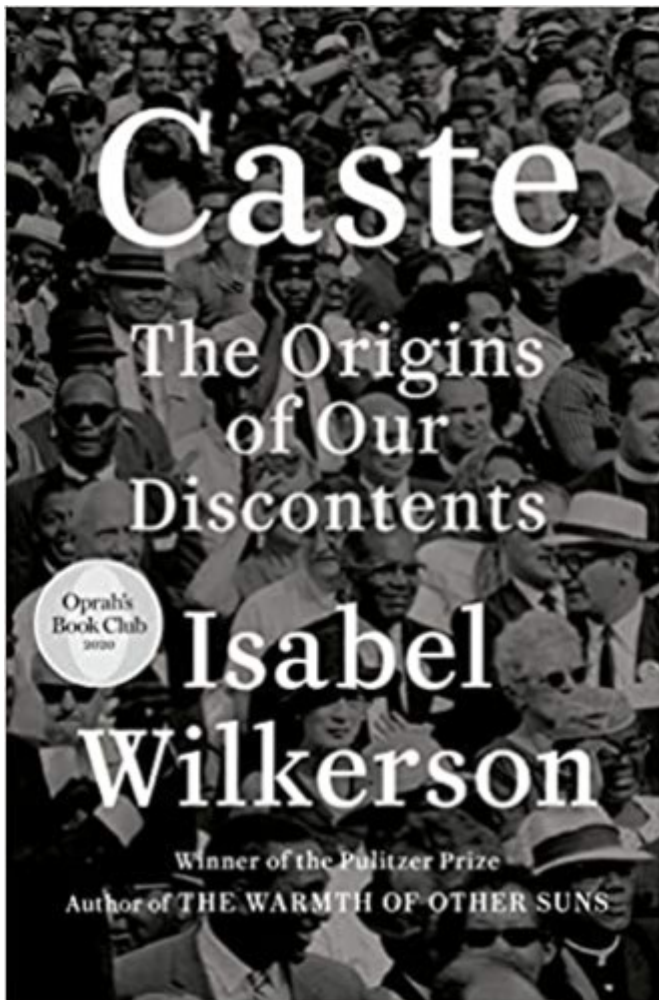


Is there an American caste system?

Caste is more complex than Isabel Wilkerson suggests. But she excels at forcing open our eyes to the horrific realities of racism.

by [Sandhya Rani Jha](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Caste

The Origins of Our Discontents

By Isabel Wilkerson

Random House

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The power of an analogy is twofold: it can make something relatable, or it can completely turn upside down all of our preconceived notions. Isabel Wilkerson seeks to do the latter in her most recent book.

Wilkerson, who won a Pulitzer Prize as a reporter for the *New York Times* and garnered multiple awards for her 2011 book about the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, turns her attention here to the basic vocabulary we use when we talk about racism. She argues that years of antidiscrimination campaigns have rendered the term racism meaningless, erasing its multigenerational reality and reducing the term to individual acts of hatred. Many who do racial justice work have noted that for some people, being called racist seems to be a worse offense than actually engaging in racist action.

And so Wilkerson chooses a fresh framework, one not saturated in years of assumptions and mischaracterizations. She uses the framework of caste to explain what a hundreds-year-long system looks like when it's baked into our culture, our laws, our way of doing business, and our ways of distributing power and work and dignity and worth. She alludes briefly and vaguely to how an American caste system interacts with people of color who are not Black, but her primary focus is on White supremacy culture and anti-Black racism. In that process, she occasionally makes references to two other national caste systems: Germany (which she argues largely overcame its caste system by actively, intentionally, and publicly dismantling the work of the Nazi Party) and India (which has a thousands-year-long tradition that's still in place, although it has been outlawed since the 1950s).

By using the language of caste, something people are familiar with but generally think of as distinctly Hindu or Indian, Wilkerson helps her readers engage familiar stories from US history in a new way as well as encounter new stories. One small example is the first smallpox vaccine in the United States. While many Americans know that it emerged in New England in the colonial era, few know that it actually came to us because of the wisdom of an enslaved African whose community had been practicing inoculations for generations. His scientific sharing resulted in neither

his freedom nor any credit. This is one among hundreds of illustrations of how the American caste system results in physical violence, economic insecurity, and threat to life among Black people.

This is not the first time the analogy between caste and race has been made, although it is certainly the most sustained. As Wilkerson notes, in the antebellum era, Senator Charles Sumner pointed out that educational segregation was a form of caste oppression, stating, “The separation of children in the Public Schools of Boston, on account of color or race, is in the nature of Caste, and on this account is a violation of Equality. *Caste makes distinctions where God has made none.*”

The power of this shift in framework is that it allows people to engage issues of anti-Black racism through a systemic lens rather than as a patchwork of random individual acts. Anti-Blackness is a pyramid we are born into or inherit as part of the fabric of this country, which some of us get to be unaware of and others are forced to confront every day.

However, as a South Asian with caste privilege who has had to navigate the realities of caste and what it has meant for my family’s opportunities as well as our mind-sets, I see real limitations to the analogy Wilkerson uses. As another South Asian reviewer, Anupama Rao, [noted](#) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “I wonder whether Wilkerson has not politicized race at the cost of essentializing caste.”

Caste is more complex and has more moving pieces than in Wilkerson’s characterization—although it is just as horrifying, violent, and oppressive. To give just one example, the current politics of India wields the specter of Islam as a dangerous tool to unite people across caste in shared distrust of a common enemy (even while that “enemy” is a community that has been present for hundreds of years). This aspect of caste might render Wilkerson’s book richer and more complex. Some social scientists have also argued that the use of a relatively short-lived movement like the Nazi Party in Germany strains the analogy.

And yet, Wilkerson’s real purpose is to force open our eyes to the horrific realities of racism in this country—and to remind us that it is about systems that yield access for White people and erase the gifts and contributions of Black people. In this task she excels, with so many illustrations of her point that it may feel like drinking out of a fire hose.

This book doesn't provide substantive solutions. It doesn't provide complex analysis for people who already understand that racism transcends individual behavior and extends from the origins of this nation to the current moment. But so many of my White colleagues have found it truly meaningful, and so many of my Black colleagues have felt finally seen by it. This suggests to me that it is an essential text for our time, the limitations of the analogy notwithstanding.