

Isabel Wilkerson's World-Historical Theory of Race and Caste

By comparing white supremacy in the U.S. to the caste system in India, her new book at once illuminates and collapses a complex history.

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In Wilkerson's view, racism is only the visible manifestation of something deeper, a hidden system of social domination. Illustration by Anthony Russo

As the summer of 1958 was coming to an end, Martin Luther King, Jr., was newly famous and exhausted. All of twenty-nine years old, he had been travelling across the country for weeks promoting his first book, “Stride Toward Freedom,” a memoir of the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott—a protest that, at three hundred and eighty-two days, was the most sustained mass action in American history. It had led both to a Supreme Court decision that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional and to retaliatory bombings of Black churches. The book tour was meant to mobilize support for the movement’s next phase,

but days after his first event he'd been kicked, choked, and arrested by the Montgomery police. And now, in Harlem on September 20th, he was being denounced as an Uncle Tom for not appearing at a Black-owned bookstore whose politics conflicted with the mainstream image he was trying to project. So he sat at a table with a pile of books at the white-owned Blumstein's department store on West 125th Street. It was a store that didn't even sell books—a store whose management refused to hire Black clerks until a boycott forced the issue. The staff had put his signing table at the back, by the shoes.

“Is this Martin Luther King?” a woman in sequined cat-eye glasses asked when she got to the table. He said yes, and she plunged a steel letter opener deep into his chest.

Later, King viewed his months of recovery as a period of productive recalibration. It became clear to him how much stamina he would need to withstand the battles and backlashes ahead. He marked the end of his convalescence by going to India, the birthplace of a man whose self-discipline he had admired since he was in theology school: the late Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the mass movement that secured India's independence from the British, in 1947. King had most recently enacted Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence by publicly forgiving his would-be assassin, a woman who struggled with mental illness.

King liked to say afterward that he'd gone to India as a pilgrim. Arriving home, though, spiritual lessons weren't what he wanted to share. He was more animated by the concrete political steps that leaders had taken to redress the wrongs of India's age-old caste system. Gandhi fought for the right of “untouchables”—known today as Dalits—to gain entry to Hindu temples that had long barred them as “impure.” “To equal that, President Eisenhower would take a Negro child by the hand and lead her into Central High School in Little Rock,” King wrote. The Indian Constitution of 1950 had officially abolished untouchability, declared caste discrimination a crime, and created affirmative-action quotas for Dalits and indigenous tribes—in part because a formidable Dalit thinker

and leader, B. R. Ambedkar, had played a crucial role in writing it. “Today no leader in India would dare to make a public endorsement of untouchability,” King told reporters. “But in America, every day some leader endorses racial segregation.”

In “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” (Random House), Isabel Wilkerson contends that the brutal Indian system of hierarchy illuminates more about American racial divides than the idea of race alone can, and early in her book she relays a story that King told about his India trip. He was visiting a school for Dalit children when the principal introduced him as “a fellow untouchable.” The comparison made King flinch—but then its truth overwhelmed him. “In that moment, he realized that the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India and that he had lived under that system all of his life,” Wilkerson writes. “It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in America.”

This story is almost certainly apocryphal, borrowed from a sermon that one of King’s mentors gave more than two decades earlier. In later years, King took little interest in how the idea of caste might apply in his own country. But the anecdote at once lends a civil-rights hero’s weight to Wilkerson’s bold thesis and provides the model response to it: a lightning flash of insight about the mechanics of white supremacy. In her view, racism is only the visible manifestation of something deeper. Underlying and predating racism, and holding white supremacy in place, is a hidden system of social domination: a caste structure that uses neutral human differences, skin color among them, as the basis for ranking human value.

“Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred; it is not necessarily personal,” she writes. “It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things.” The caste model moves white behavior away from subjective feelings (what motivates these people to do what they do) and

into the objective realm of power dynamics (what they do, and to whom). The dynamic that concerns Wilkerson the most is how a dominant caste stops a low-ranking caste from gaining on it.

