

Study Guide

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

By Isabel Wilkerson

Spring 2021



Foothills Unitarian
LOVE UNITES US ALL

Covenant

FUC Caste Book Group

Spring, 2021

To help us become better able to be active partners in dismantling systems of oppression, we covenant to:

1. Speak from our own experiences and perspectives, not those of others
2. Listen to others with an open, nonjudgmental mind
3. Refrain from fixing, saving, advising, making assumptions about, or correcting one another
4. Be mindful of the time you take, ensuring that everyone has opportunities to share
5. Avoid perpetuating the use of racially charged language, even when we are sharing what others have said
6. Speak up when you feel hurt or offended, and apologize when you discover that you have hurt or offended someone else
7. Respect confidentiality of personal information and stories shared in this group
8. Be brave, be vulnerable, and risk being uncomfortable



Part 1: Toxins in the Permafrost and Heat Rushing All Around

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. Knowledge of “the hierarchy of our ancestors,” the American caste system, helps us understand our current social unrest and imparts the opportunity for change.
2. Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive; both are interwoven to form the infrastructure of America.
3. Even though we were not on hand at the creation of our caste system, we are responsible for its ongoing tenure.

Questions for Reflection

1. What were your overall impressions and feelings about looking at our current events or even U.S. history through the lens of our caste system?
2. When reading about the “lens of caste”, what did you uncover that you had never heard before?
3. What is the difference between caste and race (or class), and how are they related?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. Wilkerson uses the term “silent earthquake” as a metaphor for our discontent, described as rumblings beneath the surface (*Caste*, p. 11). What are some examples of those rumblings currently erupting onto the surface?
2. What would it take for all of us, as members of our society, to transcend our fears, discomfort, and derision, to see the humanity of those in the subordinate caste?

Chalice Lighting

“We . . . are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even And Yes, not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars and joists, but they are ours to deal with now.” (*Caste*, p. 16)

Closing

“Thus we are all born into a silent war-game, centuries old, enlisted in teams not of our own choosing. The side to which we are assigned in the American system of categorizing people is proclaimed by the team uniform that each caste wears, signaling our presumed worth and potential. That any of us manages to create abiding connections across these manufactured divisions is a testament to the beauty of the human spirit.” (*Caste*, p. 19–20)



Part 2 The Arbitrary Construction of Human Divisions

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. Race is an arbitrary social construct.
2. Caste is a social, economic, and psychological system created at the inception of America.
3. Caste is a deeply embedded structure of ranking that sets expectations from birth for where one fits in a hierarchy.

Questions for Reflection

1. How did you feel about what you learned in Part 2?
2. How has our idea of who is white changed over time? And why do we now recognize race as a social construct?
3. What are the similarities between India's, Germany's, and the American caste systems? What surprised you about Wilkerson's comparisons of the three caste systems?
4. While reading Chapter 9, The Evil of Silence, what feelings and reflections did you have about these true stories of real people's lives?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. Given that race is known to be a social construct, why do you think race is so important in this country? How does race support or reinforce the caste system?
2. In the U.S., how is "affirmative action" viewed by the dominant class? What are other examples of resistance to laws enacted to end discrimination or support equity?
3. Did you know that Nazis developed their laws regarding Jewish people, gypsies, and other "undesirables" by observing and implementing American caste laws found in our southern states Jim Crow laws? When did you learn this? How do you feel about knowing this?
4. In Chapter 9, the dissident theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said of bystanders: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil." As you reflect on the beginning of the book where Wilkerson talks about the one lone dissenter amidst a crowd of Germans giving the Nazi salute, what would it take to be this person, today, in our American society?

Chalice Lighting

"Each of us is in a container of some kind. The label signals to the world what is presumed to be inside and what is to be done with it. In a caste system, the label is frequently out of sync with the content" (Caste, p. 59)

"And my eyes – my beautiful, precious eyes – were growing stronger each day. And I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have

named us, matters more than anything we could ever actually do.” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me, p. 120)

Closing

I, Too (Langston Hughes, 2004)

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes,

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.



Part 3: The Eight Pillars of Caste

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. Wilkerson describes eight pillars that are the necessary characteristics that support and maintain all caste systems – systems that benefit only the dominant caste but harm everyone.
2. The ancient principles of caste, based upon misperceptions, distortions, pseudoscience, and other false assumptions, were, and are, used to justify cruel and unequal treatment of the presumed subordinate caste.

