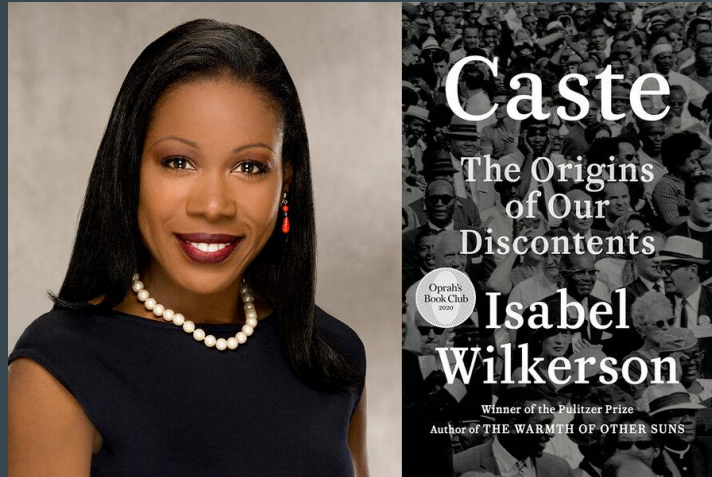
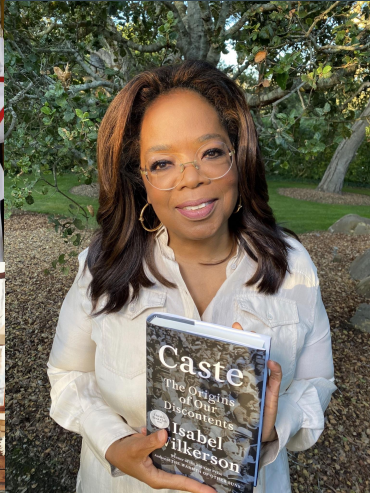


# “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” By Isabel Wilkerson



*Presented by Cory Utsey*

# About the Author



Isabel Wilkerson is a Pulitzer Prize and National Humanities Medal winning journalist from Washington, DC. A Howard alumna, Wilkerson became the first Black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism in 1994 for feature writing. Her debut book, **“The Warmth of Other Suns”** (2010) won a number of awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award. **“Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents”** (2020) also received much acclaim, including a spot in Oprah’s book club.

# Book Overview



**Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent** (2020) uses an intersectional analysis of race and class throughout history to assert the idea that America operates within the confines of a hidden caste system.

Traditionally, a caste system assigns a class structure that determines an individual's social standing straight from birth. Wilkerson defines a caste as a “fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups”. Throughout this book, Wilkerson argues that America has long operated under a hidden caste system, resulting in the current white supremacist power structures. Where the traditional caste system places priests and teachers at the top of the hierarchy and “outcastes” at the bottom, the American caste system places “those whose appearance enabled them to claim pure Caucasian ancestry” at the top and those who appear Black at the bottom.

Wilkerson notes that the American caste system is comprised of social rather than natural phenomena, meaning that the breakdown of the human race into multiple races did not occur by natural means. Rather, it allowed for the justification of slavery and the exploitation of enslaved Africans. She draws parallels between what she argues is the American caste system, India's caste system and Nazi Germany, noting that each system was maintained by faux premises of division.

Ultimately, the book argues that America's treatment of Black Americans serves as the most violent and invasive demonstration of the caste system. Additionally, it argues that we can only understand and possibly dismantle manifestations of American racism and white supremacy by considering it within the context of the caste.

# 8 Pillars of Caste

1. Divine Will and the Laws of Nature
2. Heritability
3. Endogamy (Control of Marriage & Mating)
4. Purity vs Pollution
5. Occupational Hierarchy
6. Dehumanization & Stigma
7. Terror & Cruelty
8. Inherent Superiority vs Inherent Inferiority

# Book Format

This book is non-fiction and contains first-person recountings of history.

Each chapter contains a detailed account of historical events and their alignment with the caste system, comprised both of objective detail and subjective contextualization of the events. For example, the book begins with a short italicized chapter about a man presumed to be named August Landmesser and his criticism of the Nazi party in 1936 as represented in a photo (right). It then talks about the 2016 election in the next chapter, asking whether or not we (the readers) would want to be the “odd man out” among the mass and misguided majority.

There is no specific time period in which this book takes place, as the book spans hundreds of years in order to recount the transcendence of the caste system.



# Key Themes

**Transcendence-** *The book argues that racist ideologies might lay docile for a period, but they will inevitably resurface if left unaddressed. Racism, as an agent of the caste system, transcends time, as does the caste system itself.*

**Race and Inequality-** *Race is a huge aspect of this book, and it is explicitly linked to one's livelihood. In total, it is argued to be an arbitrary label created to facilitate oppression and uphold the caste system.*

**Class and Community-** *Being that the caste assigns a class structure, class is inexplicably linked with one's standing in the community.*

**Intersectionality-** *Race, class and community relations are presented as concepts that are interrelated and largely influenced or determined by the caste system.*

# What I Learned/Found Interesting

The main thing that I found interesting was the book's entire premise; I had never considered the ills of racism and white supremacy within the context of a caste system.

My biggest takeaway was that struggles of inequity and oppression might differ, but they are all rooted in artificial division. It is at times easy to view the Black American struggle within a vacuum, when in reality, freedom is a constant, global struggle with foundations in much of the same antiquated ideologies.

**Thank you!**