

Dismantling Racism
Caste by Isabel Wilkerson
March 22, 2022

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents is a 2020 book by Isabel Wilkerson that describes her idea of a fixed ranking of human value on the basis of ancestry and traits that set one group as superior and another inferior, and once set in that ranking uses rigid constructs to confine people to those groups.

In Soapstone's Dismantling Racism Book Group, Bill Poston led a great discussion of the book.

Wilkerson makes a distinction between caste and race: "Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the US."

Wilkerson compares three different caste systems: looking at the way blacks are treated in the US, the untouchable class in India and Jews in Nazi Germany. She writes: "Each version relied on stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through generations." One of the scary things, according to Wilkerson, is the understanding that the dominant group willingly goes along with maintaining their system of domination.

Wilkerson names eight pillars of caste that keep the structure in place. These include complicity by the church, determining that caste is assigned at birth and handed down to descendants, marriage is restricted to those within the same caste, the dominant caste fears pollution from lower castes, the bottom castes provide labor that supports upper castes, the higher caste dehumanizes the lower caste and uses terror and cruelty to enforce caste status.

Wilkerson says it is possible to live in a society without caste. She pointed to the way the allies defeated the Nazis in the WW2 and Germany has today rid itself of Nazis and their treatment of Jewish citizens. She recommends the US establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission so that every American can know the full history of our country. Once awakened to the caste system, we must then choose to eliminate it. And she says in a world without caste we would all be invested in the well-being of others and we would all be free.

Some of us also watched a 2020 youtube interview of Wilkerson by Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, for Politics and Prose bookstore. There Wilkerson said of the segregation she encountered in her first book that: "Racism was not a sufficient word to describe what they were leaving, it was deeper and bigger and something almost primordial about it that was beyond just simply not liking someone, so I began using the word caste and that's what led me to this book."

In our discussions, we had several people overwhelmed with descriptions of brutality Wilkerson related, such as postcard photographs of lynchings members of the mob would send to friends and family or that the Nazis turned to the American South to help them define racial purity. We talked about the fact that the comparison with other caste systems showed the problem was broader than racism and that embedded cultural guidelines and government laws had to change to end the caste system in the US.