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Reviews

The American Caste System

- Reviews section -

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The brilliant physicist and Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein left Germany in December 1932, one month before Adolph Hitler took power. In the United States he was astonished to see the way African Americans were treated.

He knew discrimination as a Jew, no matter his intelligence and accomplishments, in Germany and Europe. Jews under Nazi rule were living under a manufactured caste system that justified their mistreatment and eventual near extermination.

The United States has never had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to discuss the history of caste, racism and national oppression of Black people. The mass awakening that began with the uprising against police violence and terror following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, marks another opportunity to do so.

The power of that Black-led uprising played a central role in defeating President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, and electing Kamala Harris, the first Black, South Asian woman to the vice presidency.

Isabel Wilkerson's new book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, describes the "American caste system" forged over 400 years. While others have written about the unique American caste system (notably Oliver Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race* [1948]), she gives a well-documented analysis and timely presentation.

In 1994, Wilkerson was the Chicago bureau chief of *The New York Times*. She became the first woman of African-American heritage to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism. In 2011 she wrote the nonfiction best seller, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, winning numerous awards.

A Social Construction

Wilkerson explains the caste system as the foundation where institutional racism sits. While she does not discuss how Blacks from many African tribes, languages and cultures became an oppressed nationality, the failure to end that system is why institutional racism is so strong and prevalent.

She says that what occurred — white supremacy — was not inevitable. Yet it is easy to understand why and how it happened: The vast wealth created for the white settlers who slaughtered Indigenous peoples and owned slaves made it easy for them and their descendants to treat Africans and their children so harshly.

George Washington, the first president, owned 300 slaves through his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis Washington and chased down any who tried to escape.

Caste describes how that second-class status of African Americans has remained, even with the growth of a vibrant Black middle class. The class gap between haves and have-nots has widened within the oppressed nationality, even as the wealth gap between African Americans and the dominant "white caste" has grown.

Wilkerson looks comparatively at the oldest caste system in India, the American caste system and the caste system

created under Nazi Germany.

The Nazis, she points out, studied the extreme laws and discrimination in the former slaveholding South — Jim Crow legal segregation. The Nazis were both impressed and amazed how a modern “democracy” could justify such a legal system and still be called a democratic country.

In India, the historic caste system was formally banned in the new constitution after independence from the United Kingdom in 1947. Yet the caste system is still alive, and Dalits (then known as “Untouchables”) are still looked down upon by higher castes.

African Americans still suffer from institutional racism more than 50 years after the civil rights revolution returned the right to vote that had existed under federal protection for twelve years after the Civil War.

Caste in Context

Wilkerson defines the caste system as a social construction:

“A caste 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 on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distanced from one another and in their assigned places.”

She goes on to explain how caste and race are connected:

“Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division. If we have been trained to see humans in the language of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children, as when learning our mother tongue. Caste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only to how we speak, but how we process information, the automatic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it.” (17)

She further adds:

“Race in the United States is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place.” (18)

These themes are repeated with examples throughout the book.

Wilkerson is describing the origin of the special oppression and exploitation of African Americans. While the Bible and other holy texts have been used to justify it, the bottom line is that the skin color of slaves and former slaves was used to justify the dominant (whites) and inferior castes (Blacks).

By extension, other groups or subcastes were in relationship to these two dominant castes. Indigenous peoples were unique since the white settlers sought to exterminate and later forced them into “reservations” on the least habitable

lands.

The post-Civil War citizenship Amendments did not apply to the original tribes. Indigenous people did not gain formal U.S. citizenship until 1924.

Connections Between Caste Systems

A feature of Wilkerson's study is how similar various caste systems are. She tells the story of Martin Luther King, Jr. in his trip to India in the winter of 1959. King and his wife Coretta went to India, as he said, not as tourists but as pilgrims.

India was the home of Mahatma Gandhi, the recognized spiritual leader and practitioner of the strategy of "nonviolence" around the world.

King arrived in Mumbai (then known as Bombay), invited by the Indian government. He wanted to see the Untouchables (Dalits), who were treated historically as bad if not worse than Black Americans.

He went to the southern state of Kerala and visited a high school where the students were from Dalit families. The school principal gave an introduction that surprised King: "Young people, I like to present to you a fellow untouchable from the United States of America."

Wilkerson writes, "King was floored. He did not see the connection." She continues: "For a moment," he later wrote, "I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable."

After further thought comparing the oppression of Blacks and Untouchables, King said, "Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States is an untouchable." (Chapter Three, *An American Untouchable*)

Wilkerson observes how the caste system still impacts India. Higher castes still see themselves by their words and attitudes as superior to Dalits and lower castes. She attended conferences of Indian scholars where she could identify upper castes and Dalits even if all had similar academic credentials.

The Indian constitution written after independence, banning discrimination on the basis of caste, states that all Indians are equal. Yet the social and economic inequalities remain despite "affirmative action" laws aimed at leveling the playing field.

In the United States the constitution was amended after the Civil War to provide former slaves citizenship. For a decade that brought real change, including the election of the first Blacks to public office including to the Senate and Congress. All were in former slave states.

Yet in 1877 under the "Great Compromise," Union troops left the South. Quickly, on the ground in the former Confederate states, the citizenship rights for Blacks were gutted violently and then overturned.

Blacks had been seen as inferior and a subordinate caste since 1619. Under Jim Crow era segregation these caste and racial divisions were reinforced. The education or economic status of a Black person mattered little.

