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# Caste

## The Origins of Our Discontents

by Isabel Wilkerson

Random House

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Longlisted for the National Book Award for Nonfiction,  
the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award, and the  
PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction

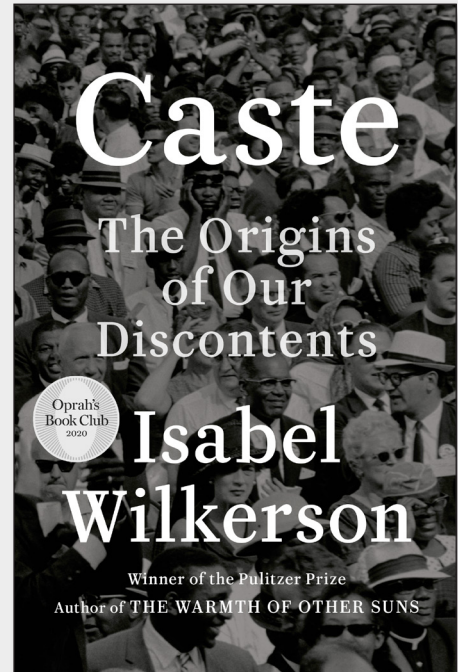
### ABOUT THE BOOK

In this brilliant book, Isabel Wilkerson gives us a masterful portrait of an unseen phenomenon in America as she explores, through an immersive, deeply researched narrative and stories about real people, how America today and throughout its history has been shaped by a hidden caste system, a rigid hierarchy of human rankings.

Beyond race, class, or other factors, there is a powerful caste system that influences people's lives and behavior and the nation's fate. Linking the caste systems of America, India, and Nazi Germany, Wilkerson explores eight pillars that underlie caste systems across civilizations, including divine will, bloodlines, stigma, and more. Using riveting stories about people—including Martin Luther King, Jr., baseball's Satchel Paige, a single father and his toddler son, Wilkerson herself, and many others—she shows the ways that the insidious undertow of caste is experienced every day. She documents how the Nazis studied the racial systems in America to plan their out-cast of the Jews; she discusses why the cruel logic of caste requires that there be a bottom rung for those in the middle to measure themselves against; she writes about the surprising health costs of caste, in depression and life expectancy, and the effects of this hierarchy on our culture and politics. Finally, she points forward to ways America can move beyond the artificial and destructive separations of human divisions, toward hope in our common humanity.

Beautifully written, original, and revealing, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* is an eye-opening story of people and history, and a reexamination of what lies under the surface of ordinary lives and of American life today.

## First-Year and Common Reading Guide



“Should be required reading for generations to come . . . A significant work of social science, journalism, and history, *Caste* removes the tenuous language of racial animus and replaces it with a sturdier lexicon based on power relationships.”

— Joshunda Sanders, *The Boston Globe*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ISABEL WILKERSON, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, is the author of the critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Her debut work won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and was named to *Time*'s 10 Best Nonfiction Books of the 2010s and *The New York Times*'s list of the Best Nonfiction of All Time. She has taught at Princeton, Emory, and Boston Universities and has lectured at more than 200 other colleges and universities across the United States and in Europe and Asia.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is a caste system? How does caste function in the United States today? How does the American caste system function as both the architecture for social hierarchy and the unspoken instructions for daily life? How does caste impact your own life? What are some of the messages and instructions that you have been taught about caste?
2. What is the difference between racism and casteism? Had you previously heard the concept of caste applied to the United States? Why does Isabel Wilkerson choose to use language like dominant and subordinate castes rather than identifying groups by race?
3. Wilkerson uses many metaphors to describe a caste system—the foundation of an old house, a play in which costumes were handed out at birth, the invisible programming in *The Matrix* film series, and a container whose label is out of sync with its contents. Which metaphor resonates most with you? Why? How would you describe the American caste system to someone who has never heard or associated the word caste with the United States?
4. How have tribalism and an established caste hierarchy encouraged hate crimes and violence in the United States? Why is education about American history often obscured by guilt and shame? How can learning about history help us ensure that past harms are not reenacted?
5. What are some of the parallels between African Americans in the United States and Dalits in India? Who was Bhimrao Ambedkar? Why does Wilkerson compare Ambedkar to Martin Luther King, Jr.? Have you witnessed or experienced resistance to the American caste system? If yes, how was that resistance similar to or different from Ambedkar's resistance to the Indian caste system?
6. How does caste impact peoples' demeanor and behavior? How did Wilkerson accurately identify caste rankings while attending a conference on caste? What signals of encoded superiority did she identify? How have you witnessed people reflect their caste position in their behavior and treatment of others?
7. How did the caste system in the United States shift from a hierarchy based on religion to one based on race? How are caste and labor intertwined? Why did enslavers face no punishment for the atrocities they inflicted upon the people they enslaved? How were laws and eugenics used to keep African Americans in the subordinated caste?
8. How have European immigrants navigated the American caste system? How have many European immigrants effectively distanced themselves from the established lowest caste? Why are Black people identified differently in the United States and the United Kingdom than they are in other countries?
9. Why did Harold Hale name his daughter Miss? How did this naming serve as an act of resistance to the established rules of the caste system? Why was Miss Hale confronted by her high school principal? How was she expected to act? Why was Wilkerson accused of impersonating herself by a shop owner in Chicago? Why does she choose not to mention the name of the retailer? Can

