

Notes by Marcia Bailey from an incredible book:

*"Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson"*

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Few problems have ever been solved by ignoring them. Whatever you are ignoring will never go away.

America has a caste system that is central to its operation. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining our 400-year-old social order. The country cannot become whole until it confronts what was not merely a chapter in its history but the basis of its social and economic order.

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, groups with certain traits that are actually meaningless for ascribing "value" (e.g., competence, contribution to society) but are deemed important in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forbears designed it. It is rigid, with arbitrary boundaries.

The hierarchy of caste is about power, resources, respect, authority, and assumptions of competence. Race, defined by superficial physical characteristics such as skin color, is the primary tool of our caste system. Caste is the infrastructure of society – its bones. The use of physical traits to form human categories surpasses all others in intensity and power to subordinate.

In the 1630 Virginia census, Africans who were brought to Virginia in 1619 on slave ships were not listed by name, age, or arrival date. Africans seemed to know more about growing rice, cotton, and sugarcane than the colonists, and they were strong. European indentured servants would escape and blend into the general White

population. Slavery was an American innovation created by and for the benefit of the elites and enforced by poorer Whites.

People came to this country and became White. A Nigerian playwright told Wilkerson: "You know that there are no Black people in Africa." They identify by tribes. It is only in the US or the UK that people are labeled by skin color. Race has no basis in science or biology. It is a social concept since all humans are 99.9% the same genetically. We all evolved from a small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa.

Abolition transferred Blacks from slavery into "debt peonage" with Blacks being arrested for trivial wrongs and then having to work as prisoners to pay off the fines levied against them.

In 1934 the Nazis used America to study how to keep the Aryan race pure because the US was the leading racist nation. Nazis were struck by how successful the extensive US race legislation was. Germans called it a "political construction of race." American laws were the main foreign precedents for Nazi legislation. Hitler, operating on instinct, used methods of democracy to destroy democracy. In the US, the silent complicity in cruelty by Whites has allowed our caste system to thrive.

Blacks were, by law, forbidden to use the same cup or door as people of higher castes. Bar tenders in the North who served Blacks would then break the glass they had used. Into the 1970's, the majority of Whites in the South had never shaken a Black person's hand. To this day, Sunday morning may be the most segregated hours in the US.

The division of labor based on one's place in the hierarchy exists so that the tasks necessary for a society to function get handled whether or not people wish to do them. In 1890s Blacks were basically agricultural or domestic workers, and that continued into the 1930s except that by then about half of the men were laborers. Five percent of Blacks were

ministers, teachers, or small business owners of businesses catering only to Blacks. People from the lower caste performed not only a certain kind of labor but labor considered subservient roles.

Blacks also served as entertainers. They were forced to act with good cheer. That allowed Whites to pretend that Blacks liked or accepted their “place.” Some Blacks played roles like a court jester whose jolly nature shielded him from suffering. Sometimes they were portrayed as heavy, but most Blacks were very thin because of minimal food. In 2020 seventeen of the top twenty wealthiest Blacks in the US made their wealth as innovators and then moguls in entertainment or sports.

It’s hard to dehumanize an individual, so the whole group is dehumanized in order to render any action against the group “reasonable.” Individuality is a luxury afforded the dominant caste. When groups become a single mass, it is easier for abusers to distance themselves from what they are doing. Group members are seen as objects over whom abusers have the right to exert control in every aspect of life.

Blacks were given only enough food to subsist. They were punished for human responses to events. They were used for medical experiments, including surgeries without anesthesia and exposure to pathogens followed by experimental treatments. Violence was part of the terror mechanism that kept caste structure in place. Whip use was common in the US, where 400 lashes might be a punishment. President Andrew Jackson used bridle reins made of the flesh of indigenous people. Blacks were burned alive at the stake and lynched.

People were reminded in every interaction of their position. Some social studies and civics teachers replicated a brown eyed-vs-blue eyed role-play to show children how discrimination worked. Given

assumptions about the value of brown-eyed versus blue-eyed children, the students changed their behavior toward each other in 15 minutes.