

Prologue, Part One, & Part Two

“The Man in the Crowd” (Prologue)

Part One: Toxins in the Permafrost and Heat Rising All Around

Part Two: The Arbitrary Construction of Human Divisions

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson focuses on what it takes to build, maintain, and perpetuate a caste system. Wilkerson asserts that her priority in defining caste is to wake readers up to the reality of its power, particularly in the United States, and in so doing, begin to dismantle it. The book begins with “The Man in the Crowd,” which gives a description of a 1936 photograph in which a crowd of Germans salutes Adolf Hitler. In the photograph, just one man refuses to participate. This short prologue deftly sets up three of the fundamental structural elements of *Caste*. It introduces Nazi Germany as one of the book’s primary examples of caste, establishes brief historical anecdotes as a central narrative technique, and, with its final pair of rhetorical questions, seeks to spur readers into action against systemic power imbalances. At the end of the prologue, Wilkerson asks the reader to consider what it would take to be someone who, like the brave man in the photograph, stands up against injustice—in the past and now. In doing so, Wilkerson both invites the reader to insert themselves into the text, and positions historical events side by side with the present.

Together, Part One and Part Two lay the broad historical and rhetorical foundation for the more detailed analysis of caste and specific caste systems that will be covered later in the book. In Chapter 2, in a metaphor she extends throughout the text, Wilkerson compares America to an old house whose new owners must continually reckon with the damage done to it over time. Just as someone who purchases an old house is not to blame for a leaky roof or damaged foundation, neither are today’s Americans to blame for creating the country’s caste system. However, both the new homeowner and Americans of today, Wilkerson says, are responsible for repairing the damage they have inherited. Wilkerson then explains that she will be comparing and contrasting three caste systems from human history: India’s caste system, which is most commonly associated with the word *caste*, along with two hierarchical societies that aren’t commonly considered caste systems: Nazi Germany and the United States. Wilkerson recognizes that many readers will instinctively resist the notion that the United States is a caste system, a hierarchical social structure that forms the foundation of certain societies. She argues that this is because racial discrimination in post-Jim Crow America is often seen as an individual issue rather than a systemic one. Wilkerson’s argument turns this limited definition on its head, and she positions American racial discrimination as just one historical manifestation of caste.

To drive home her argument, Wilkerson explores the difference between caste and race. She defines a caste system as a “fixed and embedded ranking of human value” that pervades all aspects of society and is inescapable to anyone born within its ranking system. Race, in contrast, is the arbitrary and immutable characteristic that serves as the marker of caste ranking in the United States. Defining race and caste as separate and distinct concepts, Wilkerson argues, is necessary for filling a major logical gap for many Americans.

For example, when Wilkerson discusses the 2016 presidential election in Chapter 1, she recounts the disbelief and bafflement of progressives who couldn't understand why so many working-class white voters had "voted against their own interests" in backing Donald Trump. Because both candidates were white, simple racism directed at the candidates can't explain this behavior, but, Wilkerson argues, caste can. While race and caste are inextricably tied together in the United States, it is caste, in Wilkerson's view, that is responsible for cataclysmic patterns of behavior that continue to harm Black Americans.

Wilkerson's chief means of demonstrating that racial discrimination in the United States results from a race-based caste system is to invoke the caste systems of India and Nazi Germany as points of comparison. To begin connecting these three societies separated by time and geography, Wilkerson writes in Chapter 3 of civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s experiences in India, where he observed the commonalities between African Americans and India's lowest ranked people, the *Dalits* (formerly called "Untouchables"). Like King, both academic and activist W.E.B. Du Bois and *Dalit* intellectual and anti-caste activist Bhimrao Ambedkar drew connections between the conditions of the Dalits and Black Americans. Wilkerson also presents quotations from numerous scholars both in favor of and against racialized caste in United States. Taken together, this positions Wilkerson as the latest in a long line of observers who have explicitly argued that the United States is a caste system. To further articulate the similarities, in Chapters 7-8, Wilkerson gives brief histories of the caste systems of India and Nazi Germany, drawing explicit parallels with the United States.

