



Caste is the title of a book written by Isabel Wilkerson and published in April 2020. I intend to tell you some of what she says, and not give you a book review, except for two points:

1-the facts she presents flow like a novel, not like the more structured way of even my favorite non-fiction writers, and
2- the one difficulty I find in the book is that, because black, Native American, and often Chinese people (that is colored people) are relegated to the lowest caste in America, it is sometimes difficult to keep discussions of caste separate from color, although Wilkerson works hard to do so.

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WHAT DOES THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK MEAN?

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 other immutable traits, traits that 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, distinct from one another and in their assigned places. (p.17)

And, in the American caste system, the sign of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America, race is the primary tool for caste. (p.18)

But Wilkerson points out: Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. Race is what we can see. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial. Whoever fit the definition of white, at whatever point in history, was granted the legal rights and privileges of the dominate class. (P.19)

WHAT CASTE SYSTEMS DOES WILKERSON TALK ABOUT?

Wilkerson tells us that there are caste systems throughout the world, but she focuses on the caste systems in India and the United States, and what was the caste system in Nazi Germany. Some of the details in the Indian caste system that she describes are:

- in India, it is people's surnames that may most readily convey what caste a person is in; (p76)
- the Indian caste system is part of the Hindu religion and is an elaborate network of thousands of subcastes; the four main varnas are, starting from the top—the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and the excluded **fourth**, known as the Untouchables or Dalits; (p.76)
- Dalits must act in a subservient manner toward higher castes,
- and in some places in rural India, Dalits cannot walk on the same streets as Brahmins; (p.291)
- and Dalits who have PhDs, and are associated with prestigious universities, still retain their caste and often find it difficult to associate with people in higher castes. (p.289).
- Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians are not in the caste system; (p.76)

WHAT DOES SHE SAY ABOUT THE NAZI CASTE SYSTEM?

I was shocked to read that the Nazis learned from our caste system. Here are some examples:

- the 1934 meeting of men debating how to turn the Nazi ideology into law (what later became the Nuremberg laws) put the United States, and what they could learn from it, as the first item on their agenda; (p. 78)

- A racial slur that the Nazis adopted in their campaign to dehumanize Jews and other non-Aryans—the word *Undermensch*, meaning sub-human—came to them from a New England geneticist who wrote about white supremacy and later sat in on Nazi sterilization trials; (p. 80)
- Hitler praised the United States’ near-genocide of Native Americans, and the exiling to reservations of those who had survived; (p. 81)
- in their search for prototypes of white-dominated countries, the Nazis’ overwhelming interest was in the classic example of the United States; (p. 82)
- the Nazis wondered how the United States had managed to turn its racial hierarchy into rigid law, yet retain such a sterling reputation; (p. 83)
- a young Nazi tasked with compiling a table of US race laws was confounded by the lengths to which America went to segregate its population—the segregation into different schools for white and black children, the requirement of most states that race be given on birth certificates, and many states segregating waiting rooms, train cars, street cars, buses, prisons, jails; (p. 84)
- Nazi leaders were fascinated with America’s habit of assigning humans to categories by fractions of perceived ancestry; (p. 85 or 86)
- Nazis learned that, in their miscegenation laws, Texas and North Carolina had an “association clause” in their marriage bans that said that an ambiguous person would be counted in the disfavored group (black) if they had been married to, or had been known to associate with people in the disfavored group, and thus Hitler came up with the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor which defined someone who had three Jewish grandparents as a Jew and banned marriage and intercourse outside of marriage between Jews and Germans. (p. 88)

But, because they found it too harsh, the Nazis did not include in their Nuremberg Laws, the one drop of blood defining race that they found in the United States. (p. 88)

WHAT ARE THE EIGHT PILLARS OF CASTE THAT WILKERSON DESCRIBES?

1. divine will and the laws of nature-Indians ascribed their caste system to the gods; many American slave holders and later racists ascribed their position of dominance to God (pp. 101-102)
2. heritability-you were born into a certain caste and remained in it for the rest of your life (p. 105)
3. endogamy-enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage outside of one's caste, forbidding sexual relations and even the appearance of romantic interests (p. 109) [I add, however, that this did not prevent white slave holders from raping their black slaves; nor did it prohibit Thomas Jefferson's long affair with his slave Sarah Hemming]
4. purity vs pollution-which retains the supposed purity of the dominant caste from pollution by the lower caste (p. 115); in India this included lower caste people having to walk as many as 90 paces behind upper caste people and having to prostrate themselves upon the ground if a Brahmin passed, so that his "foul shadow" might not defile the holy Brahmin (p. 115); in the United States it included, well into the 20th century, the barring of African Americans from white beaches, just as Dalites were forbidden from the waters of the Brahmins and Nazis forbade Jews from Aryan waters (p. 117); the United States created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that a single drop of African blood could taint the purity of someone who might otherwise be considered in the dominant class
5. occupational hierarchy-the relegating of African Americans to the dirtiest and most menial jobs and, even after acquiring an education, to teaching and ministering, although African Americans in the United States (p. 138) and Jews in Nazi Germany (p. 139) were used for the entertainment of the dominant caste