The most enduring caste system, India's, turned a division of labor into a division of lineage. In the Laws of Manu and other ancient Hindu texts, caste was inscribed with rigid precision, slotting occupations into four *varnas*, or ranks—priest, ruler-warrior, merchant, laborer—and a fifth category, outcastes (another old name for today's Dalits). Caste as a lived Indian reality, though, is crueller than any study of scriptural texts would indicate; it's also more fluid. Each *varna* comprises innumerable subcastes, or *jatis*, and, over generations, some *jatis* have climbed up the ranks as others have slipped down. New occupational groups have been incorporated into the system as others have vanished. In the nineteenth century, the hierarchy, vicious enough by its own design, was entrenched by taxonomies imposed by the British Raj—categories used as instruments of colonial control. What fascinated King, during his sojourn in the subcontinent, was how the newly independent state intended to weaken the caste order by insuring entry for low-caste citizens into schools, universities, and government jobs. What fascinates Wilkerson, like many progressives before her, is the ossified model—heritable hierarchy in its purest form.

Writing with calm and penetrating authority, Wilkerson discusses three caste hierarchies in world history—those of India, America, and Nazi Germany—and excavates the shared principles “burrowed deep within the culture and subconsciousness” of each. She identifies several “pillars” of caste, including inherited rank, taboos related to notions of purity and pollution, the enforcement of hierarchies through terror and violence, and divine sanction of superiority. (The American equivalent to the Laws of Manu is, of course, the Old Testament.) In Wilkerson's first book, “The Warmth of Other Suns,” which documented the Great Migration of American Blacks in the twentieth century, she wrote about past lives with finer precision and texture than most professional historians have done. So she must have considered the risks involved in

compressing into a single frame India's roughly three-thousand-year-old caste structure, America's four-hundred-year-old racial hierarchies, and the Third Reich's twelve-year enforcement of Aryanism. Even on her home terrain, where she focusses on what she calls the "poles of the American caste system," Blacks and whites, her analysis sometimes seems more ahistorical than transhistorical, as temporal specificities collapse into an eternal present. But this effect is consonant with the view of history she presents in her book—one involving more grim continuity than hopeful departures, more regression to the mean than moments of progress.

In the nineteen-thirties, Allison Davis, a pathbreaking African-American social anthropologist whom Wilkerson calls her spiritual father, risked his life to examine the interplay of caste and class in Natchez, Mississippi. The work that he and his collaborators ultimately produced, "Deep South" (1941), was the first systematic, empirical study of post-Reconstruction life in the region. Confirming the work of other social theorists of the time, they concluded that the structures that kept Blacks immiserated and imperilled were so entrenched that they constituted a caste system. When Gunnar Myrdal incorporated their research into his own classic report, "An American Dilemma" (1944), the idea of caste fully entered the twentieth-century American conversation about race.

Twenty years after Myrdal published his report, and five years after King travelled to India, the dream of seeing aggressive anti-discrimination legislation in America was realized: President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Wilkerson emphasizes the recoil that followed this victory. No Democratic contender for President has won the majority of the white vote since. In her analysis, the arc of the political universe bends toward caste, as progressive legislative or electoral victories activate the threatened dominant group. Had observers better grasped white anxieties unleashed by the growth of America's nonwhite population and the two-term Presidency of Barack Obama, Donald Trump's victory in 2016 would have come as no surprise. In the voting booth, Wilkerson argues, whites across the board set aside

considerations like gender affinity and such class concerns as access to health care in order to support a man who had signalled his commitment to the continued dominion of their caste.

Trump didn't need to tweet out "You will not replace us." Throughout American history, Wilkerson says, white-supremacist ideas deemed taboo have simply gone undercover. When, in the early years of the twentieth century, the Postmaster General banned the grotesque postcards that certain whites liked to send, featuring the corpses of the lynched ("This is the Barbecue we had last night"), the cards kept on circulating in envelopes. With Trump, a twenty-first-century version of these clandestine networks produced what Wilkerson sees as a "consolidation of rank among the historic ruling caste" following the disruption represented by a Black First Family.

The Obamas have been touted, in some circles, as proof of progress toward racial equality. The experience of elite Black Americans is central to Wilkerson's account, but for the opposite reason. She sees in their attempts to transcend their assigned place in the hierarchy a natural caste experiment—and a failed one at that. Regardless of their wealth or refinement, the system tries to shove them back down. To illustrate this phenomenon, she ranges across disciplines from sociology to economics to medicine, interspersing her analysis with what she calls "scenes of caste," among them wrenching personal ones.

