and race. Wilkerson suggests that while concepts of racism and caste may overlap, caste is a more useful way of understanding the persistent exclusion and maltreatment of African Americans (and of Dalits and Jews). Caste helps to explain what is different and why exclusion persists even after discrimination is outlawed and no longer tolerated by the state.

The modern-day version of easily deniable racism may be able to cloak the invisible structure that created and maintains hierarchy and inequality. But caste does not allow us to ignore structure. Caste *is* structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like. Caste is a living breathing entity...To achieve a truly egalitarian world requires looking deeper than what we think we see.(69-70)

Caste, she asserts, is embedded--like DNA. We can address, through law and its enforcement, discrimination in hiring, lending, and housing, voting suppression, lynching, or segregation. As societies we cannot legislate away caste. It is here in our culture, our norms and our unacknowledged ways of behaving.

The institution of slavery is not unique to the United States. It existed among the ancients, in Mesopotamia, in ancient Greece and Rome, in Africa, and it continues to exist today in what the International Organization on Migration considers modern forms of slavery. So, what is it, if anything, that makes enslavement, Jim Crow practices, and continuing exclusion of African Americans different? Isn't the problem in the U.S. a problem of racism, full stop? Wilkerson says 'no'. It is about power. Racism may be defined

...as the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism, like sexism, as primarily the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power, as men have power over women, whites over people of color, and the dominant over the subordinate. (68)

Wilkerson reminds us that racism has come to mean for many 'overt and declared hatred of a person or group because of the race ascribed to them'. Few today will admit to being racist. A prominent example of this is President Donald Trump who has periodically and publicly claimed: 'I am the least racist person there is.' 'I don't have a racist bone in my body.' At the same time, he has encouraged white nationalists and white supremacists in remarks and actions throughout his career. He is attempting to punish the state of California for introducing curriculum changes that explore the history of enslavement; he has condemned anti-bias training as racist and he has taken actions to resurrect barriers to voting by African Americans. Discussing racism has become difficult in American society. This past year a New York Times article noted differences between textbooks published for school systems in the state of California as opposed to those in Texas. The textbooks offer very different histories of enslavement or about the treatment of indigenous peoples. Children in California and Texas are presented with different sets of 'facts.' Americans cannot have a national dialogue on racism. In a debate prior to the 2020 November election, Republican candidate vice

president Mike Pence dismissed the concepts of implicit bias and of systemic racism in police forces. The Trump Department of Justice instituted a law suit against Yale University, charging that admission procedures aimed at diversity penalize Asian and white students. As I wrote this review, I was interrupted by a telephone call from a police group asking me to donate money to support the police and help guarantee police safety. The caller and his supervisor were not willing to talk about the unjustified deaths of multiple African Americans at the hands of police, increasing in number over the past four years. Nor were they willing to engage in a 'political discussion' about the fear that African-Americans have of the police.

Wilkerson uses a large segment of her book to describe what she calls the Eight Pillars of Caste.

This is where the power of caste as an analytical concept emerges. Wilkerson is an able story teller and the stories she tells here make concrete the ways in which caste entrenches attitudes and behaviors in structures and processes so that maintaining the dominance of whites (or the upper castes) is nearly invisible and seamless. She ably distinguishes among the different levels of caste in the U.S.—just as there are different levels of castes in India that exclude only the Dalits. Some whites may be at the top of the dominant caste in the U.S. because of money, education or heritage, but the dominant caste also includes less educated and less wealthy whites and Asians, and it creates space for Latinx. She describes the perverse effects of being part of the dominant caste even as you do not enjoy the benefits of those at the very top. This helps to explain why some at the bottom of the dominant caste oppose progressive legislation such as funding education, reforming regressive tax systems, or providing health insurance for all. Preserving their caste position over the long run trumps getting near-term economic benefits.

Her stories are powerful because they move reality from the theoretical to the personal, human level. Wilkerson clearly believes that these stories are important for Americans; stories comparing South Asian and American caste systems can help Americans dig deep to understand the complexity of America's sad history of white power and privilege.

