

*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, by Isabel Wilkerson (2020, Random House)

You probably have heard of this book, and if you remember reading James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* or Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, you may feel that you already understand how African Americans experience living in our country and how racism poisons white culture as much as Black. But *Caste* has a somewhat different message.

In this book, Wilkerson compares the caste system of India and of Nazi Germany to the system in this country: she sees the position of African-Americans here as being similar to that of Jews in Hitler's Germany and of Dalits (formerly "untouchables") in India. She believes that our caste system underlies both white supremacy and racism in general, being a system that puts white European-Americans on top, African-Americans of whatever class and education on the bottom, and everybody else in the middle striving to be accepted as whites or near-whites. The characteristics of a caste system, she explains, are the belief that it's divinely or naturally ordained, the fact that status in it is inherited, that it requires marrying within one's caste, that it rests on ideas of purity and pollution and of inherent superiority and inferiority, that it includes an occupational hierarchy, and that it is enforced by terror, cruelty, and dehumanization. Wilkerson traces the development of these beliefs and practices throughout American history, relying on a considerable bibliography of secondary sources (she's a journalist, not an historian).

After setting forth the caste system in the first part of the book, Wilkerson turns to its effects on everyone's life today— our health, our education, our economy. For all of these, the caste system is costly to maintain. In a section called "Backlash" Wilkerson analyses the rise of far right hate groups in response to the Obama presidency and explains Trump's appeal to the many people who seemingly vote against their own interests in supporting him. These people, she argues, are voting to preserve their status as top caste, no matter how poor or uneducated (or well-off) they might be.

Some critics have argued that Wilkerson is wrong to think caste explains more than racism. In a sense the two are one, but looking at our society as a caste system gives one's understanding a valuable jolt. The book is fairly long (388 pages of text), but it is divided into many short chapters gathered into seven parts, so one doesn't get lost in it, and it's clearly written in unpretentious prose. No matter how familiar you are with the problems of minorities in our country, I think you will find new insights in this book, and a new framework for facts you already know.