One evening, violating caste's pre-written script, she is flying first class. As she stands in the aisle and waits to disembark, the lone African-American passenger in the cabin, a white man retrieving his bag from an overhead compartment thrusts his full weight onto her body, while other travellers watch, their faces determinedly blank. "Over the course of American history, black men have died for doing far less to white women than what he did to me," she writes. The men and women in the cabin would have suffered no material consequence for defending her, she notes, yet every one of them chose "caste solidarity over principle, tribe over empathy."

One of those impassive witnesses, the lead flight attendant, is a Black man, and she imagines his own caste calculations. This low-caste man doesn't know what power the upper-caste man might possess. To defend a low-caste woman, even if it is his professional responsibility to do so, could bring negative consequences. "In a caste system," she concludes, "things work more smoothly when everyone stays in their place, and that is what he did."

In Wilkerson's book, one senses that each word choice has been carefully weighed, and her tone remains measured even when describing her own assault. But she conveys a particular frustration with those members of her caste, from the flight attendant to the Black police officers involved in the deaths of Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, who try to rise by rejecting their own. The caste system, she says, in an echo of Malcolm X, has always rewarded "snitches and sellouts."

Mustering old and new historical scholarship, sometimes to shattering effect, "Caste" brings out how systematically, through the centuries, Black lives were destroyed "under the terror of people who had absolute power over their bodies and their very breath." In considering the present, though, she often focusses on questions of dignity. Many scenes involve whites failing to recognize the status of successful Blacks—like the white man, having recently moved into a wealthy suburb, who mistakes his elegant Black neighbor for the woman who picks up his laundry. As for how caste dynamics affect those Black Americans who really do pick up the laundry—or shell the shrimp, or clean the motel rooms—Wilkerson has little to say. At one point, she implies that poor people of color are in some ways more fortunate than wealthier ones, because they have fewer stress-related health problems. She surmises that this has to do with low-income people of color getting less white pushback. But the claim isn't supported by most recent research, and she doesn't mention the significant diagnostic gap created by unequal access to health care. Considerations of material resources, in her analysis, can disappear in the shadow of status.

Applying a single abstraction to multiple realities inevitably creates friction—sometimes productive, sometimes not. In the book’s comparison of the Third Reich to India and America, for example, a rather jarring distinction is set aside: the final objective of Nazi ideology was to eliminate Jewish people, not just to subordinate them. While American whites and Indian upper castes exploited Blacks and Dalits to do their menial labor, the Nazis came to see no functional role for Jews. In Nazi propaganda, Jews weren’t backward, bestial, natural-born toilers; they were cunning arch-manipulators of historical events. (When Goebbels and other Nazis reviled “extreme Jewish intellectualism” and claimed that Jews had helped orchestrate Germany’s defeat in the Great War, they were insisting on Jewish iniquity, not occupational incapacity.) The violence exercised against Dalits in India and Black people in America provides an ill-fitting template for eliminationist anti-Semitism.

Even in this country, as Wilkerson prosecutes the case for her caste model, she occasionally skirts facts that resist alignment with her thesis. To clinch her argument that Trump was elected because whites were protecting their caste status, she says that he won them over at every education level. According to the Pew Foundation’s 2018 validated-voter analysis, though, most whites with a college education or higher voted against him. Wilkerson seems at times to have a sophisticated idea of how caste operates in the modern world, with all its internal diversities. But at this and other points in her book she appears to be reaching back toward older understandings of the system, in which each group is a monolith, consistent in its interests and political allegiances, impervious to contingencies or context.

Indeed, reading Wilkerson’s chapter on Allison Davis, one could forget that “Deep South” pointedly billed itself as “a study of caste and class.” She leaves out the fact that Davis and his co-authors were fascinated by the ways in which the two gradients could complicate each other—the ways in which solidarities of class sometimes trumped those of color. Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and James Foreman, who

encountered “Deep South” in college, read its findings more instrumentally than Wilkerson does. The structural and individual outrages committed by Mississippi whites would not have been news to them. The news was that white élites often despised the white poor more than they did Black workers. Black and white landlords coöperated to protect their interests and exploit poor tenant farmers. And some white shopkeepers, however racist, knew that they had to be courteous to Black customers or lose their business. Many civil-rights activists concluded that, if Blacks gained more wealth and political power, they could compel whites to modify their behavior. Altering that key variable might start the process of eroding the caste system itself.

