

The Village Common of Rhode Island

Aging Better Together

CASTE: The Origins of our Discontents

Welcome to seven conversations on Isabel Wilkerson's landmark book. We look forward to your sharing in this collaborative group learning process.

Preparation:

As you read each week's pages, please think about a personal experience or insight you can share with your group in about two minutes. If nothing comes to mind yet, don't worry!

Timeline for each session:

- 1:00 Phil West and Jim Vincent will reflect on the day's reading.
- 1:20 Gabriella Laurenzo will divide us into breakout groups. Jim and Phil will drop in.

Within the breakout groups:

Make sure everyone has time to share (2-3 minutes each).

Have the group take a deep breath after each speaker.

Keep other people's personal stories confidential.



Call attention to **signs of hope** with the [“Double Victory” sign](#), championed by the Pittsburgh Courier in 1942, then the largest Black newspaper in the United States to show the need for victories both at home and abroad.

A double “V” with both hands is also an American Sign Language sign for “hope”.

- 1:45 The entire group reconvenes to share. Closing comments from Jim and Phil.
- 2:15 Adjourn

Calendar and Outline:

1/16/23

INTRODUCTION TO CASTE

Part 1

What emotional challenges do we feel in reading Caste?

Pages xv-35

How do you react to these observations Isabel Wilkerson makes in Part One?

1. *You cannot fix a problem until you see it. (16)*
2. *Few problems have ever been solved by ignoring them. (13)*
3. *Caste is the underlying grammar we unknowingly encode as children. It guides how we speak and think without our being aware of how the grammar works. (18)*
4. *Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. (23)*

1/23/23

Part 2

Pages 39-96

ARBITRARY DIVISIONS OF CASTE

Many Americans have judged India's caste system harshly. Before reading Caste, did you think of racial injustices in the United States as a caste system?

If your grandchild were to ask about a collection of lynching postcards (90-96) she saw online or in a museum, how would you explain?

How do you react to these observations Isabel Wilkerson makes in Part Two?

1. *The colonists created a caste of people who would by definition be seen as dumb because it was not legal to teach them to read or write, as lazy to justify the bullwhip, as immoral to justify rape and forced breeding, as criminal because the colonists made the natural response to kidnap, floggings, and torture — the human impulse to defend oneself or break free — a crime if one were black. (48)*
2. *To gain acceptance, each fresh infusion of immigrants had to enter into a silent, unspoken pact of separating and distancing themselves from the established lowest caste... Hostility toward the lowest caste became part of the initiation rite into citizenship in America. (50)*
3. *Like the cast on a broken arm, like the cast in a play, a caste system holds everyone in a fixed place. (71)*

1/30/23

Part 3

Pages 99-164

EIGHT PILLARS OF CASTE

Wilkerson lists Eight Pillars of Caste:

- #1 Divine Will and Laws of Nature
- #2 Heritability
- #3 Endogamy and Control of Marriage & Mating
- #4 Purity vs Pollution
- #5 Occupational Hierarchy: Jatis and the Mudsill
- #6 Dehumanization and Stigma
- #7 Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as Means of Control
- #8 Inherent Superiority/Inferiority

Can you recall a situation where you experienced one or several of these pillars of caste affecting behavior? Please recall the moment as clearly as you can and be ready to share in the breakout group?

Short of frontal attack on the religion itself, is there any way to overcome caste systems built on sacred texts?

1. *Hindu belief segregated men into four varnas: (1) Brahmins as highest caste (priests and teachers) from his mouth, (2) Kshatriya (warriors, protectors, rulers) were the arms, (3) Vaishya (farmers, traders, merchants) were the thighs, and (4) Shudra (laborers, bearers of burdens) were the feet. Unmentioned and below these four varnas were the Untouchables or Dalits. (101-2)*

2. *From the time of the Middle Ages, some interpreters of the Old Testament described Ham as bearing black skin and translated Noah's curse against him as a curse against the descendants of Ham, against all humans with dark skin, the people who the Europeans told themselves had been condemned to enslavement by God's emissary, Noah himself. (103)*
3. *The United States and India... both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of sacred texts of their respective cultures. In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to their sins of the past. (104)*

2/6/23

Part 4

Pages 167-
260**TENTACLES OF CASTE**

Can you describe what your thought or the effects on your life when you learned that federal government programs — Social Security, the Wagner Act, the Federal Housing Administration, and others — effectively discriminated against African-Americans?

How can schools respond to those who don't want children to learn about historic events that might make them feel ashamed? Can teachers deal with lynchings and massacres without touching their horror?

