

CASTE, RACE—AND CLASS

FEW TODAY CAN doubt the centrality of the division in American society that goes by the name of race. The police violence to which black people in the US are routinely subjected has become more widely visible, thanks to cellphone videos and social media. The names of those killed by the police in the past few years, across the country—Eric Garner in New York, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, Jacob Blake in Wisconsin, Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Rekia Boyd in Chicago, George Floyd in Minneapolis, to name but a few—are borne on the placards of protests often galvanized by working-class communities.

Yet despite the inescapable significance of the colour line in the US, its basis is curiously elusive. Race, needless to say, is not a biological classification. Even when considered as a socio-cultural category, it cannot account for the persistent forms of oppression and exclusion faced by African-Americans, in contrast to other groups—as illustrated by the famous anecdote, told by Malcolm X among others, of a dark-skinned friend who put on a turban and was duly seated and served in a segregated restaurant in Atlanta. Colour alone was not the issue. Whether or not the story is true, the mere possibility that such a stunt might work points to an aspect of African-American identity that lies beyond the physical markers of ‘race’ or ethnic ancestry alone.

Nor is anti-black racism in the US a form of xenophobia, as might be said of prejudice against immigrants in Europe. The American form is mitigated, not deepened, by signs of foreign extraction. Malcolm X, for one, made that principle the foundation of his political philosophy. From his original commitment to the faux-exoticism of the Nation of Islam sect to the pan-Africanism of his final years, he sought to raise black Americans generally to the status of visiting Africans. As part of that project, he

called—like a number of black leaders before and since—for the recognition of his people as an oppressed nationality. Yet black people in America do not constitute a nation. They have no territory or economic life of their own; black culture is archetypically American. While some have been attracted to nationalist movements, the vast majority of blacks have aspired not to secede but to integrate.

The nation is not the only type of community to which African-Americans have been ascribed. In recent years the notion of ‘caste’, by analogy with the position of ‘untouchables’ in India, has come to the fore. In 2002, the Berkeley sociologist Loïc Wacquant depicted slavery, Jim Crow, the Northern ghetto and the prison system as successive instruments for shoring up a ‘racial-caste’ system, combining the extraction of labour with social ostracization. Drawing on Wacquant’s work, civil-rights advocate Michelle Alexander likewise analysed the mass incarceration of African-Americans as the reincarnation of a racial-caste system in *The New Jim Crow*.¹ At the same time, *New York Times* feature writer Isabel Wilkerson wrote of a Southern caste system in her book on the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Wilkerson has now produced a full-blown theoretical elaboration in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, a 500-page blockbuster that has been on US best-seller lists for the past year.² Given these prominent efforts to deploy the terminology of caste to define the situation of US blacks, it may be useful to review their history and consider the lessons that might be drawn from it for future attempts at characterization.

American caste theory

Though it sounds novel today, there is a long history of describing African-Americans as a caste. In the mid-19th century, the term was current among advocates for black rights such as Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. In that revolutionary epoch there was reason to hope that black oppression would be swept away along with chattel slavery. Calling it ‘caste’, by analogy with the

¹ Loïc Wacquant, ‘From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the “Race Question” in the US’, NLR 13, Jan–Feb 2002; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colourblindness*, New York 2010.

² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, New York 2010; Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York 2020.

caste system in India, defined it as foreign, retrograde, outmoded. In the 1930s, the term was revived in the US social sciences by the ‘caste school of race relations’, centred at Chicago and Yale. By then, the structures of Jim Crow segregation seemed as stable and unchanging as the Indian system was thought to be. In that new context, an analogy between the two could suggest that the Southern way of life was capable of resisting change indefinitely. Robert E. Park, the doyen of Chicago urban sociology, wrote in 1937: ‘Slavery is dead, and no one now defends it. But caste remains and is still so much a part of the natural and expected order that few people in the South either question its right to exist or discuss its function.’³

Park’s Chicago colleagues did not go so far as to dismiss the possibility of reform, but took segregation as a given—a standpoint conceptually supported by the terminology of caste. A case in point was *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (1941) by Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner and Mary Gardner, supervised by W. Lloyd Warner. With his wife Elizabeth, Davis undertook courageous fieldwork in a small town in 1930s Mississippi.⁴ They found that, though blacks were socially inferior to whites as a group, individual black people were able to improve their class position to a certain extent. If more blacks were helped to do so, Warner and Davis argued, the two communities could reach parity in status and opportunity—without challenging the ‘separate but equal’ framework that was the legal cornerstone of Jim Crow. They held that the rules governing separation were enforced by both groups. As Davis wrote, ‘For learning and maintaining the appropriate caste behaviour, an individual of either the Negro or the white group is rewarded by approval and acceptance from his caste.’⁵

Over the next decade, Warner, Davis and their collaborators accumulated a vast amount of data on African-American social conditions. The Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal would draw upon their material,

³ Robert Park, ‘Introduction’ to Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South*, New York 1970 [Chicago 1937], p. xxviii.

⁴ For a recent biographical study see David Varel, *The Lost Black Scholar: Resurrecting Allison Davis in American Social Thought*, Chicago 2018.