Class differences exist. But that's within each caste group. Whites, including union and nonunion working-class whites, see themselves primarily first as part of the dominant white group and have rarely seen Blacks as allies on non-economic issues.

Wilkerson provides numerous examples, including current ones, where this attitude persists.

Nazi Germany's Caste System

Wilkerson discusses a third caste system — Nazi Germany for 12 years until Hitler's defeat and death in World War II.

In Chapter Eight, "The Nazis and the Acceleration of Caste," Wilkerson discusses how a modern creation of caste was accelerated in Germany.

The Nazi hierarchy decided early in its rule to legally and otherwise isolate German Jews from "Aryan" Germans. They studied the Jim Crow South and its method of domination and terror over Blacks. The Nuremberg meeting was held in 1934 to turn anti-Semitic ideology into new laws.

Wilkerson explains:

"The Nazis needed no outsiders to plant the seeds of hatred within them. But in the early years of the regime, when they still had a stake in the appearance of legitimacy and the hope of foreign investment, they were seeking legal prototypes for the caste system they were building. They were looking to move quickly with their plans for racial separation and purity and knew that the United States was centuries ahead of them with its anti-miscegenation statues and race-based immigration bans."

The rapidity of entrenching the dominant caste system in Nazi Germany was similar to what occurred after the U.S. Civil War. Legal rights were taken away through laws and violence. "Ordinary" citizens accepted this violence and terror directed at the lower caste.

In Germany, it didn't matter that Jews had been co-workers and neighbors. Just as white Americans cheered lynchings, these ordinary Germans looked the other way as Hitler exterminated Jews.

Caste and National Oppression

Why is the caste system important to understand? As all three examples Wilkerson cites show, racist ideology was enlisted to justify their actions. While caste and race are social constructions and not identical, the caste system is essential to see how the dominant group rules.

The caste system allowed new immigrants from Europe, for example, to quickly learn that their future was tied to the dominant caste, not the old relationship of groups in Europe. Thus, Irish who were seen as less than English soon recognized it was okay to be "white Americans" and look down on Blacks and other nonwhites.

Caste explains that the defeat of Radical Reconstruction in 1877 ended the possibility of a new “American colorblind nation.” Wilkerson clearly explains that the caste system is the foundation, and racism is the political justification. That’s how, by the 20th century, Blacks became an inferior “racial” group.

The oppressed Black nationality was forged in the period following Reconstruction’s defeat. The radical concept of the “right to self-determination,” emerging in 19th century Europe, also applies to African Americans: To end the inferior caste and race system means that the right to form an independent country within the boundary of the territory of the United States may be required.

Wilkerson does not discuss the national question in this book but her analysis of the origin of institutional racism opens the door to understanding a permanent solution to national oppression.

Persistent Oppression

In the 21st century caste, race and national oppression remain strong. Trumpism could not exist without the support of “ordinary whites” who don’t face cop violence as a norm or race-based financial discrimination.

There is no level playing field for Blacks and whites. It is why the issue of reparations continues to be raised by African Americans.

A Washington Post feature discussed two communities — one African American, one white — both composed of middle-class professionals with decent-paying jobs. But there was one major difference.

As explained in an October 23 article by personal finance columnist Michelle Singletary, “Being Black lowers the value of my home: The legacy of redlining.”

“If I picked up my home and moved it 20 miles west to a White neighborhood, it would be worth much more.”

How much? Her community average home value is \$300,000 versus \$700,000 for the white-owned homes.

Wilkerson explains how decades of racist housing policies, including the New Deal of the 1930s, excluded African Americans. Due to housing segregation, the cheap GI loans in the 1950s also kept Blacks on the margins. African Americans have been denied massive potential wealth, as the Post article shows.

The exception is when Blacks can move into white suburbs as a minority and do not become a majority. Realtors can then still sell the homes at standard “white” market value.

The wealth gap between Black families actually grew wider from 1968 to 2020. Working-class Black families are worse off. Wilkerson says these facts are connected to the inequities of the institutionalized caste system.

Revolutionary socialists have always argued that to end caste and racial discrimination means the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a democratic socialist society. Since the late 1960s with demographic changes, hope for an end to institutional racism has ebbed up and down. But the power of white nationalism based on the ideology of white supremacy is entrenched.

The American Caste System

The most significant fact of the 2020 presidential election is that 2016 was not an aberration. A large majority of “ordinary whites” backed Trump again in the 2020 election. There is a racial gender gap too, as a vast majority of women of color voted for Joseph Biden while 56% of white women went for Trump.

Hatred and fear of the “others” is Trumpism’s core strategy. Wilkerson’s discussion of caste makes clear why these attitudes remain prevalent — and why it is so difficult to overcome and end them in the bourgeois democracy founded by slave holders.

In her “Epilogue A World Without Caste,” Wilkerson indicates a possible future:

“And yet, somehow, there are the rare people, like Einstein, who seem immune to the toxins of caste in the air we breathe, who manage to transcend what most people are susceptible to. From the abolitionists who risked personal ruin to end slavery to the white civil rights workers who gave their lives to help end Jim Crow and the political leaders who outlawed it, these all-too-rare people are a testament to the human spirit, that humans can break free of the hierarchy’s hold on them.

“These are people of personal courage and conviction, secure within themselves, willing to break convention, not reliant on the approval of others for their sense of self, people of deep and abiding empathy and compassion. They are what many of us might wish to be but not nearly enough of us are. Perhaps, once awakened, more of us will be.”
(384)

Caste and her first book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, are first rate. They should be taught in schools and universities.

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