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Book Review

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020. Pp. xvii + 476. Bibliography and Index. $32.00 (hardcover).

Caste is not a new concept in the Americas. The Spanish described the social system that emerged in the wake of their colonization of the New World as a "sistema de castas," reflecting their preoccupation with the purity of lineage and blood. The Portuguese applied the same concept to the multifarious society they encountered in India. Caste is not a term that South Asian people used to talk about their own societies, however; it is a term that Europeans applied to them, and which they have since adopted. But it is not a direct translation of some subcontinental concept. In Nepal, for instance, the state referred to its various peoples with the single word *jat*. Anthropologists and colonial administrators across the border in British India, however, classified those same people as castes and as tribes, a distinction not present then in Nepal.

What is it then that the word caste seeks to capture that is excluded by the use of other terms, such as tribe, race, and ethnic group, that also index human difference? It is the idea that castes, by definition, are organized into a formal structure, in which groups are ranked and valued differently, where this difference is maintained by limitations on commensality, sexual relations, and other forms of intercourse, and where certain occupations are associated with particular castes. These attributes are not implicated where any of the other terms are concerned. So, for example, one can refer to people in Africa as a race without necessarily implying that they belong in a system of structured inequality characterized by the attributes mentioned above; there, "race" simply denotes a distinct human group among other such groups. Bring those same people over to the United States, however, and they—and their descendants—become part of a caste system. How that happens is what Isabel Wilkerson sets out to explain in this book.

Wilkerson uses an insightful image to explain the relation of race to caste; race, she says, is the skin, and caste the bones. Race is the idiom through which

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Americans understand their difference from one another as *kinds of people*, but to understand why race takes on the meaning it does in the United States, we must turn to caste. That is what supplies the underlying, organizing principle. The attributes of caste are inherent in the relations between Blacks and Whites in the United States, and it is those attributes that explain the form that race relations take in this country.

This book has been critiqued by anthropologists of India as well as by scholars of race in the United States. The latter see race as originating in systems of economic exploitation, and therefore as being incommensurate with caste. But caste and race in the U.S. belong in the same frame of analysis because they share the same structural features; how and where they originated, and how they might differ in terms of their "history, context, geography, and form" (to quote a reviewer who faulted Wilkerson's argument on these grounds) is irrelevant.[1] If it *were* relevant, it would result in a radical particularism; we would have to apply the same logic to other areas of cross-cultural comparison (e.g., religion, marriage, politics, class, etc.) and end up unable to say anything meaningful about what human beings might have in common. That 'caste' is possibly the only Western sociological concept not deployed in comparative analysis but treated as a unique signifier of India is perhaps due to the desires of both Westerners and Indians, to see India as fundamentally different in its ideology and social organization from the modern West—to quote Dumont, it teaches "a fundamental social principle, hierarchy."[2] Hierarchy, apparently, is not an aspect of the modern West. Wilkerson would differ.

Some have critiqued Wilkerson for attending to the plight of Black elites, rather than to the experience of the Black working class. They misconstrue her argument. Caste is a status you cannot throw off by rising in the class order. It stays with you, as Dalits in American IT firms have discovered to their cost—at the hands of their fellow Indians, of high caste. Had she focused only on the plight of working-class people, it would have been harder for her to distinguish the caste order in the U.S. from the class order. Instead, she brings both forms of stratification into a single frame, to show the limitation of class (or economistic reasoning more generally) to interrogate the Black experience.

Another charge levelled against this book, by scholars of India, is that Wilkerson knows little about caste (in reference presumably to India, because she clearly knows a great deal about its American manifestation). To be sure, caste is a vast and complex subject, but much of that complexity is a matter of scale; India is a continent-sized country with the second largest population in the world. There is no single caste system; rather, there are innumerable caste systems, varying in their form and complexity by region and by religion (Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims in South Asia are also stratified by caste,

even though no religious dogma legitimizes it, as it does in Hinduism). What Wilkerson understands by caste in India are relations between Dalits and high castes, without the complications and complexities of all the social forms that lie in-between. However, this is enough for her purposes. In these relations — between the so-called twice-born and Dalits—are encoded the very essence of what caste means. Not surprisingly, one of the few American anthropologists she cites is Gerald Berreman, who described —in Uttarakhand —a caste system consisting solely of two blocs: high castes and Dalits. That both blocs were themselves internally differentiated by caste made no difference to the way relations were constituted between them. The American racial system could be absorbed into Indian society with scarcely any dissonance. It is this affinity that both Black Americans and Indians, especially Dalits, have recognized over the years; it is what led Martin Luther King, according to Wilkerson, to recognize his own status as an Untouchable when he visited India (22).

Caste is a complex and plastic phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single dimension, whether economic or ideological or anything else. It has changed over the years, locally, regionally and on a subcontinent-wide basis, in response to changing social, economic, and political conditions. It is this very malleability and diversity of caste that allows for the American race system to be treated as a caste system. What makes it so is that it shares certain fundamental features that align it with the social system operating on the Indian subcontinent. Wilkerson addresses these features in Part III of her book, in an extended discussion of what she calls the eight pillars of caste, which are also examined in most accounts of Indian caste. There is one significant exception: in addition to chapters dealing with religious justification for caste, its heritability, purity and pollution beliefs, occupational hierarchies, and the restriction of marriage and mating, she adds a section on "Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control." It is Wilkerson's attention to violence as an essential factor undergirding relations between low (especially Dalit) castes and high castes, and Blacks and Whites in the United States, which sets her work apart from most of the anthropological literature on India. Indeed, if one were to depend solely on the writings of anthropologists, one's understandings of how violence underpins the status of Dalits would be severely impoverished.

The principal weakness in Wilkerson's argument is not that she does not understand caste in India (her understanding is adequate to her purpose, which is to throw new light onto the obduracy of the American system of race), but her invocation of the Third Reich as a caste order. Rhetorically, her purpose is to point out that the Nazis sought inspiration from American race laws, which were a model for the world on how racism could be institutionalized (81), even as the U.S. maintained "a sterling reputation on the world stage" (83). But even the

Nazis thought the "one-drop" rule a bridge too far on the road to racial purity. Contrary to Wilkerson's argument, however, the Nazis were not interested in creating a caste system; caste systems, despite the violence at their heart, are about control of the lower orders, not their extermination. Dalits and Blacks have a role to play in their respective societies; for the Nazis, the Jews did not.

In short, this is a good book and well worth one's time. It brings into a comparative framework a concept which has, in the words of Nicholas Dirks, "become a central metaphor for India" but which had once been used, during the middle decades of the last century, to shed light on the American racial order, to be then forgotten.[3] That this racial order originated with capitalism and the slave trade does not explain its obduracy or its structure. That race in the U.S. is a system pre-occupied with hierarchy, with purity of blood, and with the proper organization of labor (who should do what kinds of work), and that one cannot shake off one's 'racial' status —all matters that Wilkerson extensively discusses— indicates the extent to which American race is consonant with Indian caste. Wilkerson expands our understanding of caste by showing us the permutations it undergoes in places far from where it first emerged. The clarity of her ideas and the lucidity of her language makes the book especially useful for the classroom (both high school and introductory college courses), and the subject matter speaks directly to the experience of American students.

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Notes

[1] Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Caste Does Not Explain Race," Boston Review, December 15, 2020, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/charisse-burden-stelly-tk/.

[2] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. 2

[3] Nicholas Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 83