⁵ W. Lloyd Warner, ‘American Caste and Class’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1936, p. 235; W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis, ‘A Comparative Study of American Caste’, in Edgar Thompson, ed., *Race Relations and the Race Problem*, Durham NC 1939, p. 245; Allison Davis, ‘Caste, Economy and Violence’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1945, pp. 8–9.

along with their concept of an American racial-caste system, for his best-selling, Carnegie-funded mega-study, *An American Dilemma* (1944). For Myrdal, as for the Chicago sociologists, the concept of caste served to obscure class divisions and enshrine the racist status quo as a fact of life. But where Warner and Davis presented the colour line as a self-acting system, Myrdal identified an interest behind it: 'lower-class whites' who, unlike the upper and middle classes, competed with black labour. 'Caste struggle' was said to explain American social reality more profoundly than the class struggle, white workers' caste interests leading them to violate the principle of equality of opportunity on which the US was supposedly founded.⁶ 'In America', Myrdal would remark a quarter-century later, 'the real antagonists are the poor whites and the Negroes.'⁷

The terminology of caste was heavily criticized at the time by some of Warner and Davis's former researchers, including Franklin Frazier and Charles Johnson—and most formidably, as we shall see, by the black Marxian scholar Oliver Cox.⁸ It fell into disuse from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, a second period of advance for black rights. Associating African-Americans with a rigid, millennia-old system did not suit the goal of liberal integration pursued by the Civil Rights movement. When the limits of that project became apparent in the late 1960s, black militants preferred to compare their struggle to the rising anti-imperialist movements shaking off white rule in Asia, Africa and the Near East. The return of 'caste' in the 2010s signalled another period of defeat, whose hallmark has been the disproportionate ensnaring of black people in the expanded penal system that Alexander dubbed *The New Jim Crow*. Bringing back the notion of caste in the US reflected increasing despair at the prospect of integration.

International hit

This is the context in which Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste*—hailed by Oprah in her inimitable fashion as 'Magnificent. Profound. Eye-opening. Sobering. Hopeful'—has become a major international bestseller. It

⁶ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York 1944, pp. 676, 597.

⁷ Gunnar Myrdal in 'Analogues and Homologues of Caste Systems: Discussion', Anthony De Reuck and Julie Knight, eds, *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*, Boston 1967, pp. 74–91.

⁸ Daniel Immerwahr, 'Caste or Colony?: Indianizing Race in the United States', *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2007.

is worth asking what *Caste* sets out to do and how it relates to these earlier traditions. Wilkerson herself is an accomplished journalist, equally at home penning glitzy celebrations of the fashion world and eloquent accounts of poor blacks' struggles. Born in DC in 1961, she comes from a professional black middle-class family, her father a civil engineer and former Tuskegee Airman; her parents met while both were studying at Howard University. After Theodore Roosevelt High, a school for diplomats' children, Wilkerson, too, graduated from Howard, where she edited the college magazine. She interned at the *LA Times* and *Washington Post* before joining the *New York Times*, where she rose from metropolitan reporter to national correspondent to Chicago bureau chief in the space of just six years. At 33, she won a Pulitzer Prize for her moving profile of a Chicago South Side fourth-grader battling to keep his siblings in school.

Wilkerson's first book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, brought the same ethos of imaginative sympathy for black lives to bear on the Great Migration. An episodic oral history reconfigured as a narrative non-fiction collage, the work was a runaway hit, widely compared to Alex Haley's *Roots*, and earned Wilkerson a National Humanities Medal from the Obama White House. *The Warmth of Other Suns* deployed the notion of a Southern caste society arising out of slavery, drawing on Myrdal's use of the term in *An American Dilemma*. Here, Wilkerson contrasted the racialized caste system of the Jim Crow South, 'as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay', to the relative freedoms of the cacophonous Northern cities, where the free-spirited individualism of immigrants and newcomers, the desire for profit and more fluid cultural and economic relations worked to the benefit of the six million black Americans who made the trek, however fraught and exploitative conditions still remained.⁹

Buoyed by the book's success, Wilkerson set about a more ambitious project. Her aim in *Caste* was to 'dig up the taproots of hierarchy'—to understand the origins, operation, evolution and consequences of what she now called not the Southern but the American caste system. 'The issue of caste was to my mind the basis of every other *ism*', she writes. Besides, 'Moving about the world as a living breathing caste experiment myself, I wanted to understand the hierarchies we have to navigate to pursue our work, our dreams.'¹⁰ Wilkerson draws explicitly on the work

⁹ Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, pp. 8, 250–1.

¹⁰ Wilkerson, *Caste*, pp. 28, 171, 27; henceforward, *iw*.

of the interwar 'caste school' anthropologists, Warner, and especially Allison Davis—an impeccably tailored academic with the sculpted, square-jawed face of a film star—whom she describes in the book's acknowledgements as her 'spiritual father'.¹¹ In one respect *Caste* represents a step beyond the work of Davis, Warner and their collaborators. Just as the Indian Dalit leader Ambedkar reached out to W. E. B. Du Bois in 1946, and Martin Luther King is said to have declared himself an untouchable on his visit to India in 1959, so Wilkerson embarks upon her book with a desire 'to reach out across the oceans'. Instead of concentrating solely on the US, she aims to extend her thesis by comparing the position of African-Americans to Indian untouchables and European Jews—'the three major caste hierarchies'.¹²

Wilkerson defines caste as a 'fixed social hierarchy', a ranking of human worth on the basis of ancestry or immutable traits, which assures the supremacy of some groups over others by using tightly policed boundaries to keep them all in their assigned positions.¹³ She maps this abstract definition onto the ethnic populations that make up American society, presenting the prevailing liberal view of their relative social status as an anthropological given: whites as 'dominant', Asians and Latinos as 'middle castes' and African-Americans on the bottom. Unlike Warner and Davis, Wilkerson does not depict the American caste system as operating autonomously, with each caste rewarding and disciplining its own members. Instead, like Myrdal, she sees it as perpetuated by the mass of 'lower-class whites', motivated by feelings of superiority or fear of losing their place in the world. She warns that those who see white workers voting for the racist right as acting against their own interests failed to grasp that 'maintaining the caste system' *was* in their interest.