Today, Republican political strategists are no doubt at work trying to capitalize on similar class and caste variables in the hope of dividing the Black vote, and undermining Black-equality movements. As it happens, a middle-caste Indian immigrant, the economist Raj Chetty, has given us an illuminating forensic picture of the complexity of the castes in question. Gender matters: Black women now slightly outearn white women who were raised in financially similar family circumstances, while the incomes of Black men account for most of a still appalling Black-white income gap. Location matters, too: Black people who moved to “better neighborhoods” as children have significantly different earning prospects as adults. (Counties with the least social mobility today often had a great density of slaves in the antebellum era.)

Decades after King celebrated the laws Indian leaders had enacted to break down the caste system, that system has proved much tougher to dismantle than many observers had hoped. One thing quotas have achieved, though, is increased economic diversity within lower castes—a change that shows how labile the corresponding political alliances can be. After independence, Dalits, who constitute more than sixteen per cent of the population, were a reliable vote, first for the Congress Party and then, in some states, for their own caste-based regional parties. They were nearly as unified as the white Trump voters Wilkerson conjures. That’s no longer true. For the past six years, India has been ruled by the

Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.), a party with Brahminic roots which was established to promote upper-caste interests and advocates an ideology of Hindu supremacy. Dalits and lower castes were largely aligned against the B.J.P.—until it began courting them by exploiting the economic divisions within their ranks.

Some Dalit communities had benefitted disproportionately from the quotas for government jobs that Ambedkar (whom Wilkerson dubs “India’s Martin Luther King”) fought to write into the Constitution. Over time, a small Dalit élite, known as “the creamy layer,” emerged. The B.J.P. recruited Dalits who were beneath that layer and resentful of it, promising them economic advancement. Simultaneously, the Party’s networks tried to draw them into the Hindu-supremacist fold by inciting fear about a group even lower in the social hierarchy: Indian Muslims. In 2019, fully a third of Dalits voted for the B.J.P. in national elections that returned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power.

Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, sees possible benefits in his caste’s lack of unity. As parties compete for their votes, he has argued, Dalits may have a wider and less corrupt range of candidates to choose from, and more effective representation. But Yengde’s sometime collaborator, the astringent, seventy-year-old Dalit intellectual and activist Anand Teltumbde (currently imprisoned by the Modi government on dubious charges of inciting violence), perceives a larger political failure; he believes that “the debacle of the Dalit movement” today lies in its inability to recognize how class intersects with caste.

Starting in the nineteenth century, low-caste Indians looked to America’s progressives for ideas about fighting inequality. Jyotirao Phule, an anti-Brahmin agitator from a lowly gardener caste, dedicated his 1873 book, “Ghulamgiri,” or “Slavery,” to American abolitionists. A century later, young Dalits who had studied the Black Power movement launched the Dalit Panthers. In Wilkerson’s estimation, what America may teach the world in the coming decades is, alas, how a numerically

vulnerable dominant caste can cling to power. She recounts a conversation she had with the civil-rights historian Taylor Branch about how American democracy will fare when it reaches a demographic watershed: the moment in the twenty-forties when non-Hispanic whites are expected to see their majority disappear. “So the real question would be,” Branch says, “if people were given the choice between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?”

Whites, Wilkerson anticipates, will rush to co-opt insecure mid-caste nonwhites—ethnic groups who have profited from affirmative-action programs that Blacks fought for. She chillingly envisages Latinos, Asians, and other citizens of color entering the voting booth and making an “autonomic, subconscious assessment of their station,” privileging features of their identity that align them with the dominant caste over features they share with other voters of color. “They will vote up, rather than across, and usually not down,” she predicts. As these new “honorary” whites bolster the ranks of the dominant caste, Blacks will remain on the bottom. In Frank B. Wilderson III’s stark phrasing, those middle castes will become “junior partners” in white supremacy.