Questions for Reflection

1. In learning about the eight pillars developed by Wilkerson, which of them had the most emotional impact or seemed most significant? Why did that pillar have this effect on you?
2. In what ways do each of the eight pillars continue to impact our society? How have you witnessed their impact? What do we lose when casteism restricts, or even forbids, relationships between and among people different from us?
3. What has been your response when confronted with casteism and the dehumanization of others?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. In what ways have you observed (or participated in) actions that reflected one or more of the pillars of caste? What was your response?
2. What messages have you received that perpetuated falsehoods that Blacks are viewed as “the lowest of the low” and deemed to deserve their plight? What were their sources (e.g., family, school, politicians, the media, others)? What have been your responses when confronted with these myths?
3. How have messages about inequality been perpetuated, ones that originated in rigid laws of purity or the fact that white males could rape black women with impunity? How do we all lose when relationships between and among people different from us are restricted or forbidden?

Chalice Lighting

“The human meaning of caste for those who live it, is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety.” (Berreman, cited by Wilkerson in Caste p. 164).

“People who treat other people as less than human must not be surprised when the bread they have cast on the waters comes floating back to them, poisoned” (James Baldwin)

Closing

■ ■ ■

*“The elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children and various other acts meant first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies.” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, p. 8)*

■ ■ ■

Part 4: The Tentacles of Caste

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. Two key features of caste systems are the use of scapegoating and “policing,” methods designed to keep the subordinate caste “in the basement.”
2. Some key concepts in this section are
 - Dominant group status threat
 - Intergenerational wealth gap
 - Intrusions – a more neutral term Wilkerson uses instead of “microaggressions”

Questions for Reflection

1. What is dominant group status threat, and how is it manifested in the statements, “Who are you if there is no one to be better than?” and “The assumptions of superiority can burden those at the top with unsustainable expectations of needing to be several rungs above” (*Caste*, p. 183). How does this concept help us understand what has happened in the U.S. during the recent past??
2. Wilkerson describes an intergenerational wealth gap between those in the dominant caste and those in the subordinate caste. How have you benefitted or lost due to this wealth gap? – consider “wealth” in terms of opportunities, property, economic/financial status.
3. Wilkerson provides numerous stories about caste status playing out in everyday situations through scapegoating and “policing” – methods to keep the subordinate caste “in the basement.” Can you think of any stories of your own, ones that have affected you, you have witnessed, or even participated in?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. How has the intergenerational wealth gap connected to caste affected your family over time? How has reflecting on the origins of this wealth gap changed your perspective on your own financial situation?
2. How have you, personally, acted in ways that ensured, from a caste perspective, that you and your loved ones “remained better than”? How might you change your ways of being to avoid ensuring that you and your loved ones remain “better than” in the future?
3. When considered from the perspective of caste, where have you observed, participated in, or experienced scapegoating? How did it impact you personally? How might you change your “ways of being” to avoid scapegoating in the future?
4. When considered from the perspective of caste, how have you observed, participated in, or experienced “policing”? How did it impact you personally? How might you change your “ways of being” to avoid “policing” in the future?

5. How do dominant group status threat, scapegoating, and “policing” help us to understand what has happened in our country in recent years? What might we do to change that?

Chalice Lighting

“Racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference.” (Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, p.17)

“It is this failure to care, really care across color lines, that lies at the core of this system of control and every racial caste system that has existed in the United States or anywhere else in the world.” (James Baldwin, as cited in *Caste*, p. xlviii)

Closing

“This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them. That they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. . . . It is their innocence which constitutes the crime.” (James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 5–10)



Parts 5 & 6: The Consequences of Caste & Backlash

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. Dynamics of Caste: rise of fascism, narcissism of inherent superiority, retribution for advancement, and behaviors of the subordinate
2. Costs of Caste: physiological implications of discrimination and societal consequences
3. Dismantling of Caste: symbols, reparations, and telling of history
4. Politics of Caste: The Obama Presidency, the Trump Presidency, and the political system