To delineate the difference between race and caste, Wilkerson argues that America's definition of race is a purely social construct. Chapters 4-6 give a historical and social explanation for the racial categories in America that people within the United States typically take for granted as natural and innate. Wilkerson argues that race, as Americans understand it today, actually evolved slowly over time as a way of drawing a solid line between people who were designated for lifelong enslavement and people who were designated their masters. In the 1600s, instead of using skin color to determine who would be marked for slavery, the self-determined masters originally used religion, says Wilkerson. However, Africans could and did convert to Christianity, which posed a risk to the logic that, Wilkerson asserts, sought to keep them permanently enslaved. To sustain their supply of free human labor, European colonists needed a characteristic by which to define their subordinates that couldn't be changed or hidden, Wilkerson argues, and skin color fulfilled this requirement. As further support for this mainstay of her argument, Wilkerson cites multiple geneticists, anthropologists, and historians who have found that race has no basis in science.

Part Three: The Eight Pillars of Caste

Part Three: The Eight Pillars of Caste draws from the book's three central examples to delve deeper into the nuances of caste, as well as to present by way of comparison more concrete evidence for the existence of such a system in America. In Pillar Number One:

Divine Will and the Laws of Nature, Wilkerson explains the religious justification in Hinduism for the four ranked castes that rule over the subordinate *Dalits*. She follows with a parallel description of a passage in the Old Testament that she argues Europeans, including America's founders, have historically used to justify subjugating people with darker skin.

Pillar Number Two: Heritability concerns the inherited nature of caste, which is passed down endlessly from generation to generation. Both of these pillars work together to imbue a person's caste rank with inevitability, either by widespread belief in divine will or by the ordinary process of human reproduction. Wilkerson asserts that, together, the first two pillars leave no room for subjects of a caste system to escape their assigned rank.

Pillar Number Three: Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating details the steps each caste-based society has historically taken to enforce endogamy, or the forbidding of marriage across caste lines, and why this practice is so important to maintaining caste structure. Wilkerson asserts that limiting marriage and procreation to members of the same caste not only restricts the emotional bonds that can be formed between people across caste lines but also serves to reinforce the traits that caste relies upon to operate. Harkening back to Chapters 4-6, in which Wilkerson maps the emergence of race as a social construct, here she argues that separating people by caste can actually create race by perpetuating the genetic traits that signal a person's caste rank.

With Pillar Number Four: Purity versus Pollution, Wilkerson takes extra care to outline the specificities of the rules regarding purity of rank and the belief that those of lower strata can pollute higher caste people. She pays particular attention to the castes' fixation on the "sanctity of water," which has played a central role in preserving the supposed purity of the dominant castes and dehumanizing the subordinate castes. For example, Jews in Nazi Germany were not allowed access to the water in front of their own beach houses, and African Americans in the Jim Crow South were prohibited from entering whites-only public pools. Wilkerson argues that both of these restrictions were established to prevent the dominant castes from touching "contaminated" water.

In Pillar Number Five: Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill, Wilkerson returns to the persistent metaphor of a house to illustrate why castes need a subordinate category of people who perform less desirable but necessary occupations in a society. She quotes James Henry Hammond, a United States senator from South Carolina who, in 1858, compared Black slaves to the mudsill, or foundation, of a house because of their perceived suitability for performing the menial tasks that allowed society to function. By comparison, India's caste system contains thousands of subcastes called *jatis*, each of which is associated with a different occupation. Wilkerson notes that this means the subjects of Indian castes are assigned a more diverse variety of jobs than African Americans, who have spent the majority of America's history relegated to performing either domestic service or manual labor. She goes on to connect the eventual prominence of African Americans in the entertainment and sports industries to the tradition of Black slaves being forced to sing and dance for their enslavers, a degradation tactic that Nazi soldiers also used against their Jewish prisoners.

In Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma and Pillar Number Seven: Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control, Wilkerson delineates two different attitudinal aspects of caste. She focuses on dehumanization not of individuals, but of groups, which serves to dehumanize every individual within a group by turning them into an undifferentiated mass. To illustrate this, Wilkerson cites how both the Nazis and slaveholders in the American South stripped their captors of their names, belongings, and culture. Wilkerson argues that this helped the dominant castes see the Jews in the concentration camps or the enslaved Africans as objects rather than humans deserving compassion.

With Pillar Seven, Wilkerson asserts that caste systems use terror and cruelty as tools to further distance the dominant caste from their subordinates, numbing their ability to empathize with them as fellow humans. By rewarding members of the dominant caste for committing acts of hatred and violence against the subordinate caste, the system reinforces the hierarchy, discourages dominant caste members from questioning their place in it, and continues the project of dehumanization, Wilkerson says. Later, Wilkerson will assert that empathy across caste lines is the only way to begin to dismantle a caste system, since it is the elimination of empathy that creates and maintains caste divisions.

The final pillar of caste, detailed in Pillar Number Eight: Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority, dictates that subjects of a caste system must never appear to step out of their assigned roles and must always act in ways that affirm the assumptions underlying their rank. Wilkerson describes several historical examples of African Americans being forced to hide their strengths and individuality to avoid the wrath of members of the dominant caste. This, Wilkerson argues, served to protect the white worldview, which hinged on perceiving Black people as inherently inferior to them in every possible way. Fittingly, Wilkerson begins this chapter with a description of Louise Beavers, a Black actress from the Jim Crow era whose only option in Hollywood was to play characters based on Black stereotypes. Like the broken dialect Beavers had to learn for her film roles, Wilkerson argues that caste is a performance that requires people to shoehorn themselves and others into the roles the hierarchy has assigned them.

Part Four: The Tentacles of Caste

Part Five: The Consequences of Caste

Part Four and Five lay out Wilkerson's arguments about how caste systems affect the people living within them, particularly those who occupy the borders of their caste ranking. The wide-ranging impact of caste reaches into unexpected places, Wilkerson says, arguing that a caste system hurts people at every level of its hierarchy, not just those at the bottom. Importantly, both Part Four and Part Five include more personal and historical anecdotes than other sections of *Caste*. Wilkerson uses this narrative technique to underscore how vital individual experiences are both to defining caste and to dismantling it. Caste, Wilkerson asserts, shapes a society's larger structures, like politics and healthcare, by dehumanizing the people who comprise its subordinate levels. To resist this,

Wilkerson says it's necessary to rehumanize them, which means telling stories of how caste has affected them individually. Anecdotes range from Wilkerson's own harrowing experiences of caste discrimination in America, to a woman in Nazi Germany desperate to prove her dark wavy hair doesn't indicate Jewish ancestry, to a Dalit scholar in America who fears other Indian immigrants whose last names signify India's upper castes.

The wide-ranging impacts of caste on health feature centrally in Parts Four and Five as well, beginning with Chapter 11: Dominant Group Status Threat and the Precarity of the Highest Rung. Citing a 2015 study showing increased death rates among less-educated, middle-aged white Americans for the first time since 1950, Wilkerson argues that caste is the most logical explanation for this trend. While wage stagnation and other macroeconomic issues affect multiple racial and socioeconomic groups, mortality rates only rose among one group, the one that Wilkerson identifies as occupying the most precarious rank of the dominant caste. In her view, the least privileged white Americans are the most insecure among the dominant caste because their caste rank grants them only limited power in a society that has otherwise marginalized them. Wilkerson argues that this caste precarity, which political scientists call "dominant group status threat," is responsible for the increase in deaths from drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, and suicide among this single demographic group.