6. dehumanization and stigma-dehumanizing the group dehumanizes and stigmatizes every individual in it (p. 141); Jews under the Nazis and African Americans in the United States were subject to gruesome medical experimentation and built the walls that would imprison them, often dying in the process (p. 147)

7. terror as enforcement, cruelty as a means of control for infractions, Nazis used a nominal twenty-five lash limit, Americans 400; Native Americans were occasionally skinned and made into bridle reins, they were flogged, hung, and burned (p. 153) [and still are being killed in other ways]

8. inherent superiority vs. inherent inferiority-for a long time black actors and actresses in the United States had to play subservient roles and speak in ways that were very different from their real life selves; for many years, even after slavery ended, African Americans had to totally submit to the dominant caste

WHERE DOES CLASS FIT IN?

Class is a measure of one's standing in society marked by education, income, and occupation, as well as accent, taste, and manners; it is something one can work into or out of (p. 106)

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LOWER CASTE PEOPLE RISE ABOVE UPPER CASTE PEOPLE?

- If a lower-caste person rises above an upper-caste person, the natural human response from someone weaned on their caste's inherent superiority is to perceive a threat to their existence—spiritual, emotional, psychological, and economic (p.183)
- “The symbolism of Obama’s election was a profound loss to white status...For many the ability of a black person to supplant the racial caste system...was the manifestation of a nightmare which would need to be resisted.” (p. 315)
- That sense of fear and loss, however remote, brought to the fore, for many whites, a sense of commonality, attachment, and solidarity

with their racial group, a sense of needing to band together to protect their place in the hierarchy.” (p. 316)

- An entire machinery moved into place upon the arrival of the first head of state from the subordinate caste system: This included and includes the Tea [meaning Taxed Enough Already] Party, the Birthers, labeling the Obamas simians, the changing of election laws to make it harder to vote, and the purging of registration lists. (p. 318)

- It was as if the caste system were reminding everyone of their place, the subordinate caste in particular, that no matter how the cast (i.e., c-a-s-t) was reshuffled, the hierarchy would remain as it always has been. (p. 320)

- But the information that white people in this nation would be outnumbered by people of color by 2042, really frightened and frightens many white people, lest they lose their dominant caste position. (p. 323)

DOES THAT RELATE TO TRUMP’S 2016 ELECTION?

- Yes. Consciously or not, many white voters were and “are seeking to reassert a racial order in which their group is firmly at the top.” p. 326)

- Trump was ushered into office by whites concerned about their status. (p. 332)

- Those susceptible to “dominant group status threat” will do whatever they can to protect the hierarchy that has benefitted them, “to ...[retain] a sense of dominance and well being.” (p. 332)

- But a change in demographics might have less of a material effect on the dominant caste than imagined. If disparities in wealth were to continue at the common rate it would take black families 228 years to amass the wealth that white families now have, and Latino families another 84 years to reach parity. Thus, political dominance might still remain in the hands of those who have held it for the entirety of our country’s history. (p. 381)

CAN A CASTE SYSTEM BE ENDED?

The brutal one in Germany has been ended. But, of course that lasted for only twelve years, while ours is more than 400 hundred years old. We still honor former slave owners with statues, names of schools, and military bases, while the Germans have memorials to those who were killed in the Holocaust, and **stumbling**stones named for each one killed. Nazi leaders were punished, not glorified, displaying the Swastika is a crime punishable by up to three years in prison, while the confederate flag still flies in many places in our nation.(p. 34}, including in our nation's Capitol on January 6thof last year.

A caste system exists in part because we allow it to exist. Even if we were born into the dominant caste, we can choose not to dominate. (p. 383)

And, toward the end of the book, Wilkerson asks, “Will the United States adhere to its belief in majority rule if the majority does not look as it has throughout our history? “(p. 382)

And I answer:

Looking at what happened outside and in our nation's Capitol on January 6, that question seems to have been answered. Thousands of dominant caste people seeking to overturn the Presidential election (in which many people of color had voted), stormed and defaced our nation's Capitol, carried confederate flags, hung a noose for vice-President Pence whom they sought to kill, battered one policeman to death, and mostly were not harmed by the police or even arrested on the spot. They were allowed to break many laws. What a comparison to the people of color—lower caste citizens—who have been killed for doing nothing unlawful and arrested and hurt on the spot for peacefully and lawfully protesting.

But you may have noticed that about ten days ago Representative Ron Johnson of Wisconsin said that he “never felt threatened” by the pro-Trump mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, that he knew that they were people that love this country, that truly respect

law enforcement, would never do anything to break the law, and so, he wasn't concerned, but that he would have been concerned if the mob had been made up of Black Lives Matter or antifa protesters.

However, as Isabel Wilkerson told us:

A caste system exists in part because we allow it to exist. Even if we were born into the dominant class, we can choose not to dominate.