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some effects of caste? Consider the (a) dynamics of caste within the dominant caste versus the subordinate caste, (b) the costs of caste on health and society, (c) the dismantling of caste in the U.S. versus Germany, and (d) the politics of caste (e.g., Obama and Trump presidencies).
2. How did the U.S. caste system affect the people in the stories Wilkerson shares?
3. How has the Covid-19 pandemic shifted how you feel about the caste system in the U.S? How has your caste status impacted your response?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. What were the effects of casteism on the people you read about? How does viewing these effects from the perspective of a caste structure (vs. racism or white fragility) help you rethink the effects?
2. **Dynamics of Caste** – Proximity to the “coveted” dominant caste, rise of fascism, extreme narcissism, retribution for advancement, “needing to be twice as good”: How have these dynamics played out in the U.S. over the past few decades? What can we do to minimize or eliminate them?
3. **Costs of Caste** – Physiological/health implications and societal consequences: How does casteism change your views on how this structure impacts the lives of everyone? Are your opinions different now than they were before reading this book? How so?
4. **Dismantling of Caste** – Monuments, symbols, reparations, (mis)telling of history: What was the most memorable part of this section for you? Why did it make an impression? What can we learn from Germany in their dismantling of caste?
5. **Politics of Caste** – Obama presidency, Trump presidency, current political system: What is your reaction to Wilkerson’s take on politics and caste? Do you believe that the U.S. still remains divided in essentially the same way it was during the Jim Crow era?
6. What has the pandemic uncovered for you about the caste system in the U.S.? How has the relation between (a) caste status and (b) relative power and privilege impacted your awareness, risk, and access to resources during the pandemic?



Chalice Lighting

“Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinkable expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things” (Caste, p. 70)

Closing

*“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We are given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.” (From Sonya Renee Taylor in *Unlocking Us*, a Podcast with Brené Brown)*



Part 7 & Epilogue: Awakening & A World Without Caste

Key Takeaways/Concepts

1. “A caste system persists in part because we, each and every one of us, allow it to exist” (p. 380)
2. We are not responsible for what others did long ago, but we are responsible for our own ignorance and the good or ill we do today
3. Radical empathy – putting in the work to educate oneself and to understand others from their perspectives

Questions for Reflection

1. As you read, what most struck you about the four stories of awakening? What insights did you gain about how you might more fully break out of this caste structure? What most struck you about these stories?
2. What does Wilkerson mean by the term, “radical empathy”? What insights did you gain about how you might become better able to display radical empathy when interacting with others, especially those whom our caste system wants to place in subordinate castes?
3. How do you imagine your life would be richer if the American caste system did not exist? What actions might you take to dismantle our caste system?

Questions for Deeper Discussion

1. When reading the stories of awakening in Part 7, what insights did you gain about yourself? Give specific examples of what is limiting your ability to break free of the hierarchical caste system? What specific actions might you take to break free of this caste structure?
2. What are the key features or components of radical empathy? Share specific examples of how you might display radical empathy when interacting with others, especially those whom our caste system wants to place in subordinate castes.
3. Share three actions you were willing to commit to taking to dismantle our caste system – (a) one focused on you, as an individual, (b) one focused on the church community or other social network of which you are a part, and (c) one focused on our greater community of Fort Collins or wherever you live.
4. What ideas do you have for how we, as a group, could work together to dismantle the caste system in the U.S.? Remember, even small steps make a big difference. Together, we can do even more.

Chalice Lighting

"A caste system persists in part because we, each and every one of us, allow it to exist. . .

Once awakened, we then have a choice. We can be born to the dominant caste but choose not to dominate. We can be born to a subordinated caste but resist the box others force upon us. . . . We need not bristle when those deemed subordinate break free, but rejoice that here may be one more human being who can add their true strengths to humanity.

It is for the owners, meaning each of us, to correct the ruptures we have inherited."
(Caste, p. 380)

"The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it."
(<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/23/archives/james-baldwin-writing-and-talking-baldwin-baldwin-authors-query.html>)

Closing

"It is . . . tempting to vilify a single despot at the sight of injustice when, in fact, it is the actions, or more commonly inactions, of ordinary people that keep the mechanism of caste running, the people who shrug their shoulders at the latest police killing, the people who laugh off the coded put-downs of marginalized people shared at the dinner table and say nothing for fear of alienating an otherwise beloved uncle. The people who are willing to pay higher property taxes for their own children's schools but who balk at taxes to educate the children society devalues. Or the people who sit in silence as a marginalized person, whether of color or a woman, is interrupted in a meeting, her ideas dismissed (though perhaps later adopted), for fear of losing caste, each of these keeping intact the whole system that holds everyone in its grip." (Caste, p. 383)

"A world without caste would set everyone free." (Caste, p. 388)

