

Notes (Continued) by Marcia Bailey from an incredible book:

"Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson"

February 19, 2021

Deaths of despair, taking their lives slowly or quickly, is unique to the US. Political scientists called it a "dominant group status threat." Status and opportunity started to improve in the 1960s for women, Blacks, and immigrants. That change left the White working class concerned that their skin and ascribed race were losing value. The equality of working class Whites with Blacks feels like a demotion to the Whites.

Having the lower caste (Blacks) rise about them (poor Whites), like Obama as President, is perceived as a threat to their existence, and they fear for their survival. The malaise is spiritual, psychological, and emotional. A person in this position's whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste, his precious possession, which he must save at any cost. Once things opened up for Blacks, Whites reported they were worse off and suffered racism. The greatest threat to a caste system is lower-caste success. It triggers primeval and often violent backlash.

By the end of the 20th Century, the population was so well indoctrinated in racist assumptions that unconscious biases could affect thinking and behavior, even in people who claim to "not see color." Blacks experience biases too; they shape behavior unconsciously. One of the most serious biases is disregarding pain. Blacks receive pain meds at levels beneath the threshold established by the World Health Organization.

When a group is scapegoated, they may be seen as responsible for problems that had nothing to do with them, and people are not concerned about that group's misfortunes.

During segregation Whites hired the least competent applicants for teachers in Black schools. Prince Edward County Virginia had no public schools from 1959 to 1964 so as to avoid integration. Cities in the South poured concrete into city pools, and Whites built private pools in gated communities. A caste system shape-shifts and works around laws.

Caste can lead people at the bottom to perceive competition for resources to be against groups with different skin color in the same economic class. Hair and facial features as well as skin color can be ranked, even within one marginalized group. People are bothered more by someone in a lower rank moving ahead of them than by the already “upper class,” whose advantages seem just the way things are.

Caste systems reward snitches and sellouts—Uncle Toms or HNIC (Head Negro in Charge.) Others in the same caste tug down the ones trying to rise, a phenomenon called “crabs in a barrel.”

New Black immigrants distance themselves so as to be clear they are not African-Americans but instead Jamaican, Grenadian, or Ghanaian. A Caribbean accent can help distance a Caribbean Black from African-Americans.

Sometimes officers of color pay a price for what White men can do. The supervisor of the officers at the chokehold death of Eric Garner was a Black woman, probably under a lot of pressure from male bosses.

The most potent instrument of a caste system is a sentinel at every rung who makes it look like an action was not discrimination. Any of us can be swept up in following a despot. The working class is most susceptible.

Takamichi Sakurai: “Group narcissism leads people to fascism. An extreme form of group narcissism means malignant narcissism, which gives rise to fanatical fascist politics, an extreme racialism.”

The dominant group projects their narcissism onto a leader. Fromm: “The narcissism of the leader who is convinced of his greatness, and who has no doubts, is precisely what attracts the narcissism of those who submit to him.”

Hanif Abdurraqib wrote in *Pacific Standard* that “there is a perverse need to see harmed people demonstrate nobility because that’s how we can believe the myths that suffering builds character and that righteousness will triumph over power.”

Caste strikes fear into those at the bottom when they are around groups from higher castes. Historically caste trumps class. Prejudice can be triggered in the body in 30 milli-seconds. “Weathering” and “Black tax” are caused by continual exposure to sociological disadvantage and the need to be constantly vigilant. Life expectancy is influenced by educational level and race. “Black tax” is higher among college-educated Blacks because they must be extremely vigilant due to being in an unexpected place.

Obama prevailed because of a number of factors including that he was the human equivalent of a Supernova; McCain made some misjudgments in his campaign, most significantly his choice for VP; and the country was suffering a once in a generation financial catastrophe.

Hope was Obama’s mantra. He received great support from the lower and middle castes. He was free from the heaviness of slavery, Jim Crow, and Blacks. His origin story freed people from thinking about slavery.

After his election, Whites thought racism was resolved. Most voters in the dominant class didn’t support him. Many feared the end of the White majority by 2042. Whites felt the need to protect their place in the hierarchy.

The dominant party didn't limit him to one term but they forced him to make change by using many Executive Orders. The Tea Party intended to take their country back. Birthers raised false issues. Hate groups surged. Anti-Black attitudes and stereotyping increased. There was an undercurrent of anxiety about our changing nation. In November 2012, after the election, Rush Limbaugh said, "We've lost the country."

On New Year's Eve 2015, Wilkerson and Gwen Ifill agreed Trump could win. They remarked to each other, "It's all about 2042!" People had not considered the reliable consistency of caste. The two main parties bear the advantages and burdens of the castes they most attract, and with whom they are associated.

Republicans are now seen as the party of an anxious but powerful dominant-caste electorate. Polls were wrong because people gave socially acceptable answers, and then voted differently. Hillary got a small share of the White vote. Fifty-three percent of White women voted for Trump. Evangelicals were, and remain, committed to gun rights, abolition of legal abortion, and low taxes. They are fighting for the America they once knew. Or told themselves they knew.

Every group except Whites supported the Democrats in 2016. A sense of group threat is stronger than economic insecurity. In places with a different history and hierarchy, it is not seen as taking away from one's own prosperity to care for the needs of everyone. Writer Jonathan Chait noted America's singular indifference, unique among developed nations, toward helping all of its citizens. A caste system builds lack of empathy toward one's fellows.

How does caste-identification based indifference to others manifest itself in measurable ways? The US lags in major indicators of quality of life among leading countries in the world. We have more public mass shootings and one of the highest rates of gun death. Americans own

almost half of the guns in the world that are owned by civilians. The US has the highest incarceration rate. Women here are more likely to die in childbirth than women in other wealthy nations. Infant mortality is highest here among the richest countries. Our life expectancy is the lowest among the eleven highest-income countries. Students score low in math and reading compared to other industrialized nations. The US ranks 18th in happiness.

“This is a civilization searching for its humanity,” said Gary Michael Tartakov, an American scholar of caste.

In a 1946 address Albert Einstein told students, “The separation of the races is not a disease of the colored people but a disease of the white people. I do not intend to be quiet about it.”

The tyranny of caste is that people are judged on the very things they cannot change.