

2022

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Recommended Citation

Gota, J. C. (2022). Book Review: Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 6(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol6/iss1/11>

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Book Review

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

by Isabel Wilkerson

Random House, 2020, 447 pages.

\$32 (Hardcover), \$14.99 (eBook).

ISBN: 9780593230251

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When we speak of the race problem in America, what we really mean is the caste system and the problems which that caste system creates in America.

(Ashley Montagu, 1942, as cited in Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 24–25)

In August of 2020, *Fresh Air with Terry Gross* aired an interview with Isabel Wilkerson, Pulitzer Prize winning author and journalist, about her new book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020). From the moment the interview started, I was intrigued with Wilkerson’s thesis: America has a caste system, and it is the larger framework from which our ongoing race and class problems stem. As a doctoral student researching human rights education in the United States, many of those concepts align with the questions I often ask when looking at this country through a human rights lens. If “American exceptionalism” and “the American dream” (along with other American myths) are taken out of the equation, what do

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our power dynamics and systems look like? And more importantly, how can we even think about solutions to systemic inequities if we do not fully understand the systemic causes?

The concept of a caste system in the United States challenges the notion of America as the land of infinite equal opportunity, and its assumed exemption from systemic accountability to its histories and current state. Throughout the book, Wilkerson explores her thesis through historical moments, personal experiences, interviews, and metaphors that bring caste from the background to the foreground of the living present. As human rights connect civil, political, social, economic, cultural, and community rights under one umbrella, caste connects inequities of race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status in America. Looking at these systemic issues through the lens of caste, Wilkerson identifies the underlying DNA of the social ills that plague the American sociopolitical and cultural landscape to one root source, the titular “Origin of Our Discontents.”

From a human rights education perspective, *Caste* highlights an important concept on how we in the United States—and I would also argue the entire Global North—see ourselves, our histories, and our potential futures.

Caste is not a term often applied to systemic inequities in the United States, as it runs counter to concepts of freedom and the great American epic of rising above one’s birth status to become whatever one can dream. However, Wilkerson identifies and defines caste as a system of “subconscious human hierarches” (p. 16), not specific cultures (like India) or specific moments in history (such as the caste system employed by the Nazis) which opens up the word and concept to include the terrain of the United States. Recognizing the enormity of the proposed concept, the case for this framework is presented from multiple angles and sources—connecting the theoretical to the professional and personal, the historical to the present day.

Instead of presenting a linear timeline of events, Wilkerson assembles evidence of caste in the United States as an interconnected sphere of examples. Her intention here is to focus the reader not on a specific event or moment, but rather to develop tools to see the underlying

framework from which each instance has been built upon—or has been grown from. While Wilkerson employs many metaphors and allegories to illustrate these ideas, the most helpful analogy is that of DNA:

Just as DNA is the code of instructions for cell development, caste is the operating system for economic, political, and social interaction in the United States from the time of its gestation. (p. 23).

This shift in rhetoric and framing used to understand our systemic issues in the United States invites the reader to simultaneously see the underlying DNA, what it has built, and how it functions.

Historically speaking, writing about caste in the United States isn't new. Wilkerson compiles evidence that goes back to the First World War with the Nazis studying American systems of oppression for its lowest castes; anthropologist Ashley Montagu's direct observation in 1942; and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s lessons from his visit to India in 1959 where he was introduced at a high school as "a fellow Untouchable from the United States of America" (p. 21). After the initial shock wore off, Dr. King reflected and concluded that "the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India ... It was what lay beneath the forces he [Dr. King] was fighting in America" (p. 22).

Interwoven with pieces of American and world history, Wilkerson brings in personal and professional experiences with caste as a Black American journalist in the United States. From an upper caste (e.g., White) businessman in Chicago absolutely refusing to acknowledge that she was the *New York Times* journalist he had an interview with to being passed up for upper caste patrons at a chic restaurant, these stories bring additional weight to the theoretical and historical. She recounts speaking with a man born in Bengal to the warrior-solider (second-upper) caste who chose to be a geologist. They talked about how each had defied their caste assignments and what it meant to show up in spaces where you are not expected to be. In fact, this discussion picks up from transnational conversations and solidarity movements between oppressed peoples all over the world, including between Black Americans and Dalits in India (see Chapter 3.)

Looking through the lens of caste, I am reminded of discussions around classism, racism, colorism, and nationalism, and how many times I have observed that they seemed like parts of a larger system. Like a caste system. This discursive divergence helpfully recontextualizes the United States within the rest of the world. To put it bluntly, if we look at America without assuming that there cannot be a caste system in place, the clues are hidden in plain sight.

From a human rights perspective, rights, freedoms, and responsibilities are interconnected and interdependent. They are designed to rely on and support each other as a framework whose goal is equality, equity, and justice for all people—which makes it very much the opposite of Wilkerson’s definition of caste as a system of hierarches that require the elevation and subjugation of varying parts of a population based on socially constructed indicators. It was for this reason that I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone studying, researching, writing, or advocating social justice and human rights in the United States.

It is important to note that *Caste* does not speak to the entire history and present experiences of those living in caste systems. This book focuses on identifying a broad concept as it applies to the context of the United States. While other aspects of inequities are touched upon (class, gender, etc.) the principle point of analysis focuses on race as a case study. There are areas that this concept can (and I hope will) be expanded in the near future, but this book’s primary goal is in reframing how we, as Americans, look at our sociological realities, past, present, and future. The purpose of identifying an American caste system is not to draw direct parallels or compare struggles against oppression in global contexts, but to help us see what has always been here hiding behind the idea that it couldn’t happen here. Like human rights are not an “over there” problem, caste isn’t either.

To quote James Baldwin (1962), “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (p. 38). It is imperative that we confront and acknowledge the foundational framework of caste that our societies are built on if we are to have a chance at changing them.

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