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Review of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson

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human behavior, we still need help and encouragement to incorporate sexuality into our practice. Dodd's book is accessible and thorough, and, most importantly, is steeped in the best aspects of social work practice. I'm so glad it is now available.

Melinda M. McCormick
Western Michigan University

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House (2020). 446 pages, \$32 (hardcover).

Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* is a fascinating meditation on racism in the United States and a reinterpretation of its underpinnings. Her first book, the highly acclaimed *The Warmth of Other Suns*, is an exemplary work of narrative non-fiction that traced the exodus of Black families out of the Jim Crow South early in the 20th century. In contrast, *Caste* is a unique and impressionistic work that incorporates the author's personal experiences and observations, comparative historical analysis, and evocative metaphors, parables, and allegories, all in the service of an extended argument for the centrality of caste in understanding racism.

Wilkerson refers, of course, to the now-illegal, yet pervasive, Hindu-based system of cultural, economic, and social hierarchy that has existed for millennia in India. In the 1930s and 1940s, Black and White scholars conducted field work in the southern United States, of which Gunnar Myrdal's classic *An American Dilemma* is the best known. One of Wilkerson's most interesting chapters recounts the travails of a Black academic, Allison Davis, and his colleagues, to complete his field research in the midst of such hyper-segregation. These scholars argued that Jim Crow comprised an American version of the Indian caste system. However, other contemporary scholars and activists objected that to view racial oppression through the lens of caste was a grave mistake. First, the seemingly endless persistence of caste in India, they believed, implied that fundamental change was practically impossible. Second, the sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox, for one, argued the concept of caste diverted focus away from the uniquely savage system of racial

capitalism and economic exploitation of African Americans in the American South.

Nevertheless, it is this venerable intellectual framework that Wilkerson seeks to revive. Caste, she argues, creates the mental structures that underlie racism and support pervasive racial inequality, shaping social interactions, economic opportunities, cultural practices, cognitive processes (e.g., implicit bias), and prevailing norms in malign, hierarchical ways. As Wilkerson succinctly puts it, "Caste is the bones, race is the skin." She identifies eight "pillars" of caste societies that justify and enforce this system of social domination: divine will, heritability, the control of marriage and mating, purity vs. pollution, occupational hierarchy, dehumanization and stigma, terror and cruelty as means of enforcement, and inherent superiority/inferiority. In a startling chapter on Hitler's Germany, we learn that Nazi legal scholars drew directly on Jim Crow laws for guidance in devising racial laws on such matters as intermarriage, miscegenation, and the notorious "one drop" rule.

Her purpose in comparing India, Germany, and the United States is to illustrate commonalities in the workings of racial oppression across borders, and she offers two examples. When Martin Luther King visited India in 1959, he was taken aback when introduced to a crowd as an American "untouchable" or Dalit, the lowest caste. However, he quickly came to embrace the term for himself and his fellow African Americans. Similarly, after Albert Einstein arrived in the US in 1933, he swiftly became a vocal supporter of civil rights, noting that, as a Jew, he could easily empathize with how Blacks in his new country felt about racial discrimination.

Under Wilkerson's skillful guidance, caste becomes a powerful lens with which to view the textures of racial inequality. She offers many accounts of the everyday racism that she, an African American professional woman, has experienced as a citizen, air traveler, and reporter. In describing her and others' stories of being disrespected, she pointedly avoids racial identifiers and frames them instead as fraught encounters between members of lower and upper castes. In one memorable case, a store owner, who had previously agreed to be interviewed by Wilkerson, refused to believe on meeting her in person that she was a reporter for the *New York Times*. In her terms, this upper caste person was threatened by a lower caste person who has risen above her station. In an increasingly diverse

society, multiply these status anxieties a millionfold and, presto, a cultural and political backlash is bound to erupt.

It boiled over with the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the January 6, 2021 deadly Capitol insurrection by a pro-Trump mob—a white riot—after he lost his reelection bid. The United States faces a growing crisis of governance directly tied to the ongoing demographic transition by which non-Hispanic whites will no longer be the majority caste within a few decades. In response, the far right and most of the Republican Party seek to lock in minority rule via the courts, voter suppression, and gerrymandering, supported by the antidemocratic features of the Senate and the Electoral College. Moreover, a kind of multiracial whiteness may be developing among some lighter-skinned Hispanics and Asians, which could allow a reconstituted upper caste to extend its numerical majority and political dominance.

In a moving final chapter, the author finds herself in her basement with a white plumber wearing a MAGA hat. They are neither talking nor locating the source of a water leak, so she seeks to find common ground by mentioning the recent death of her mother and asking about his own mother. She had died years before, but they bond over their losses and the mood suddenly lightens. Their relationship is transformed and the previously indifferent plumber miraculously finds the motivation to fix the problem. After he leaves, he unexpectedly returns to her house to check on the water heater. They chat amiably, she reports, “almost like family.”

In the end, Wilkerson contends that history, even that of India, Germany, and the U.S., shows that the divisions engendered by caste are neither immutable nor permanent. Caste is a treatable disease, like cancer. What is needed, she believes, is “radical empathy”—walking in each other’s shoes, recognizing that our common humanity is more significant than our differences, and accepting that all people have intrinsic worth. It is the upper caste—i.e., white people—who bear the most responsibility to change. As her story of the plumber suggests, it is possible to reach across racial and cultural lines. But can this be scaled up? After all, it was she, the lower caste member, who initiated the conversation that broke the ice. The hard challenge is to motivate a large majority of white people to recognize that a vastly unequal, racialized caste society is not worth upholding, and to care enough to join in its transformation. Unfortunately, the di-

mensions of this task are daunting: in the 2020 election, 58 percent of white voters supported Trump. How to change this is not clear, but we must.

Reading *Caste* is an unforgettable experience, not least for the author's literary skills and moral depth. However, it is not without flaws. The emphasis on caste obscures the realities of how class interacts with race. The personal experiences she describes do not, by and large, reflect the daily struggles of poor and blue-collar Black and Brown people in the U.S. The vastly disparate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color results from longstanding inequities in housing, education, employment, and health care, all of which receive little attention. Although caste has limits as an analytical framework for understanding racism, Wilkerson finds creative ways to deploy it to reveal deep structures of oppression. A more conventional book might have focused on the political and economic structures that maintain racial inequality in the United States, but that would probably have been a less imaginative, less intimate, and less original work. Highly recommended for students, faculty, and all human beings.

Edward U. Murphy
Northeastern University

John G. McNutt, *Technology, Activism, and Social Justice in a Digital Age*. Oxford University Press (2018). 240 pages, \$34.95 (paperback).

To say globalization and the Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) revolution have profoundly impacted the world would be an understatement. Locally and globally, people are wired between friends, families, groups, and communities. Interconnect-edness facilitated by ICTs has had a number of positive outcomes for people around the world, such as the sharing of knowledge, culture, art, music, and creativity, as well as affordable and immediate widespread communication. ICTs have also fostered myriad challenges and negative effects regarding human health and well-being, digital inequality, information poverty, mass surveillance,