There’s some precedent to support this argument: Italian-Americans, who now tend to vote Republican, were nineteenth-century pariahs, seen as nonwhite and sometimes lynched. But, given the increasing range of America’s contemporary middle castes—consider the economic chasm between an Indian tech C.E.O. and an Indian security guard, or the ideological one between a Ted Cruz and an Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—it’s hard to see a concerted march toward whiteness. Too many of those mid-caste Americans seem, in this moment, to be an impediment to the second term of the white-supremacist-in-chief. Wilkerson’s conception of social rigidities may itself prove too rigid to accommodate the complexities of what’s unfolding around us. Today, the Confederate emblem has been chased off the Mississippi state flag, and talk of reparations has moved into the political mainstream. But Wilkerson’s model does not encourage optimism: backlash follows legislative and electoral progress so reliably in her account that hopes for change begin

to feel naïve. No law is etched in granite, she reminds us; each one can be chiselled away.

Although Wilkerson considers herself more a diagnostician than a clinician, she advances, toward the end of the book, two ideas for toppling the American caste system. She'd like to see a public accounting of the American past modelled on postwar Germany, which paid restitution to Holocaust survivors, made displaying the swastika a crime, and erected memorials to victims. But her greater faith lies in what she calls "radical empathy." She has described her work as a moral "mission": "to change the country, the world, one heart at a time." And she concludes her book by celebrating individuals like Albert Einstein, who came to the U.S. shortly before the Nazis took power, empathized with Blacks facing discrimination, and began advocating for their rights. "Each time a person reaches across caste and makes a connection, it helps break the back of caste," Wilkerson writes. "Multiplied by millions in a given day, it becomes the flap of a butterfly wing that shifts the air and builds to a hurricane across an ocean."

This resort to moral psychology—a self-oriented Gandhian move of the kind that infuriated Ambedkar—seems a retreat from her larger argument that white supremacy should be seen as systemic, not personal. Perhaps, boxed in by her caste model, she is seeking hope by reaching outside it. But, if the caste model can feel unnuanced and overly deterministic, the turn toward empathy can feel detached from history in another way. After all, were every white person in America to wake up tomorrow cured of what Wilkerson terms the "disease" of caste, the change of heart alone would not redress the deprivation of human, financial, and social capital to which Blacks have been subjected for centuries. Talk of "structural racism" is meant to highlight this difficult truth; Wilkerson's understanding of caste, by emphasizing norms of respect over the promptings of distributive justice, can sometimes obscure it.

One soggy evening in July, I visited the area where “BLACK LIVES MATTER” has been painted on a street leading to the White House. As young white people stood on the street taking selfies, I did my best to imagine a lasting equality built on what was in their hearts, and those of millions like them. Yet their baseball caps took me back to an argument in “Caste,” about the great Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige.

Wilkerson argues that, if Paige had been allowed to play in the white leagues while he was in his athletic prime (he wasn’t tapped by the majors until he was in his forties), his uncanny skill would have been further honed, spectators would have flocked to see him, his team would have risen in the rankings, and the sport as a whole would have reaped the profits. This line of argument recurs in her book, and turns up in a lot of other places lately: if you level the playing field, everyone wins.

But what about the not-quite-great white player whose major-league career happened only because Paige was barred from the competition? In a fair world, dominant-caste individuals who have historically benefitted from prejudice and discrimination would lose out. When I multiplied the injury of disinheritance by, to use Wilkerson’s phrase, “millions in a given day” in a foreseeable future of economic insecurity, the sustained radical empathy of downwardly mobile whites became a hard thing to envision. I started to wonder if Wilkerson’s faith in psychology had underestimated a particularly treacherous aspect of Indian caste, which is how well it insulates the hearts of individual oppressors from the injustices they perpetrate and profit by. Radical empathy is exactly what caste societies preclude. The system’s fictitious gradations extinguish, by design, a sense of common humanity.

Pinned on the new iron fence protecting the White House from the public were photos of Black people killed by the police in recent years. In the photo of the Minnesota cafeteria worker Philando Castile, I could make out the motto on his school-issue lanyard: “Live Well.” Why, I wondered, should justice for a low-wage worker murdered while complying with a law officer’s order have to depend on anything as discretionary as empathy?

I recalled a detail about King's trip to India, when, looking for psychological strength, he'd found political strategy. A reporter in New Delhi had asked him about those who had fought him in Montgomery: had he, in the end, "transformed the hearts of the white people"? Maybe some hearts, King replied. Others remained bitter. He moved on to another question. Changing power differentials in order to redress vile histories of discrimination, he knew, was bound to be ugly. Sometimes hearts barely figured at all. ♦

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