

Caste, Race, Class—A Review of Isabel Wilkerson’s Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Relation of Caste and Race to Class, as it Appears in Wilkerson’s “Caste”

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Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* explores the roots of U.S. racism in an underlying caste system. She compares U.S. white supremacy to South Asian caste and to the Nazis' anti-Jewish laws. However, she says little or nothing about caste's relation to class and exploitation. This undermines her analysis and program.

Caste by Isabel Wilkerson has been a highly praised and best-selling book. Reviewers have acclaimed her insights into U.S. racism. These are made by comparing U.S. white supremacy to the South Asian (Asian Indian) caste system as well as to the German Nazis' anti-Semitic laws. In general, readers have responded to her clear, smooth, and warm writing. She uses anecdotes from her own life as an African-American woman professional, as well as using frequent anecdotal incidents from others, combined with a deft use of historical narratives. To European-Americans, she brings racial oppression alive in heart-rendering detail. To U.S. people in general she gives a glimpse into the oppression of low caste and outcaste Indians (Dalits or "Untouchables").

Her basic thesis is that the primary underlying structure of the U.S. (at least) is that of caste. To her, race is the cover of caste. Castes are arranged in hierarchies, with superior and inferior castes, dominant and subservient, those worth more and those of less value. The essential issue is not one of mass prejudice (although there may be a lot of prejudice, including out-and-out hatred by dominant caste members). The issue is a society structured around a hierarchy of castes.

Our society is divided by a number of criteria into several hierarchical systems (I sometimes think of it as a pile of pick-up sticks, leaning on each other). But unlike some subsystems, caste is something people are born into and cannot get out of. "*It is the fixed nature of caste that distinguishes it from class...*" (p. 106) People may be born into the middle class and rise to the upper class or sink to the lower class. They cannot stop being of whatever caste they were born into, no matter how rich they become. Caste is not the same as being in a religious group, since people may change their religion. It is not even ethnicity. Irish-Americans may marry Italian-Americans, producing white "Catholic Americans".

Of course, this is an abstraction. The line between what is a caste and what a religious group may be altered. The Nazis insisted on arresting Catholics with Jewish origins, despite opposition from the Church; Nazis treated "Jews" as a "racial" caste, rather than a religious group. In the U.S., a small number of African-Americans has "passed" into the white population in each generation (but they have mostly kept their racial history a secret).

As I see it, the only categorical division similar to caste is gender. People are born into one of two genders, one of which is "superior" to the other. This is the gender they are assigned all their lives—with a very few exceptions. Some theoreticians have called this a "gender-caste" system. Wilkerson gives many examples of gender and race/caste interacting, in her case and that of others. But she does not really examine the structure of their interaction.

Wilkerson proposes eight "pillars" of caste. One is accepting a "*divine and spiritual foundation for the belief in a human pyramid willed by God.*" (p. 104) The second is the heritability of a fixed nature. The third is "*to keep the castes separate and to seal off the bloodlines of those assigned to the upper rung...—endogamy.*" (p. 109) The fourth is "*the fundamental belief in the purity of the dominant caste and the fear of pollution from the castes deemed beneath it.*" (p. 115) Six is dehumanization. "*A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.*" (p. 142) The seventh "pillar" is violence and cruelty: "*The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others...is with violence and terror, psychological and physical...to be reminded of the absolute power the dominant caste held over them.*" (p.151) The eighth is "*the*

presumption and continued reminder of the inborn superiority of the dominant caste and the inherent inferiority of the subordinate.” (p. 160)

Of the eight pillars of caste, all are cultural and social-psychological. Not one speaks of the need for the dominated caste to work for the dominant caste, to provide a surplus for the rulers, or to labor for less pay than do members of the dominant caste. None refers to the need for political machinery (a state) to carry out the “violence and terror.”