The origins of the US caste system lay with the first Virginia colonists: 'If they were to convert this wilderness, they would need to conquer, enslave or remove the people on it.' Wilkerson's explanation is essentially a moral one: the colonists fell prey to the temptation of 'entitled expansion'—'greed eclipsed conscience.' To justify their plans, 'they took pre-existing notions of their own centrality, reinforced by their self-interested interpretation of the Bible, and created a hierarchy of who could do what, who could own what.'¹⁴ The descendants of those

¹¹ IW, pp. 245, 391.

¹² IW, pp. 27, 99.

¹³ IW, pp. 27, 380, 171, 17, 68.

¹⁴ IW, p. 23.

at the top grew up accustomed to ‘unearned deference from the subjugated group’. On this ladder of humanity, the English Protestants were at the very top, with their guns and resources, and the African captives at the bottom:

The dominant caste controlled all resources, controlled whether, when, and if a black person would eat, sleep, reproduce, or live. The colonists created a caste of people who would by definition be seen as dumb because it was illegal to teach them to read or write, as lazy to justify the bullwhip, as immoral to justify rape and forced breeding, as criminal because the colonists made the natural response to kidnap, floggings and torture—the human impulse to defend oneself or break free—a crime if one were black.¹⁵

The slave system, Wilkerson writes, was enforced by ‘the poorer members of the dominant caste, who tied their lot to the caste system rather than to their consciences.’ *Caste*’s argument is that this underlying social hierarchy predates notions of race. For Wilkerson, ‘race’ refers to physical traits that have been allotted arbitrary meanings—people who are gradations of brown, beige, ivory assigned to categories of ‘black’ or ‘white’. Its categories are fluid, superficial, subject to periodic re-definition to meet the needs of the dominant caste, as with the incorporation of non-WASPs into the ‘white race’. Wilkerson’s metaphors start to proliferate as she explains that caste is the grammar that structures the language of race, ‘the bones beneath the skin’, the beams and joists of the national house, the infrastructure of our subdivisions, the subconscious code maintaining the architecture of human hierarchy, an operating system for economic and social interactions, a cultural DNA, a wordless usher guiding us to our seats, an intravenous drip into the mind.¹⁶

In the American caste system, she argues, rank is usually signified by ‘what we call race’. But while they overlap, race and caste are not synonymous. Race is ‘the visible decoy’, ‘the primary tool’, ‘the front man’ for the caste system, doing its heavy lifting, or a ‘visual cue’, a ‘historic flashboard’, indicating to what caste an American should be assigned. Racism for Wilkerson is that which mocks, harms or ascribes inferiority on the basis of ‘the social construct of race’; she sees it as a continuum, not an absolute. Casteism is about keeping people in their place, to maintain your own advantage in the hierarchy. It is ‘the granting or withholding of respect, status, honour, attention, privileges, resources,

¹⁵ IW, p. 48.

¹⁶ IW, pp. 16–19, 24, 33.

benefit of the doubt and human kindness to someone, on the basis of their perceived rank or standing.' She brushes the question of class aside, as a merely temporary condition ('if you can act your way out of it, then it is class').¹⁷

Though Wilkerson positions *Caste* as a global investigation, the treatment of her non-American examples is summary in the extreme. Her discussion of the position of the Nuremberg Laws omits any consideration of the preceding history of the European Jews or the broader context for the rise of Nazism. Instead, Wilkerson concentrates on the story of how Nazi researchers looked to the Jim Crow system for inspiration as they drafted Hitler's 'blood law', impressed by the way the US had managed to retain its international reputation despite its racial segregation (even Hitler drew the line at the Southern 'one drop' rule).¹⁸ India, too, is treated chiefly as a mirror held up to the American way of life. 'The United States and India are profoundly different from each other', Wilkerson informs us; and yet, 'as if operating from the same instruction manual', both countries adopted similar methods of maintaining rigid lines of demarcation. Both used religious legitimization: *Caste* draws a parallel between the Old Testament tale of Noah's son Ham and the Hindu origin story of the *varnas*, the four major caste divisions, produced by the Creator who drew the Brahmin from his head, the Kshatriya from his arm, the Vaishya from his thigh and the Shudra from his foot—respectively: to educate, to fight, to farm and trade, and to serve the others (untouchables being excluded from the holy text).¹⁹ Wilkerson concedes that the Indian system of tens of thousands of sub-castes, or *jatis*, each jealously guarding its modicum of privilege against the families grouped below, is 'infinitely more elaborate' than that of the US. Nevertheless, in her account the similarities predominate. Just as African-Americans toiled in the tobacco fields of Chesapeake, Dalits plucked cotton in Nandurbar. The Americans used 'physical features to tell the castes apart', while Indians relied on surnames, accents and clothing. Both countries outlawed discrimination—India in 1948, the US in 1964—but in both, the caste system lives on.²⁰

Wilkerson gleans from this investigation eight features that constitute the 'pillars of caste'. First, God's will—the belief that a social hierarchy

¹⁷ IW, pp. 18–19, 68–70, 106.