The creation and maintenance of caste systems is embedded in religion and justified by religion (Pillar One). In the Hindu origin stories, Brahma, the 'grandfather of all worlds' ordained the four Hindu castes or *Varnas*, starting with Brahmins as the highest caste. Unmentioned in the description of the *Varnas* were the lowest, or untouchables, who were living out the *karma* of their past. They were outside the caste system. The American origin story harks back to Noah and his son the accursed Ham, whose son Canaan was consigned to be the lowest of slaves (and assumed subsequently to be black). Americans enslaved were sons of Ham. Wilkerson quotes Thomas R. R. Cobb, a confederate defender of slavery, who argued that God created Africans as physically and mentally suited to 'the degraded position they were destined to occupy.' Thus, God takes responsibility for this subordination and abuse of the enslaved; humans of the dominant caste don't need to concern themselves.

Another Pillar, the seventh, is a painful to read set of stories of how terror and cruelty have been used and are used to enforce caste strictures and to exert control. Dalits in India and Jews in the Third Reich have been and were at the mercy of the dominant caste, subjected to terror to keep them in their subordinate position. The same has been true in the U.S. In the antebellum South, excessive whipping might be used as punishment for an enslaved person whose performance was seen as lagging,

or who was seen as insufficiently insubordinate. Ultimately cruelty was a device to terrorize the lowest caste—African Americans. Remember that for much of the antebellum period, the Black population (enslaved persons) in the South exceeded that of whites, often by a large margin. Fearing for their security, whites relied on cruelty and terror as the tools to keep enslaved populations in place. Terrorism was carried out via lynching during the later Jim Crow period. Lynching was much more than a simple hanging but included various forms of torture, and was often carried out in front of large crowds. Sometimes schools were closed so that children could attend. One needs to understand the impact of terror on the lowest or out-caste people, but also the effect these lynching spectacles had on members of the dominant caste: desensitization to violence and dehumanization of the lower caste.

Reading *Caste* as a white American is painful, but then I think about how painful it must be for African Americans, descendants of enslaved people who continue to experience the residual consequences of Jim Crow and casteism. Wilkerson wants white Americans to confront the casteism/racism that she says is in their DNA. It will be painful she knows. Identifying, understanding, and owning America's original sin is the first step toward resolving the legacies of 400 years of enslavement, terrorization, and exclusion. Confronting this history comes at a time when the United States approaches a 'demographic inversion.' In 2042 people of color are expected to outnumber people of the dominant white caste in the U.S.

Wilkerson is an optimist: 'To imagine an end to caste in America, we need only look at the history of Germany. It is living proof that if a caste system—the twelve-year reign of the Nazis—can be created, it can be dismantled' (383). She draws on her experiences in Berlin, which today is filled with monuments, educational displays, and other artefacts that testify to the German attempt to reckon with its past. Antisemitism in the Third Reich was different in its details from the racism in the U.S., but they are similar in terms of their structure and cultural embeddedness. We know that now antisemitism and antisemitic violence are on the rise in Germany. Some analysts suggest that much of this antisemitism originates in the East, where the previous communist government failed to confront the evils of the Third Reich and where demonizing Jews remained acceptable. One lesson one can take from this disparity between West and East Germany is that leadership matters. Conrad Adenauer, Willi Brandt, and others (even if imperfectly at times) provided leadership over years in enabling Germans to confront the evils perpetuated by leaders and citizens in the Third Reich. Leadership needs to continue and it may not be enough.

Ultimately, change relies on individual actions, actions of courage. Wilkerson argues that confronting the true nature of casteism is an awakening. One may be born to a dominant caste but one does not have to dominate. It is a choice. 'The challenge has long been that many in the dominant caste, who are in a better position to fix caste inequity, have often been the least likely to want to' (380). Deconstructing casteism and its systems may first mean that the dominant caste needs to give up its privilege. That may be a difficult sacrifice. In times of challenge, Americans have been capable of great change. In the thought often attributed to Winston Churchill, 'Americans will do the right thing, after they have tried everything else'. That time is now.