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
(CONTINUED)

- you think of any current examples of retailers that have publicly mistreated members of subordinated castes?
10. What did you learn about the history of race and the construction of whiteness? Why is race a social construct rather than a hierarchy based on science? Why does Wilkerson describe the word race as “radioactive” for the dominant caste?
  11. How is India’s caste system different from the social hierarchy in the United States? How are the two systems similar? How did activists like Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jotiba Phule resist the caste system in India? How is compliance with a caste system different from approval?
  12. How did the American caste system influence Nazi ideology? What systems of separation and torture used in the United States were adopted by the Nazis? How did miscegenation laws in both the United States and Germany perpetuate caste divisions?
  13. What does it mean to be complicit in the evil perpetuated by dominant caste members? How were many Germans complicit in the crimes committed by the Nazis? How were many Americans complicit in public lynchings and the torture of African Americans?
  14. What are the pillars of caste? How do sacred texts and stories of divine will keep caste structures intact? Why is it impossible for a person to overcome their inherited caste, even with wealth and celebrity? How is caste different from class?
  15. What is endogamy? How did endogamy laws keep castes separate in the United States? How did these laws prevent dominant caste members from feeling empathy or connection towards members of subordinate castes? How did these laws protect the dominant gender of the dominant caste more than other members of the dominant caste?
  16. How have beliefs about dominant caste purity impacted members of subordinate castes? How have beliefs about purity impacted how natural and man-made bodies of water have been guarded and restricted? Have you received any present-day messages about caste purity and pollution? If yes, what are they and how do they impact members of both castes?
  17. How is the bottom caste in a hierarchy similar to the muddsill of a house? How does a caste hierarchy perpetuate economic dependence on the dominant caste?
  18. How is dehumanization used to uphold a caste system? How were subordinate caste members dehumanized in Nazi Germany? How are subordinate caste members dehumanized in India? How has psychological and physical violence been used to preempt resistance to a caste system? What are some examples of how resistance is met with violence today?
  19. How are ideas of superiority and inferiority enforced and upheld within a caste hierarchy? How do assumptions of superiority impact white people? How have government reforms benefited white Americans? How has caste contributed to the racial wealth gap? Do you believe that a system of reparations should be established to account for America’s history of oppression and enslavement? Why or why not?
  20. What is dominant group status threat? What are deaths of despair? How does Wilkerson hypothesize that deaths of despair and caste are connected? Why do some members of the dominant caste view equality as a demotion in social and economic ranking?
  21. What is a scapegoat? How does a scapegoat caste serve to unify dominant castes? How has scapegoating subordinate castes influenced current systems of punishment? How does scapegoating obscure structural forces? Why does

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
(CONTINUED)