What do you make of the story of Isabel Wilkerson being shadowed and queried by DEA agents in the airport?

How do you react to these observations Isabel Wilkerson makes in Part Four?

1. *Centuries after the American caste system took shape along the Chesapeake, the most accomplished of lower caste people have often found ways to transcend caste, but rarely to fully escape it. (106)*
2. *African Americans and Dalits bore the daily brunt of taint ascribed to their very beings: not permitted to drink from the same cups as the dominant castes, live in the villages of the upper caste people, walk through the doors of upper caste homes, and neither were African Americans in much of the United States for most of its history. Throughout the United States, sundown laws forbade them from being seen in white towns and neighborhoods after sunset or risk assault or lynching. (128)*
3. *Enslaved black people were prohibited from learning to read the Bible or any book for that matter just as untouchables were prohibited from learning Sanskrit and sacred texts. (128)*
4. *Sociologist Devah Pager found that white felons applying for a job were more likely to get hired than African Americans with no criminal record. (187)*

2/13/23

Part 5

Pages 263-308

CONSEQUENCES OF CASTE

Have you ever witnessed what Wilkerson calls the Euphoria of Hate? Please describe.

How have you witnessed the pull that Wilkerson describes in a phrase: "Everyone in the caste system is trained to covet proximity to the dominant caste . . ."

Wilkerson gives examples of people forgiving abuses of power and even racially motivated murders. Where do you come down on such acts of forgiveness? (283-88)

Have you seen the "weathering" effect of chronic stress from social inequity and difficult life conditions? (305-07)

Everything that happened to the Jews of Europe, to African Americans during the lynching terrors of Jim Crow, to Native Americans as their land was plundered and their numbers decimated, to Dalits considered so low that their very shadow polluted those above them—happened because a big enough majority had been persuaded . . . that these groups were ordained by God as beneath them, subhuman, and deserving of their fate. (263)

People of color with the most education, who compete in fields where they are not expected to be, continually press against the boundaries of caste and experience a lower life expectancy as a result... The caste system takes years off the lives of subordinate caste people the more they find themselves in contention with it. (308)

2/20/23

Part 6

Pages 311-357

BACKLASH

Do you think race and/or caste were deciding factors when large majorities of white American voters rejected Barack Obama, both in voting booths and in programs he promoted? Can you describe a personal experience of this?

Do you agree with these three historical examples?

1. *Even though the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 ended slavery, it left a loophole that let the dominant cast enslave people convicted of a crime. This gave the dominant cast incentive to lock up the lowest caste people for subjective offenses like loitering or vagrancy. Just as African Americans were seeking entry to mainstream society, the North abandoned its oversight of the South, pulled its occupying troops out of the region, and handed power back to the former rebels, leaving the survivors of slavery at the mercy of supremacist militias nursing wounds from the war. (335)*
2. *After Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he predicted that Democrats would lose the South for a generation for having stood up for the citizenship rights of African Americans. That prophecy would prove to be correct but also an understatement... In more than half a century since*

the prophecy of 1964, no Democrat running for president has ever won a majority of the white vote. (314-15)

3. Ashley Jardina writes that “Trump was ushered into office by whites concerned about their status, and his political priorities are plainly aimed at both protecting the racial hierarchy and strengthening its boundaries.” She writes that many of his supporters “feel that the rug is being pulled out from under them, that the benefits they have enjoyed because of their race, their group’s advantages, and their status atop the racial hierarchy are all in jeopardy.” (328)

2/27/23

Part 7

Pages 361-388

AWAKENING

How can we bridge centuries of enforced segregation? Can we ever communicate across caste barriers?

Wilkerson writes: “The tyranny of cast is that we are judged on the very things we cannot change: a chemical in the epidermis, the shape of one’s facial features, the signposts on our bodies of gender and ancestry — superficial differences that have nothing to do with who we are inside.” (379)

Wilkerson tells about a plumber who seems indifferent or hostile to addressing water in her basement. He left her to move boxes and search for the drain. She writes that she “threw a Hail Mary” and appealed to his humanity. She told him her mother had just died the week before, and she asked him if his mother was still alive. He looked down at the floor and said she had died, years earlier, at the age of 52. Wilkerson then asked about his father, and he said his father was “as mean as they come.” That moment became a break-through of human connection. With this story and many others, she shows the value of human connection in bridging caste. (370ff)

Albert Einstein escaped Nazi Germany but felt overwhelmed by injustice in America. He joined the NAACP and worked to dismantle the injustice. (378ff)