Wilkerson returns to caste's negative health effects, both on the dominant and subordinate castes, in Chapter 24: Cortisol, Telomeres, and the Lethality of Caste. Here, she examines neuroscientific studies that have shown that shortened telomeres, an indicator of premature aging, appear both in white Americans of lower socioeconomic status and in African Americans of higher socioeconomic status. Like in Chapter 11, Wilkerson attributes this to the unique challenges posed to individuals on the borders of caste. The health of African Americans who step outside caste expectations suffers, as does the health of white Americans whose caste dominance feels at risk. Wilkerson also discusses the negative health effects of cortisol release, an automatic physiological panic-driven reaction, which has been demonstrated in white Americans when they see or interact with people of other ethnicities. Fortunately, Wilkerson adds, the perceived threat level drops as soon as the test subjects in these studies are encouraged to consider the individuality of the people they are interacting with. In the final chapters of *Caste*, which are concerned with how to disrupt and overturn America's caste system, Wilkerson argues for the power of viewing others as individuals rather than as part of an undifferentiated group.

Throughout Parts Four and Five, Wilkerson describes how she believes caste warps the perspectives of those who live in caste-based societies. Building on the concept of dominant group status threat, Wilkerson emphasizes caste's particular intolerance for the success of members of the subordinate caste because of its

potential threat to the established hierarchy. She also argues that members of the subordinate caste often marginalize and oppress one another in order to eke out power and avoid being at the absolute bottom of the ranking. Both members of the dominant caste and members of the subordinate caste are trained, Wilkerson asserts, to buy into the superiority of the dominant caste. In exploring these skewed and harmful perspectives, Wilkerson argues that caste changes people's personalities to make them crueler, less empathetic, and more individualistic. Under a caste system, success is a zero-sum game, and the behaviors that result from this belief feed into and work to perpetuate caste.

In Chapter 17, Wilkerson shares the story of one of her notable scholarly predecessors, Allison Davis, whose work is cited throughout the text. In giving a detailed account of Davis's anthropological studies of race, class, and caste in the American South under Jim Crow in the 1930s, Wilkerson presents a vital historical anecdote that illustrates how caste stratification has impeded the study of caste itself. As an African American academic, Davis was himself a member of the subordinate caste and completed his research in the South from a disadvantaged and dangerous position. After Davis and his colleagues finished their study, they published their work as *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. However, Wilkerson argues that the work of white academics, who had spent a fraction of the time on their research, faced fewer barriers during the publishing process, received more attention, and faced less criticism after publication. As Wilkerson argues, even the study of caste itself is vulnerable to the destructive workings of the caste hierarchy, which makes the caste system even more difficult to dismantle.

Part Six: Backlash

Part Seven: Awakening

Epilogue: A World Without Caste

In the final sections of the book, Wilkerson argues for resistance to caste, awareness of caste, and movement beyond caste. In Chapter 25: A Change in the Script, she returns to American electoral politics, which she first addressed in Chapter 1 as a driving factor in her own research into caste. This time, she looks back to 2008, when America elected its first Black president, Barack Obama. Though many Americans anticipated that Obama's election would be a positive turning point in the history of race relations in the United States, Wilkerson argues that it triggered intense backlash in people of the dominant caste. White Americans, she says, mobilized against Obama, forming hundreds of new hate groups as well as political and social movements designed to obstruct and delegitimize him. Wilkerson notes that Republican politicians changed election laws to delete millions of people from voter registration lists, primarily in states where ethnic minorities had recently begun voting in larger numbers. Wilkerson attributes this backlash to dominant group status threat, as defined in Chapter 11. The election of a Black president was such an extreme challenge to caste hierarchy, Wilkerson argues, that members of the dominant caste had to violently undermine it or risk losing their superior status.

Wilkerson drills down into events following Obama's election and presidency in the rest of Part Six: Backlash, beginning in Chapter 26: Turning Point and the Resurgence of Caste with the election of Donald Trump. Though numerous observers believed that Trump's policies threatened decreased stability for working-class white Americans in the short term, Wilkerson argues that this demographic, which voted for Trump at a higher rate than any other group, was not in fact voting against its own interests. In the aftermath of Obama's presidency, the dominant caste's primary interest, she says, was maintaining its own superior caste status, which Trump made clear was his priority as well.