- blame directed towards subordinate castes worsen during times of economic tension? How do you see this scapegoating taking place today?
22. How does a caste hierarchy prevent natural leaders from utilizing their innate leadership traits? Why has the success of subordinate caste members often been met with violent backlash? How has this backlash impacted the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws, and uprisings like the 1921 riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma?
  23. How does caste steal time and psychic resources from members of subordinate castes? What examples did Wilkerson share from her personal experiences? What are some present-day examples of how dominant caste members disrupt life for members of subordinate castes?
  24. How does the dominant caste become the “default setting standard of normalcy, of intellect, of beauty”? How does this lead to narcissism within the dominant caste? Why is the survival of the dominant caste dependent upon the fixed position of the subordinate castes? Consider your own position within the American caste system. How have you been treated or expected to act in your designated role?
  25. How do all members of a caste system absorb messages of caste supremacy? For subordinated caste members, how does this resemble the Stockholm Syndrome? What messages of caste supremacy have you received or disseminated?
  26. Why does Wilkerson describe subordinate caste members who have risen above their station as shock troops on the front lines of hierarchy? How did formerly enslaved people in the United States throw the entire caste belief system into question? How is this perpetuated in the treatment of Black people today? How was Wilkerson mistreated during her professional travel? What recent stories, either in your community or in the national media, have illustrated mistreatment of subordinate caste members by members of the dominant caste?
  27. How do social inequity and caste impact the lifespan of members of subordinated castes? How can caste-related stress lead to disease and greater health risks? What are telomeres and how are they impacted by social and physical stressors? Is your own wellbeing impacted by the caste system? If yes, how?
  28. Why does Wilkerson describe Barack Obama's election as “the greatest departure from the script of the American caste system”? How did Obama's identity as the son of a Kenyan immigrant and a white woman from Kansas contribute to his acceptance in the United States? Why did his presidency push Republicans to change voting laws? How have changes in voting laws impacted voter participation in recent elections?
  29. How did the American caste system impact the 2016 and 2020 elections? How does maintaining a caste hierarchy in the United States benefit white working-class voters? How is a sense of group threat exacerbated during an economic downturn?
  30. What are some of the different messages that Confederate monuments send to members of dominant and subordinate castes? Do you think these monuments should be removed? If yes, how should they be removed? How has Germany memorialized the Holocaust? How is this different than how memorials are constructed in the United States?
  31. Why does Wilkerson describe America as “a less benevolent society than other wealthy nations”? Why do many Americans equate caring for the needs of everyone as taking away from prosperity? How have you seen this perspective influence America's response to the coronavirus pandemic?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

32. What experience did Wilkerson have eating at a restaurant with an older white friend? Why was her friend infuriated by the service, while Wilkerson was unsurprised? How did caste privilege and the recognition of differing treatment encourage her friend to complain to the manager? Have you had a similar experience of witnessing social mistreatment based on caste? Did you respond? Why or why not?
33. What losses have humans suffered due to the divisions established by caste hierarchies? How can a caste system be dismantled? What can we learn from post-Nazi Germany about ending caste in the United States?
34. Why does Wilkerson call for a public accounting of our past wrongs? What will you do now that have learned more about the American caste system? Do you have a personal responsibility to respond? Why or why not?

## FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND ACTION

View the photograph of August Landmesser referenced in “The Man in the Crowd” at [tiny.cc/Landmesser](https://tiny.cc/Landmesser). What do you notice in this photograph?

Learn more about anthropologists Allison and Elizabeth Davis at [tiny.cc/DavisBio](https://tiny.cc/DavisBio). What personal and professional sacrifices did these scholars have to make in order to study caste in Natchez, Mississippi?

Learn more about baseball player Satchel Paige at [tiny.cc/SatchelPaige](https://tiny.cc/SatchelPaige). How might American baseball have been different if Paige was allowed to play Major League Baseball at the beginning of his career?

Watch Isabel Wilkerson's TED talk, “The Great Migration and the power of a single decision”: [tiny.cc/WilkersonTED](https://tiny.cc/WilkersonTED)

Read Isabel Wilkerson's article “America's ‘untouchables’: the silent power of the caste system” in *The Guardian*: [tiny.cc/WilkersonGuardian](https://tiny.cc/WilkersonGuardian)

Read Isabel Wilkerson's article “America's Enduring Caste System” in *The New York Times Magazine*: [tiny.cc/WilkersonNYT](https://tiny.cc/WilkersonNYT)

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

RACHAEL ZAFER is the author of discussion guides for many books, including *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Rachael has led hundreds of creative and educational classes and workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Colorado, and provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. She was the founding director of the NYU Prison Education Program and co-founded the Prison Arts Initiative at the University of Denver. Rachael holds an Executive MPA from New York University and a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan. You can view all of her discussion guides at [www.rachaelzafer.com/curriculum](http://www.rachaelzafer.com/curriculum).

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