¹⁸ IW, pp. 83–8.

¹⁹ IW, pp. 74–5, 101–3.

²⁰ IW, pp. 132, 74–5.

is divinely ordained. Second, the hereditary nature of roles and rank. Third, a ban on cross-caste intermarriage. Fourth, an association of the lowest strata with pollution. Fifth, occupational hierarchy—a moral ranking of ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ jobs. Sixth, the stigmatization and dehumanization of the lowly. Seventh, violent enforcement of the above. Eighth, the belief that superiority and inferiority are innate.²¹ Beneath the varying forms of race relations in America—slavery, Jim Crow, anti-discrimination—this caste structure has persisted, Wilkerson argues, flaring up to reassert itself in eras of upheaval, receding beneath the surface in times of calm.²²

If the American caste hierarchy is so powerful, how did the country elect a two-term black president? Wilkerson enthuses over Obama’s personal qualities—a human supernova, whose charisma and oratory matched or exceeded that of any other president—his ‘Harvard-trained wife’ with as much star power as her husband, a telegenic American dream family and ‘scrupulous, near-flawless’ campaign.²³ His back-story—dominant-caste mother and absent Kenyan father—was free from ‘the heaviness of slavery’ and did not trigger the same ‘discomfort’ as that of everyday black people. Nevertheless, Wilkerson argues, Obama won despite white majority opposition: only 43 per cent of whites voted for him in 2008, and 39 per cent in 2012—albeit this applied to every Democratic candidate since LBJ. After the humiliation of living under Obama, the dominant caste’s reaction was to rally behind Trump.²⁴ Added to this, Wilkerson has plenty of stories from her own stellar career to show that racial caste is ‘a living, breathing thing’: a fashion star who wouldn’t speak to her when she arrived to interview him for the *New York Times*, because he was waiting to be interviewed by someone from the *New York Times*; a rude passenger on a first-class flight; people who knock on her front door and, when she opens it, ask to speak to the lady of the house; white people at glamorous parties asking black guests to bring them a drink or, when shopping, calling out to black or brown customers to bring them a sweater in a different size.²⁵

According to Wilkerson, the bottom stratum did not create the caste system and cannot fix it. But if the moral lapse of the colonists caused the caste system to come into being, moral recovery may point the way

²¹ IW, pp. 99–164.

²² IW, p. 23.

²³ IW, p. 311.

²⁴ IW, pp. 314–5, 386.

²⁵ IW, pp. 60, 70–1.

beyond it. The higher castes need to be awakened to an ‘enlightened recognition’ of caste’s price—the danger it poses to the species and to the planet ‘to have this depth of unexamined grievance and discontent in the most powerful nation in the world.’ Besides, 2042 is looming, the supposed date at which ‘minorities’ of colour will form a majority of the US population. The moral legitimacy for (white) caste dominance is premised on the idea of majority rule, but ‘will the US adhere to this if the majority looks different?’ America, Wilkerson concludes, can either entrench its inequalities further or ‘choose to lead the world as the exceptional nation that we have proclaimed ourselves to be.’ (To show how this can operate, Wilkerson offers the heart-warming example of her successful bonding with a white plumber who came to fix a leak in her basement, despite the fact that he was phlegmy, fat and ill-shaven, smelt of tobacco and wore a MAGA cap.)²⁶

As with Wilkerson’s first book, *Caste* is not a formally or analytically structured work but a collage of short sermons, poetic flights, social philosophizing, potted history, journalistic sketches, personal anecdotes and meditations, across thirty-plus uneven chapters. The result is as conceptually thin as it is stylistically over-egged. *Caste* is full of passages in which the pile-up of mutually contradictory metaphors—‘Caste is structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like . . . It is like a corporation that seeks to sustain itself at all costs’—signals the absence of any robust and workable definition for Wilkerson’s central category. From notions of a divinely sanctioned social hierarchy to the practice of endogamy and ideology of inherent superiority, her eight pillars can be found in a wide variety of non-caste settings. Nor does she provide any indication of the relationships between these supposed pillars, or of their varying salience in the three different cases she discusses. If divine ordination is central to the Indian caste system, Wilkerson does not even attempt to discern it in Nazi Germany, where racial policies notoriously claimed a scientific basis, while Jews in Europe have a long history of assimilation and inter-marriage. Listing different aspects of caste does not tell us what it is. Like the caste-school anthropologists, Wilkerson attempts to describe the features of the institution in various ways—hierarchy, endogamy, fixed roles—but does not define it. Nor does she have much to say about its social basis—how does this differ in the US, India, Nazi

²⁶ *IW*, pp. 380–2, 370.

Germany?—or how it came into being. To talk of caste and leave it unexplained has the effect of implying it is beyond comprehension—or, as in Wilkerson’s schlocky final chapter (‘The Heart is the Last Frontier’), soluble by personal niceness and putting Biden in the White House.²⁷ Like Park, Warner, Davis and Myrdal before her, Wilkerson embraces the rhetorical shock value of the caste terminology, which portrays black oppression as all but immovable.

