

Wake Up Everybody

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Isabel Wilkerson (Random House 2020), 476 pages

Aysha S. Ames, rev'r*

Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. 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.¹

In 2020, the murders of Ahmaud Aubrey, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor and the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate health, financial, and emotional impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color brought a new racial, social, political, and economic consciousness for many Americans. In seven powerful parts, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, historian, reporter, and sociologist Isabel Wilkerson explores the rigidity of our nation's racial, social, political, and economic constructs in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*.² Throughout the work, Wilkerson, using the power of storytelling, from sacred texts to ancient mythology to anecdotes about people we know such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and even herself, shifts the narrative from race to caste—the concept that there is a system of dividing society into fixed and hereditary classes.³ Using deliberate language such as “dominant caste,” “upper caste,” “favored caste,” “subordinate caste,” and “lower caste,” she pushes the conversation beyond “black,” “white,” “race,” and “racism” to further her central thesis that mere

* Assistant Professor Legal Writing, Brooklyn Law School.

¹ ISABEL WILKERSON, *CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS* 19 (2020).

² *Id.*; ISABEL WILKERSON, *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS* (2010).

³ WILKERSON, *supra* note 1, at 319.

race is not comprehensive enough to portray what has happened and what is currently happening in American society.⁴ She explains that “[l]ooking at caste is like holding the country’s X-ray up to the light.”⁵ If you don’t hold the X-ray up to the light, you cannot know the full story.

This book resonates because all lawyers tell stories. It is especially important that the stories we tell are accurate and complete. Equally important is how we tell those stories.⁶ As law students, professors, lawyers, and judges, we cannot begin to fully tell clients’ stories if we do not understand the social context of the American story. In her exploration of the United States’ “four-hundred-year-old social order,” Wilkerson provides that context.⁷

I. Caste in America

To depict the intricacy of caste systems, Wilkerson describes the eight pillars of caste that are the foundations of caste systems throughout modern civilization—including in India and in Nazi Germany.⁸ Beginning with “Divine Will and the Laws of Nature” and concluding with “Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority,” Wilkerson presents the reader with a logical and progressive narrative of the tenets of caste.⁹ She proffers that caste systems endure when the dominant caste declares that it is a higher power’s will that groups are classified differently based on fixed, heritable characteristics, such as race.¹⁰ This declaration, accompanied by the caution that any alterations to the classification system would lead to the suspected degradation of the “dominant caste,” effectively perpetuates and maintains the system. She further explains that caste is propagated by restricting which occupations members of certain castes can occupy, and ways in which the caste systems are structured to dehumanize, stigmatize, and terrorize the subordinate caste to maintain the inherent superiority of the dominant caste.¹¹

.....

⁴ *Id.* at 18 (“Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division.”).

⁵ *Id.* at 17.

⁶ See Elizabeth Berenguer, Lucy Jewel & Teri A. McMurtry-Chubb, *Gut Renovations: Using Critical and Comparative Rhetoric to Remodel How the Law Addresses Privilege and Power*, 23 HARV. LATINX L. REV. 205, 220 (2020) (explaining that even innovative legal storytelling “is situated relationally to the classic rhetoric traditions” and reinforces harmful paradigms by only telling one side of the story).

⁷ WILKERSON, *supra* note 1, at 17.

⁸ See JAMES Q. WHITMAN, *HITLER’S AMERICAN MODEL: THE UNITED STATES AND THE MAKING OF NAZI RACE LAW* (2017) (highlighting the impact in Nazi Germany of the U.S. model of codified racism and explaining how the Nazis researched American legal codes based on white supremacy to strategically design their plan to exile Jewish people).

⁹ WILKERSON, *supra* note 1, at 101–64.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 131–64.

¹¹ *Id.*

To illustrate the permanence of caste in America, Wilkerson provides powerful illustrations throughout our history, but perhaps the most striking is her recollection of a flight in which she, an African-American, a lower caste woman, was assaulted by a white upper caste man, and fellow passengers and the flight attendant, who was also lower caste, did not intervene.¹² Her retelling is striking in not only how vivid and violating the experience was, but also in its ordinariness. It was a simple reminder that caste dominates even what should be the most seemingly mundane interactions. Caste determines who feels empowered to speak up and who does not; caste can also determine who pays attention to certain interactions and who does not. In essence, “[c]aste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only to how we speak, but to how we process information, the automatic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it.”¹³

Understanding that this “invisible guide” governs the interactions we have with our students, our colleagues, and our clients could prompt us to reevaluate the dynamics of many of our professional relationships—how students interact with each other; how professors interact with students; how attorneys interact with clients and other attorneys; and how judges interact with attorneys and the parties in their courtrooms. All of these interactions are governed by this “invisible guide,” and this “invisible guide” shapes the story.

II. Wake up everybody!¹⁴

The final part of Wilkerson’s book is entitled, “Awakening.”¹⁵ Even though she spends the better part of 300 pages illustrating that caste is enduring, rigid, and inflexible, she is still hopeful that the caste in American society does not have to be a permanent fixture and strongly advocates for “radical empathy,” which means

putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.¹⁶

¹² *Id.* at 297–300.

¹³ *Id.* at 18.

¹⁴ HAROLD MELVIN & THE BLUE NOTES, *WAKE UP EVERYBODY* (Phila. Int’l 1975).

¹⁵ WILKERSON, *supra* note 1, at 359–75.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 386.

Radical empathy is important for law students, law professors, lawyers, and judges. Radical empathy is especially important for law professors, as we are uniquely primed to foster environments which allow all students to tell their stories by the curriculum we plan, the books we assign, and the classroom environment we cultivate. These meaningful and intentional acts help to ensure that stories that are told are not just the stories from the dominant caste.¹⁷ And these actions not only will shape the students we teach, but will extend beyond our classroom when our students take what they've learned into the legal profession. When students approach their fellow classmates and future clients and colleagues with radical empathy, they will hold space for people to tell their own stories, which will build stronger relationships, and the stronger the relationships they build, the better advocates and storytellers we all become. Reader, perhaps one of your first, of many, acts of radical empathy can begin by reading this book.

¹⁷ One of the major components of critical race theory is “counter storytelling,” which highlights the experiences, narratives, and stories of those outside the dominant caste. RICHARD DELGADO & JEAN STEFANCIC, *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION* 48 (2011).