

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

By Isabel Wilkerson

This is a scholarly read, but the author has chosen to present much of it as a series of documented stories about individual people, rather than a presentation of statistics. As such, it is very easily read and full of relate-able human situations. However, reading it is not for the faint-hearted - there is simply no running away from the stories the author portrays, about herself and many others.

The point of the book is rather simple; our European ancestors broke away from a class society and wanted to set up something different here. What they ultimately chose was a caste system based on a new term created in America to delineate each cast - **race** (*the division of humans based on their appearance*). There are no "black" people in Africa; that term was exported to the world by America.

A cast system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.

Throughout human history, three caste systems have stood out: Nazi Germany, the millennia-long cast system of India, and the race-based caste pyramid in the United States. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the generations.

Caste is about power - which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources - which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence - who is accorded these and who is not.

Before there was a United States of America, there was the cast system born in colonial Virginia. At first religion, not the concept of race, defined the status of people in the colonies - European Protestants, then indigenous people, then Africans. It was a decades-long sharpening of lines, refined as the colonists had decisions to make. When Africans began to convert to Christianity, they posed a challenge, and the concept of race was created to maintain the cast system divisions.

Americans are loath to talk about enslavement precisely because it goes against our perception of our country as a just and enlightened nation. This form of slavery was created by and for the benefit of the elites of the dominant class - white European Protestant males who owned land - and it created a base class (blacks) that all other classes could look down upon. The colonists created "an extreme form of slavery that had existed nowhere else in the world." This slavery so perverted the balance of power that it made the degradation of the subordinate caste seem normal and righteous. Every "white" could have someone below them in the social order, regardless how ignorant or destitute they were. This is also why whites support issues that are seemingly not in their best interests in today's world.

African-Americans as a group will not have been free for as long as they have been enslaved until the year 2111. Free here means the official end of slavery in the United States at the end of the Civil War.

The people who descended from Africans became the unifying foil in solidifying the caste system. Each new immigrant class created a new-sub caste to be inserted somewhere above the Africans, and each of these new sub castes had to culturally separate themselves from this lowest caste - prove their worth by further demeaning the African caste.

Racism is a universally hated word and people will do anything to avoid talking about it or admit they have anything to do with it. Scientific study of racism becomes impossible, precisely because people cannot discuss it with any objectivity. The concept of caste, however, predates the notion of race and has survived the era of formal, state-sponsored racism that had long been practiced in mainstream American society.

The definition of caste is structure and ranking - not a personal animus toward any individual - making scientific discussion and study much more approachable. Thus, in discussing and analyzing the current social situation in America, concentrating on caste is a much more productive way to maintain some objectivity.

Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy. Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It has been around so long it looks like the natural order of things.

Casteism is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, to elevate yourself above others, or keep others beneath you. This is what is going on in America at this time and it is far more insidious than simple racism.

The eight pillars of caste (organizing principles inherent in any caste system):

1. **Divine Will and the Laws of Nature:** The US and India would become the oldest and largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of sacred texts of their respective cultures. In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.
2. **Heritability:** You were born to a certain caste and remained in that caste for the rest of your days.
3. **Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating:** Becomes the primary means of keeping resources and affinity within each tier of the caste system; making it less likely that someone in a dominant caste will have a personal stake in the happiness, fulfillment, or well-being of anyone deemed beneath them.
4. **Purity versus Pollution:** Over the centuries, the dominant caste has taken extreme measures to protect its sanctity from the perceived taint of the lower classes. As recently as 1983 the state of Louisiana had a law on the books stating that a person with “one-thirty-second Negro blood” was considered black.
5. **Occupational Hierarchy: The Mudsill:** When a house is being built, the single most important piece of the framework is the first wood beam hammered into place to anchor the foundation - the mudsill - as it bears the weight of the entire structure above it. Any caste system must insure the stability of the lowest class, as the menial work done is the foundation upon which all other work must be built.
6. **Dehumanization and Stigma:** It is harder to dehumanize a single individual, than to dehumanize a group. By dehumanizing a group, however, you have dehumanized any single person within that group. Dehumanization distances not only the out-group from the in-group, but those in the in-group from their own humanity. A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.
7. **Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control:** The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined. In the New World, few living creatures were, as a class of beings, subjected to the level of brute physical assault as a feature of their daily lives for as many centuries as were the subjects of American slavery.
8. **Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority:** Beneath each pillar of caste was the presumption and continual reminder of the inborn superiority of the dominant caste and the inherent inferiority of the subordinate. In America, the South Carolina Negro Code of 1735 went so far as to specify the fabrics enslaved black people were permitted to wear, forbidding any that might be seen as above their station. For much of the time that African-Americans have been in this land, they have had to find ways to stay alive in a structure that required total submission, a close reading of their ‘betters’, and the performance of that submission in order to avoid savage punishment.

In 1944 a 16 year old African-American girl won a student essay contest asking what would be the best punishment to give to Adolph Hitler. Her answer: “Put him in a black skin and let him live the rest of his life in America.”

Most of the remainder of the book is various stories about the breadth of the caste system’s reach. The variety of these stories make it very difficult for any reader to deny the impact the caste system has had not only on African-Americans, but all the other castes and sub castes in America as well. The cost has been humongous.

Of particular interest is Part Six: Backlash. This section is devoted to describing the impact of the greatest departure from the script of the American caste system - the election of an African-American to the highest office in the land. See the book *White Rage* for a review of the backlash each advancement in African-American rights has resulted in.