A left critique

In this context, it is worth returning to the arguments of the caste school’s most formidable contemporary critic, Oliver Cox, in his 1948 masterwork, *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*.²⁸ Wilkerson dismisses the book as ‘cantankerous’, but nothing could be further from the truth.²⁹ A magisterial work of nearly 700 pages, written with tremendous poise and panache, covering a civilizational range that stretches from ancient India to early-modern Europe and the American Deep South, Cox’s critique contains many lessons for Wilkerson.

Unlike the caste-school anthropologists, Cox undertook an extensive empirical and conceptual study of the Indian caste system, drawing largely on French and English scholarship. He argued that, while slave societies required a high degree of coercion, India’s caste society was maintained largely by consensus.³⁰ This was close to the sanguine outlook of his European sources; Cox was in no position to investigate the perspectives of the untouchables on their own terms. Moreover his aim in *Caste, Class and Race*, as he underlined, was to show that the caste system was an Indian cultural invention that had no real equivalent elsewhere. Cox rejected the notion that black Americans formed a caste. Training his sights on the ‘new orthodoxy’ of Park, Warner, Davis,

²⁷ Joe Biden’s ‘dominant caste’ record, to use Wilkerson’s terms, needs no repeating here: author of the 1994 Crime Bill that underwrote the ‘New Jim Crow’ surge in black incarceration, he had earlier been a vocal proponent of segregated schools.

²⁸ Born in 1901, the same year as fellow-Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James, Cox travelled to the US in 1919, initially to study as a lawyer. After an attack of polio damaged his legs he turned to social sciences, taking his PhD at Chicago in 1938. He taught at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama from 1944, moving to Lincoln University, another historically black college, in 1949.

²⁹ *IW*, pp. 254–5.

³⁰ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, New York 1948, pp. 539, 20.

Myrdal, he mocked their obfuscation of the differences between the Jim Crow South and the Indian caste system—‘not exactly the same’, but ‘the same kind of social phenomenon’, as Warner and Davis had written.³¹ Or as Cox mercilessly paraphrased:

This animal before us is not a horse, but for our purposes it is convenient to call it a horse. If you examine it closely, you will discover that it is a water buffalo. That does not matter, however, for we are not going to use it in a water buffalo sense. Obviously, you cannot say the animal is not a horse; it is, insofar as it has four legs; and four legs are generally understood to be the essence of all horses and water buffaloes.³²

Wilkerson’s book is vulnerable to many of the same criticisms levelled by Cox at the caste-school writers she cites. Cox attacked the *ad hoc* nature of their procedure—picking out shared features, as with Wilkerson’s eight pillars, without demonstrating in what ways they were defining components of caste; a good way to prove a water buffalo is a horse.

Cox’s incisive critique of Myrdal’s view—and Wilkerson’s—that ‘lower-class whites’ were the motive force in the racist oppression of black Americans is the essence of his brief against the caste school. For Cox, segregation served the ends not of a benighted poor-white majority but a shrewdly practical minority. It was the highly effective and deliberately wielded instrument of the white ruling class. Black oppression in the South, he wrote, resulted from ‘the immediate need of the white exploiting class to restore as far as possible the complete control over its labour supply, which it enjoyed during slavery’. In this it had succeeded, ‘not through the force of “mores”, but through a continued and vigorous campaign of anti-Negro education and the creation of innumerable situations for the exercise of extralegal violence against Negroes or against whites who seek to intervene in their protection’.³³ As for the role of poor whites in that system, Cox explained: ‘Today it is of vital consequence that black labour and white labour in the South be kept glaring at each other, for if they were permitted to come together in force and to identify their interests as workers, the difficulty of exploiting them would be increased beyond calculation.’ While the caste-school writers lent scientific support

³¹ W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis, ‘A Comparative Study of American Caste’, in Edgar Thompson, ed., *Race Relations and the Race Problem*, Durham NC 1940, p. 232, cited in Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, p. 493.

³² Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, p. 493.

³³ Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, p. 470.

to the belief that the division of American society by race might endure forever, Cox insisted there was ‘nothing more unstable’: the exploitative social order of the white ruling class therefore required a ‘thick matrix of organized and unorganized violence’ to sustain it.³⁴

An alternative approach

To consider whether the category of ‘caste’ can meaningfully be applied to African-Americans, a definition of the term’s scope is required. Rather than indicating an entire social system, caste can be used to denote groups that are set apart as a legacy of a traditional, hereditary, economic role. An example might be the *burakumin* of Japan. Today there are around 3 million *burakumin*, many of whom still live in segregated neighbourhoods. Poorer and less educated on average, they are frequently discriminated against, and few are able to marry outside of their community. Historically, their exclusion from mainstream society in the pre-capitalist era was related to their range of traditional occupations as tanners, butchers and undertakers—activities seen as sinful or impure by Buddhist and Shinto tradition.