Chapter 29: The Price We Pay for a Caste System examines the results of caste-based voting and policymaking, particularly in America in the years since 2016. Wilkerson enumerates areas where the United States lags behind other developed nations, including healthcare coverage, aid to the underprivileged, life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, and student test scores, all of which, she argues, stems directly from a caste system that values competition and individualism over empathy. In Wilkerson's view, America's race-based caste system is to blame for the country's disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which resulted in an extremely high death toll.

Throughout *Caste*, Wilkerson gestures toward what would be necessary to dismantle America's caste system, but in Part Seven: Awakening, she articulates a more explicit call to action for members of the dominant caste to break free of the roles and assumptions assigned them. Chapter 30: Shedding the Sacred Thread tells the story of a member of India's highest caste, the *Brahmin*, whose encounters with *Dalits* over the course of his life revealed the artifice of India's caste divisions. To irreversibly renounce his caste status, the *Brahmin* removes the sacred thread, a physical symbol of his status, from around his neck. Wilkerson follows this with two anecdotes from her own life that similarly illustrate renunciation of caste privileges. The first involves a family friend from the dominant caste who becomes righteously outraged when she sees Wilkerson being mistreated at a restaurant because of her race. The second involves a dominant caste plumber who is reluctant to help Wilkerson find the cause of her flooded basement until she shares with him that her mother recently died, and they bond over their experiences of loss. Together, these stories demonstrate the vital role that awareness and empathy play in awakening people to the illogical nature of caste as a first step in working to overcome it.

Finally, in Epilogue: A World Without Caste, Wilkerson imagines a future in which all humans refuse to be bound, or to bind others to, the hierarchical logic of caste. Her final historical example is Albert Einstein, who came to America from Germany in 1932, one month before Hitler was appointed chancellor. Once in the United States, Einstein was so disgusted with the treatment of African Americans that he became a civil rights activist, speaking out against segregation and racial prejudice from his position in the dominant caste. Just as Einstein rejected the presumption of his own racial superiority that America's caste system thrust upon him, Wilkerson calls on her readers to choose not to adhere to the expectations of caste, whatever rank they occupy. She argues that much of the responsibility to fix the problems caused by caste rests in the hands of those who have

historically benefited from it. Radical empathy, which Wilkerson defines as humbly listening to and learning from the experiences of others without trying to imagine one's own response under similar circumstances, is an essential step in this process. Wilkerson argues that it is only through radical empathy across caste lines that people can see the humanity which caste systems seek to erase.

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson argues that America is built on an invisible, race-based caste system that is responsible for many of the country's societal problems. Though this includes issues that are obviously related to race, Wilkerson posits that caste's impact also reaches numerous aspects of American society that don't immediately appear to have anything to do with race. Wilkerson is aware that associating the United States with a caste system is unconventional, so to make her point, she juxtaposes the United States with two hierarchical societies that readers may more readily accept as being structured by caste: India and Nazi Germany. Over the course of the text, Wilkerson's position allows her to reframe racial discrimination in the United States, often considered a problem of individual prejudice, as the byproduct of a larger, invisible system of enforced societal stratification. In doing this, she invites her readers from across all caste rankings to consider how caste may affect them so that they can begin working to dismantle it. Parts One and Two of *Caste* provide historical and cultural introductions to the caste systems of India and Nazi Germany, as well as an explanation of the differences between race and caste. Wilkerson defines caste as a fixed hierarchical structure that assigns inferior or superior value to people based on arbitrary inborn traits. Race, in contrast, is a collection of physical characteristics. These physical characteristics, Wilkerson declares, have been assigned meaning and value by the American caste system, and so function as the visual marker of caste in American society. A person's race or the perception of a person's race clues others into their caste ranking, but it is not in itself caste. This means that societal trends that cannot be easily attributed to race may be caused by caste, a phenomenon that Wilkerson will examine in depth later in the text. Importantly, America's caste system also makes it possible to find comparable hierarchies in other cultures that have other markers of caste ranking besides race.