As she notes, a number of writers and theorists have previously related race to caste, contrasting U.S. white supremacy to the Indian caste system. There are clear similarities which are useful in thinking about racism. But there are also differences which she glancingly mentions. The U.S. system is a few centuries old. It has two main castes, white and Black, with other people of color not-quite fitting between them. The South Asian system is thousands of years old. Its ideology is based directly in religion, without “race” or skin color as a main factor. There are a great number of castes and subcastes.

Several other writers on racism have regarded race as a caste system. Instead Wilkerson presents race as something separate and developed out of caste—which she presents as the underlying reality. “*In the American caste system...race is the primary tool and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste.*” (p. 18) It is unclear why Wilkerson chooses to present race as a reflection of caste, rather than as a form of caste.

Class Exploitation

The main weakness of Wilkerson’s book is her limited consideration of the relation of caste to class, class conflict, and class exploitation. “*The glaring omission in **Caste** is political economy....As a result, Wilkerson offers no theory of caste....*” (Steinberg 2021; p. 121) She is aware of a connection, noting that the lower caste serves the upper. “*In both [the U.S. and India]...the lowest castes toiled for their masters—African-Americans in the tobacco fields of Mississippi, Dalits plucking tea in Kerala and cotton in Nandurbar. Both worked as enslaved people and later for the right to live on the land that they were farming.*” (p. 75)

She repeatedly mentions that the lower caste works for the upper, but this is undertheorized. Her emphasis is on the devaluing of the undercastes, the contempt of the overcastes for them. Most of her anecdotes are of situations where white people overlooked or ignored her or otherwise disrespected her. She presents similar devaluing and dehumanizing interactions among upper and lower caste Indian people.

However, Africans were not kidnapped in order for European-derived people to look down on them. They were enslaved in order to do work—to grow cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rice, which were sold on the world market. They made profits for their white masters. And secondly, they were brought over to weaken by division the poorer white farmers and laborers. These were easier to be exploited while their labor was undercut by slaves (who worked for “free”). Encouraging their pride in their “whiteness” led to their support for the big slaveowners and merchants, who should have been their enemies. All the cultural and political ideologies of racism were built around this exploitation and commodification of African-derived slaves.

To this day, the basic forces of racism continue in the U.S. Black people are mainly kept at the bottom of society, to be used as a pool of cheap labor. This also drags down the price to the bosses

of white labor. Meanwhile racism divides the working class by “paying” the whites with feelings of superiority and with limited relative privileges.

Wilkerson asserts “*Americans pay a steep price for a caste system that runs counter to the country’s stated ideals.*” (p. 384) Some “Americans” pay this price, not only People of Color but also white workers. While the U.S. is the richest country on earth, racism has weakened its labor movement, which is in decline. A divided work force has been unable to force the state to provide universal health insurance (unlike all other imperialist countries). But other “Americans” have done well due to racism. The very rich have gained greater profits, lower taxes, and more right-wing, pro-business, political parties than in many other wealthy nations.

The same has been basically true of Southern Asia, despite historical and social differences. No doubt the upper castes felt pride in their “superiority” to the lower castes. But the upper castes lived off a surplus produced by the labor of the lower castes. Without the work of the overworked, impoverished, lower castes, the proud priests, warriors, and merchants would have starved. The division into many castes and subcastes served to keep the lower castes divided and hostile to each other, and all of them against the outcaste Dalits—weakening them and keeping them from uniting against their exploiters. This system has been much affected by modern industrial capitalism, yet it still has deep roots in the current exploitative system.

German anti-Semitism (meaning anti-Jewishness) was worked up by the Nazis into an ideology. Despite some use of Jewish slave labor, it was different from the above examples. Jews were not presented as simply inferior, but also as capable of being superior, as able to rule over the “Aryans” if not stopped. The Nazis’ aim was not to create an undercaste of easily exploited Jewish workers (which is why the Jews could be exterminated). It was to justify their rule—and the rule of their big business supporters—to the working class and middle class. The popular hostility to the capitalist class was misdirected toward the Jews. (As had been previously said, “*Anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools.*”) A similar distorted anti-capitalism (misdirecting popular hostility from the capitalist elite) is part of the revival of anti-Semitism on the right in the U.S. today. (See Price 2019)

Further examples of the intersection of caste and class—with similarities and differences—could be shown by analyzing other cases. However, Wilkerson does not discuss caste oppressions in apartheid South Africa or Latin America or under British and French colonialism. (But it would be unfair to criticize her for not writing a different book).