In *The Jewish Question* (1942), Abram Leon proposed an alternative category, that of a ‘people-class’, to define the situation of the Jews in feudal Europe, arising again from their traditional occupations.³⁵ Leon’s theses took issue with the conventional wisdom that European Jews’ resistance to assimilation over the centuries could be explained in idealist terms, through their devotion to their religion or their ethnic community. Following Marx’s lead, Leon placed the emphasis on their socio-economic role, but—drawing on Pirenne, Ruppin, Kautsky, Sombart, Weber and Bauer—gave this an entirely new periodization. Against the accepted view that Christian persecution and the fanaticism of the Crusades had forced the Jews to entrench themselves in

³⁴ Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, pp. 486, 472.

³⁵ Born in Warsaw in 1918, Abram Leon emigrated to Belgium with his family in 1926, after a brief spell in Palestine. Active as a teenager in the Zionist left, in the late 1930s he moved towards Trotskyism, drafting his theses on the Jewish question while editing an underground paper and organizing workers’ resistance to the Nazi occupation. In 1944 he was arrested in the mining district of Charleroi and sent to Auschwitz. See Ernest Mandel, ‘A Biographical Sketch of Abram Leon (1918–44)’, published as an afterword in Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*, New York 2020 [1950], pp. 291–312.

finance and commerce, Leon argued that, like Armenians and Greeks, Jews had played a specialized commercial role for millennia around the Mediterranean. The period of their greatest prosperity had been the feudal era, ending in the 12th century in Western Europe, where the rise of a native merchant class under ‘medieval capitalism’ served either to exclude Jews from commerce or, where they were integrated into this rising class, to assimilate them.³⁶

In Eastern Europe, Abram argued, the pre-capitalist era extended much later, up to the 18th century. Jews played a substantial role as merchants, tavern-keepers, moneylenders, and as stewards or bailiffs to the Polish landowners. Here, Jews’ self-governing communities, with their own schools and courts, continued to prosper on the basis of pre-capitalist mercantilism through to the crisis of the 18th century. It was because Eastern European Jews had preserved themselves economically for centuries as a people-class that they had retained their religious and ethnic traits, Abram argued.³⁷ The belated arrival of industrial-capitalist manufacturing in the East then further undermined their position.

The failure of new capitalist development to keep pace with the destruction of the old economy precipitated waves of emigration. At the same time, the Jewish people-class was becoming socially differentiated, producing a new proletariat—but modern capitalism, already in decay, could not absorb them. Many fled to Western Europe, where emancipated Jews who had taken up modern professions increasingly found themselves subject to a novel, racialized anti-Semitism. The legacy of their former separate existence, reinforced by the arrival of impoverished Jewish immigrants from the East, was exploited by big business to turn them into scapegoats for the distress of the middle classes, dispossessed by capitalist crisis and world war. ‘The Jewish masses find themselves wedged between the anvil of decaying feudalism and the hammer of rotting capitalism’, Leon wrote. ‘Everywhere is rife with the savage anti-Semitism of the middle classes, who are being choked to death under the weight of capitalist contradictions. Big capital exploits this elemental anti-Semitism of the petty bourgeoisie in order to mobilize the masses around the banner of racism.’³⁸

³⁶ ‘The Jew as a great entrepreneur or shareholder of the Dutch or English India Company was already on the threshold of baptism, a threshold, moreover, he crossed with the greatest of ease’: Leon, *The Jewish Question*, p. 68.

³⁷ Leon, *The Jewish Question*, pp. 57–8.

³⁸ Leon, *The Jewish Question*, pp. 69–71.

The phenomenon of a ‘people-class’ was common enough in pre-capitalist societies, where classes were frequently lineal descendants of conquering and conquered ethnic groups (Norman lords and Saxon peasants, for example). Leon’s term for the Jews of feudal Europe might equally be applied to the Roma people, who in feudal society were itinerant craftsmen, traders and performers. They, too, fulfilled necessary if marginal functions in pre-capitalist Europe and had their own governing councils, their language and culture. In the modern era, they too were subject to chronic persecution and genocide. But Leon’s formulation would not cover the many groups around the world that are defined by a hereditary economic role and yet cannot be called ‘peoples’—the *burakumin*, for example, or the untouchables in India.

Indian society as a whole is famously divided into hereditary-occupation groups. Below the high castes—priests, landlords, merchants—there are literally thousands of artisan castes, minutely graded by rank: carpenters are superior to potters, who in turn are higher than barbers; laundrymen are lower, but still rank above the untouchable outcastes, or ‘Dalits’ in today’s polite idiom. In the villages, home to nearly two-thirds of the population, each caste lives segregated in its own colony, its status dependent on how menial or polluting its work is supposed to be. Dalits too are divided by higher or lower rank. Most are agricultural labourers, but some are butchers or undertakers or empty caste people’s latrines, occupations assigned to them at birth by the specific untouchable caste to which they belong. In modern capitalist India, fewer earn their livelihood performing their caste duty: all priests are brahmins, but brahmins may be doctors, engineers, IT company CEOs, World Bank presidents. A man from the blacksmith caste may be a teacher, a clerk or a railway worker, but people still know him as a blacksmith. If he tries to marry outside his caste—especially if the woman is from a higher caste—he will face threats and sanctions.