In Part Three of *Caste*, Wilkerson describes the eight "pillars" that create and uphold a caste system, noting examples from the three caste-based societies she examines. She begins with religion and heritability. Together, these two pillars guarantee that a person's caste status is inescapable and permanent, decided by forces outside of their control. Next, she theorizes that marriage and procreation work to prevent people from different castes from building families together. In the fourth pillar, Wilkerson explores the concept of purity versus pollution, analyzing rhetoric that people from lower castes are dirty and that they can contaminate the upper castes through touch. In her discussion of occupational hierarchy, Wilkerson argues that lower castes are made to do specific jobs that are less desirable and more servile than those of the upper castes. Pillars six and seven concern dehumanization, stigma, terror, and cruelty. Wilkerson argues that individuals in the

dominant caste are rewarded for demeaning and abusing people in the subordinate caste. The final pillar discusses inherent superiority and inferiority. Wilkerson ties all her arguments together, asserting that people in the lower caste must always act inferior, even if it's just a performance.

With caste now firmly defined, Wilkerson goes on to outline many of its consequences. While Wilkerson spends the most time on the negative effects of caste on the lower castes, she also pays special attention to those at the borders of caste. For example, she cites neuroscientific studies showing that Black Americans of higher socioeconomic status and white Americans of lower socioeconomic status both show signs of premature aging. She attributes this to the unique challenges of people who transgress the boundaries of caste, both at the top and bottom of its ranking. Wilkerson also argues that those in the dominant caste experience negative health effects because of the stress induced by prejudice and status insecurity. Here, she names a concept that is central to the second half of the text, "dominant group status threat," in which people with privilege suffer physically and emotionally from the fear of losing their societal advantages. Dominant group status threat disproportionately affects people at the boundaries of caste because their caste dominance often represents their only privilege in society. In the United States, Wilkerson believes this causes patterns of increased mortality among white, middle-aged, working-class people.

This destructive dynamic of caste insecurity carries through Part Six, which delves into American history since the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the country's first Black president. In Wilkerson's view, dominant group status threat caused the extreme backlash to Obama's election, spurring the formation of new hate groups and right-wing political parties, an increase in race-based violence, and obstructionist tactics on the part of leaders of the Republican Party in Congress. Wilkerson attributes the subsequent election of Donald Trump in 2016 to this backlash, arguing that a majority of white Americans voted for Trump because he promised to act in the best interests of their continued caste dominance. This is explicitly at odds with the prevailing view among American progressives that white Americans, particularly in the working class, voted against their own interests in 2016. In presenting this argument, Wilkerson argues that caste can fill important logical gaps that race alone does not explain.

The final part of *Caste*, Part Seven: Awakening, asserts that people can begin to dismantle caste by reaching across caste lines to see the humanity in one another. This reaching-out begins, Wilkerson says, with an awareness that society is built on caste and with a willingness to fight against it, even when it means abandoning one's own caste privileges. In the Epilogue to *Caste*, Wilkerson issues an explicit call to action for her readers. She particularly encourages those in the dominant caste to follow up their newfound awareness of caste with radical empathy across caste divisions, especially for people in the subordinate class. In Wilkerson's view, radical

empathy entails humbly listening to the experiences of people with less privilege, trusting their perspectives without trying to put oneself in their shoes. Though Wilkerson emphasizes that awareness and empathy aren't enough to solve the problems of caste all at once, their ability to undo the damage done by caste's dehumanization can't be overestimated. *Caste* ends on a hopeful note as Wilkerson imagines a world in which caste holds nobody back, and everyone can be free to express their true selves without artificial limitations.