Looking at the U.S. in terms of caste—and caste only—is distorting. There is not simply a dominant caste of whites above a subordinate caste of Blacks. “Whites” as a group do not actually run this society. There is **a minority of ultra-rich people**, almost all white and male, which dominates the whole society, including its white majority. They are the bourgeoisie, the upper class, the capitalists, the ruling class—more-or-less the “one percent”. The wealth produced by the whole society is mostly drained off by them, through their control of private property. White and Black and brown workers all labor for them. Working through their minions and agents, they dominate the political parties and the state as a whole, as well as all other mainstream institutions. They maintain caste because it maintains them, their wealth and power.

What Next?

Wilkerson does not ground caste in the basic functioning of society, its production and distribution. Essentially she accepts society as it is, in its major institutions—except for caste (and gender) oppression. Therefore she lacks a program for abolishing racism. After all her condemnation of the evils of our caste-ridden society, all she can come up with is “*radical empathy*” by individuals. This means, “*putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience....If each of us could truly see and connect with the humanity of the person in front of us...it could...perhaps change the way we hire or even vote.*” (p. 386) More forcefully, but still vaguely, she declares that we should not only not be racist or sexist, but should be “*pro-African-American, pro-woman, pro-Latino, pro-Asian, pro-indigenous, pro-humanity in all its manifestations.*” (p. 386–7) Good as far as it goes, but this little list does not include being pro-worker, pro-peasant, or pro-poor. Instead she appears to identify with the “we” who “hire” workers. (Wilkerson also calls for a “*Truth and Reconciliation Commission*” to discuss the effects of caste in the U.S. As her only institutional proposal, this is rather limited.)

Downplaying economic issues, she attacks “*the Democrats’ wistful yearning for white working-class voters that they believe should respond in higher numbers to their kitchen table appeals. Why, some people on the left keep asking, why, on, why, were these people voting against their own interests?*” (p. 327) Her answer is that it was actually in these people’s interest to maintain their superior place in a caste system; white workers are racist and rationally so.

She agrees with the liberals that white workers’ “kitchen table” self-interest would really be to vote for the Democrats. But since about 1970 the post-war prosperity has been over and the economy has been going downhill, in what has been called “secular stagnation” (overall—with ups and downs). Workers’ wages have declined or stagnated. Family incomes have been maintained only by wives going to work and by the ballooning of family debt. Unions have drastically decreased. Automation and off-shore investing have shrunk the job pool. Rural and semi-rural parts of the country have sunk into depression conditions, in a vast “rust belt.”

All this happened under Republican **and Democratic** presidents and congresses. Why then should white (or other) workers conclude that the Democrats offer a better “kitchen table” program? And without a realistic class appeal, it is not surprising that they vote their prejudices and caste “interests.” To break them from these racist and nativist fallacies, it would be necessary to give them the possibility of fighting for their real interests—against their real enemies. These are Republican and Democratic and all other agents of the capitalist class and state.

Despite her book’s virtues, Isabel Wilkerson’s vision is too limited. Essentially she sees a society pretty much the same as ours, but without caste or sexism. Capitalism remains, as does the bureaucratic-military-police state, exploiting and oppressing the vast majority—but with no castes nor gender inequality. But white supremacy and patriarchy are too intertwined with capitalism and its state to abolish the first while leaving the latter standing. A more revolutionary perspective is needed. To some, it may seem “realistic” to focus on caste and ignore capitalism, but it is completely unrealistic in practice.

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