Caste in America

Despite their obvious differences, there are many examples of groups isolated by dint of a traditional economic function, based on hereditary divisions of labour. We can use the term ‘caste’ to designate this broad type. Castes in this sense are relics of the pre-capitalist era, and many disappeared in the course of capitalist development. The Cagots, an untouchable community of hereditary woodworkers in western France, were assimilated into the broader population after 1789. But other

traditional caste groups whose survival does not hinder capital—or can be turned to its advantage—still exist. Black people in America, as a group set apart by the legacy of chattel slavery, could clearly come into this category. In the US context, the physical traits by which black people are generally identified serve as a presumed index of descent from a class of African slaves. It was in fact very rare historically for slaves to form a caste in this sense—a hereditary, self-sustaining group. True, slave status was necessarily inherited across generations; no slave society could endure if children were automatically born free. Moreover, chattel slaves were nearly always drawn from outside populations, lacking ties of cultural identity with the larger society. Often they were conquered peoples, set apart by language, ethnicity or religion. ‘The slave is an outsider’, noted the ancient historian Moses Finley.³⁹ Slave classes, like castes, were socially isolated by nature.

But it was practically unknown for a slave class, ancient or modern, to constitute a stable population capable of reproducing itself. As a rule, it continually needed to be replenished with fresh captives. In some instances, the sheer rate of exploitation prevented reproduction from taking place. In others, where the powers of slave owners or the state administration were limited, runaways established communities beyond the reach of the law. More commonly, in stabilized social conditions, second- or third-generation slaves had a chance of manumission, gaining release to be assimilated into the dominant culture. The promise of eventual freedom was seen as a useful incentive for loyal service, and masters could profit handsomely when slaves were given the chance to buy themselves.

In virtually every case—except for one.⁴⁰ Here lay the true peculiarity of the ‘peculiar institution’ in the American South, where slaves served their masters ‘one generation after the next, for twelve generations’.⁴¹ Southern landowners managed to secure a self-reproducing slave workforce through a unique confluence of factors. One was the constant inflow of European settlers who could provide other forms of labour. No society is made up solely of masters and slaves; as the Columbia anthropologist Marvin Harris put it, the planters needed ‘an intermediate

³⁹ Moses Finley, ‘Slavery’, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 14, New York 1968.

⁴⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Cambridge MA, 1982.

⁴¹ *IW*, p. 23.

group'—overseers, militiamen, artisans, petty traders—'to stand between them and the slaves'. Across much of Latin America, where European colonizers remained a thin upper stratum—the colonial authorities in Brazil actively opposed non-Portuguese European settlement—a large mixed-race population provided an intermediary layer.⁴² Alone in the New World, the English colonies of North America succeeded in procuring a growing white majority to fill these roles—a demographic balance that would allow slave owners to keep manumission rates exceptionally low and runaway-recapture rates exceptionally high.

Constructed isolation

But to keep a section of the US-born population in bondage, special measures were required to cement their status as perpetual outsiders—to constitute them as a caste. Through the 17th century, the processes of conquest and colonization advanced in piecemeal fashion across Chesapeake, New England and the low-country South: the growth of cash-crop tobacco farming, the establishment of big landholdings, the arrival of settlers with capital of their own, the import of African slaves via the West Indies and of indentured labour from Europe. In the process, a minority of free blacks, some of them owning a few slaves themselves, acquired land and legal recognition. For the emerging plantation owners, this situation constituted a threat—free, educated blacks were potential allies and advocates for the growing population of African slaves, as the revolution in Saint-Domingue would show. Equally alarming was the prospect of the poor white population—initially including many bonded labourers—recognizing common class interests with slaves.

The ruling-class nightmare of white and black popular classes joining a common fight briefly threatened to become a reality in 1676, with the uprising led by Nathaniel Bacon against the colonial Governor of Virginia. Bacon was an English landowner's son, recently arrived in the colony, who had bought up two frontier plantations and backed the agitation for a more aggressive strategy against the region's Native American tribes. Rallying a cross-class and cross-race popular militia against the corrupt septuagenarian Governor, William Berkeley, Bacon called for the 'extirpation' of the Indians, and launched an all-out attack on the nearby Pamunkey tribe. When Berkeley mobilized the colony's forces

⁴² Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas*, New York 1974 [1964].

against him, Bacon and his followers burned Jamestown to the ground. Though the rebellion petered out, the colonial authorities were put on their mettle. The right to vote would subsequently be extended to all free white males, binding them politically to the Virginia elite.

In the late 17th century, the planter class in Virginia and Maryland passed a series of laws to prohibit black people—slave or free—from marrying whites. The aim was to prevent them forming legitimate ties of kin within settler society, gaining influence that they might use to benefit the slaves. To deprive them of this, all blacks had to be kept isolated from the general population. Over the following decades, further civil disabilities were imposed on free blacks, including bearing the burden of proof when their liberty was challenged. By law as by custom, chattel slavery became the presumptive condition of any American of African descent.⁴³

Restrictions on free blacks were accompanied by increasing legal obstacles to manumission—by the mid-19th century, emancipating a slave in most states required a special act of legislation—which helped to ensure a stable and naturally increasing slave class after the Atlantic trade ended. The segregation of free blacks set the US system apart. In no other slave society were the descendants of freedmen perpetually cut off from the mainstream. Manumitted slaves in Brazil and elsewhere in the New World would typically marry into the lower classes, which had long been racially intermixed. Their descendants would be assimilated within a few generations. Black slavery in Brazil left a legacy of poverty and social oppression that persists to this day, but no rigid colour line. Inter-marriage between families already bearing varying proportions of European, African and indigenous blood were the norm.⁴⁴

Caste implies inherited membership in a discrete social group. The criteria for belonging to such a group must be rigorous and clear-cut—black and white, so to speak. But people descend from all their forebears; in cases of mixed heritage—in the US context, usually the result of rape, not inter-marriage—caste membership required a rule. It was supplied by the notorious ‘one drop’ principle: any trace of African descent defined one as black. Yet appearance was not the basis of caste membership; it was merely

⁴³ Wilbert E. Moore, *American Negro Slavery and Abolition*, New York 1971.

⁴⁴ William McKee Evans, *Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America*, Urbana and Chicago 2009.

an accepted indication of it. That is what Frederick Douglass meant when he wrote, 'We are then a persecuted people, not because we are coloured, but simply because that colour has for a series of years been coupled in the public mind with the degradation of slavery and servitude.'⁴⁵

Costs of division

The materialist understanding of caste advanced here goes some way towards clarifying the special nature of African-American oppression. We should note, first, that to call American blacks a caste need not imply that whites compose one, too, as Wilkerson has it. Like the *burakumin* and other pariah groups outside the caste societies of South Asia, the argument is that black Americans form an individual out-group set apart from everyone else. Wilkerson is wrong, too, to refer to Latinos and Asians as 'middle castes'. Castes are not defined by ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigrant status, descent from a colonized or indigenous people, or racialized categories. The point is not merely semantic. Since caste oppression dates back to the premodern era and grows out of a group's exclusion from all aspects of common life, it tends to be more virulent and generalized than other social divisions. It is a mistake to occlude this by lumping black people in with other non-white minorities as 'people of colour', as shown by the current discord over admissions policies at selective schools.

The difference can be seen in rates of intermarriage. South Asian immigrants, who can be darker than many black people, suffer their share of racist abuse and anti-immigrant chauvinism. But they do not face the same degree of ostracism as African-Americans. According to the 2010 US Census, their intermarriage rate with white people when both spouses have been raised in the US is 31 per cent for men and 36 per cent for women. By contrast, black-white intermarriage is barely 8 per cent. The concept of a caste formed in the crucible of the US slave system also helps to explain why recent African and Caribbean immigrants may escape in some measure the status of blacks born here. Wilkerson interprets the phenomenon as a ruse to 'keep those at the bottom divided'.⁴⁶ But if the specific character of black oppression is based on

⁴⁵ Frederick Douglass, cited in Michael Goldfield, *The Colour of Politics: Race and the Mainspring of American Politics*, New York 1997, p. 92.

⁴⁶ *IW*, p. 242.

supposed ancestral links to a historical slave class, the explanation is more straightforward: African immigrants do not descend from trans-Atlantic slaves; migrants from the Caribbean may do, but they were not part of the US system.

The oppression of black people, as a legacy of chattel slavery, has deep roots in American history. No other group has been so chronically and severely isolated while at the same time being so ruthlessly exploited, black labour being central to the production of wealth in this country. Keeping the multiethnic, multiracial working class divided—and the special oppression of black people, in particular—has long served as a bulwark against integrated class struggle in the United States. The tiny white exploiting class, composed of the few thousand families who control the nation's productive wealth, has actively built and fostered the colour line through government policy, the police, courts, prisons and mass media, all of which are in their hands. Their success can be measured by the fact that the US, almost unique among advanced countries, has never had a mass labour party. It helps to explain why Americans lack basic public services that are taken for granted elsewhere. In fact, it helps to explain why the vast resources of this country, the product of centuries of toil by slaves and wage workers alike, remain the property of a few. Despite the militant protests of the past decade, the struggle for black rights remains mired in a period of deep reaction. The demand for black liberation has been replaced by the defensive slogan, 'Black Lives Matter', and the call for integration has been supplanted by pleas for 'diversity'—that is, tokenism.

Wilkerson's revival of the terminology of caste, in the metaphysical sense in which she uses it, reflects that liberal pessimism. If it is not the ruling minority but the white majority that is to blame, we can do little about it. There are privileged white people in America, but 'white privilege' as such is a myth. Black workers, to be sure, are doubly oppressed—as black people and as workers. In the workplace, they are typically the most precarious and do the hardest jobs. Off the job, racist segregation renders them vulnerable to repression and abuse. Yet it does not count as a 'privilege' to fail to be especially oppressed—as though the condition of the most downtrodden were a prevailing social standard that it is morally wrong to escape. That stance only serves the exploiters' aim—in Cox's phrase—of keeping black and white labour 'glaring at each other'.

Wilkerson's narrative has no place for episodes when white people have fought alongside blacks for common interests. She hardly mentions the Civil War and Reconstruction. She skips over the Southern Populist movement, in which black and white small farmers joined together to defend themselves against big planters and Northern financial interests, and the integrated class battles that founded the industrial labour movement in the 1930s and 40s. In reality, white workers have no stake in the system of exploitation that black oppression is designed to uphold. As a black miner remarks to his white coworkers' amusement in the documentary, *Harlan County USA*, everyone comes out of the coal mine the same colour. *Contra* Wilkerson, 'maintaining the caste system as it has always been' goes against the long-term interest of white workers. It drives down their wages, degrades their quality of life, disarms them politically. That the gains to them of actively supporting the social and economic equality of black people are not necessarily immediate enables capital to pit one group against the other. But the basis for a common cause is real.