

FEATURE

America's Enduring Caste System

Our founding ideals promise liberty and equality for all. Our reality is an enduring racial hierarchy that has persisted for centuries.

By Isabel Wilkerson

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We saw a man face down on the pavement, pinned beneath a car, and above him another man, a man in uniform, his skin lighter than the man on the ground, and the lighter man was bearing down on the darker man, his knee boring into the neck of the darker man, the lighter man's hands at his sides, in his pockets — could it be that his hands were so nonchalantly in his pockets? — such was the ease and casual calm, the confidence of embedded entitlement with which he was able to lord over the darker man.

We heard the man on the ground pleading with the man above him, saw the terror in his face, heard his gasps for air, heard the anguished cries of an unseen chorus, begging the lighter man to stop. But the lighter man, the dominant man, looked straight at the bystanders, into the camera, and thus at all of us around the world who would later bear witness and, instead of heeding the cries of the chorus, pressed his knee deeper into the darker man's neck as was the perceived right granted him in the hierarchy. The man on the ground went silent, drained of breath. A clear liquid crept down the pavement. We saw a man die before our very eyes.

What we did not see, not immediately anyway, was the invisible scaffolding, a caste system with ancient rules and assumptions that made such a horror possible, that held each actor in that scene in its grip. Off camera, two other men in uniform, who looked like the lighter man, were holding down the darker man from the other side of the police car as dusk approached in Minneapolis. Yet another man in uniform, of Asian descent and thus not in the dominant caste, stood near, watching, immobilized, it seemed, at a remove from his own humanity and potential common cause, as the darker man slipped out of consciousness. We soon learned that the man on the ground, George Floyd, had been accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill, and, like uncountable Black men over the centuries, lost his life over what might have been a mere citation for people in the dominant caste.

In the weeks leading up to the country's commemoration of its founding, protests and uprisings took hold in cities in every state, in Bakersfield, Charleston, Buffalo, Poughkeepsie, Wichita, Boise, Sioux Falls. Protesters tore down a statue of Christopher Columbus in St. Paul, Minn. They toppled a statue of Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Va. And the country was forced to contemplate the observation of Frederick Douglass a century and a half before: "What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July?" What, we might ask in our day, is freedom to those still denied it as their country celebrates its own?

An Old House and an Infrared Light

The inspector trained his infrared lens onto a misshapen bow in the ceiling, an invisible beam of light searching the layers of lath to test what the eye could not see. This house was built generations ago, and I had noticed the slightest welt in a corner of plaster in a spare bedroom and chalked it up to idiosyncrasy. Over time, the welt in the ceiling became a wave that widened and bulged despite the new roof. It had been building beyond perception for years. An old house is its own kind of devotional, a dowager aunt with a story to be coaxed out of her, a mystery, a series of interlocking puzzles awaiting solution. Why is this soffit tucked into the southeast corner of an eave? What is behind this discolored patch of brick? With an old house, the work is never done, and you don't expect it to be.

America is an old house. We can never declare the work over. Wind, flood, drought and human upheavals batter a structure that is already fighting whatever flaws were left unattended in the original foundation. When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction. Whatever you are wishing away will gnaw at you until you gather the courage to face what you would rather not see.

We in this country 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. Many people may rightly say: "I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked Indigenous people, never owned slaves." 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 in the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now.

And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.

Unaddressed, the ruptures and diagonal cracks will not fix themselves. The toxins will not go away but rather will spread, leach and mutate, as they already have. When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be.

In my own house, the inspector was facing the mystery of the misshapen ceiling, and so he first held a sensor to the surface to detect if it was damp. The reading inconclusive, he then pulled out the infrared camera to take a kind of X-ray of whatever was going on, the idea being that you cannot fix a problem until and unless you can see it. He could now see past the plaster, beyond what had been wallpapered or painted over, as we now are called upon to do in the house we all live in, to examine a structure built long ago.

Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton: its caste system, which is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a 400-year-old social order. Looking at caste is like holding the country's X-ray up to the light.

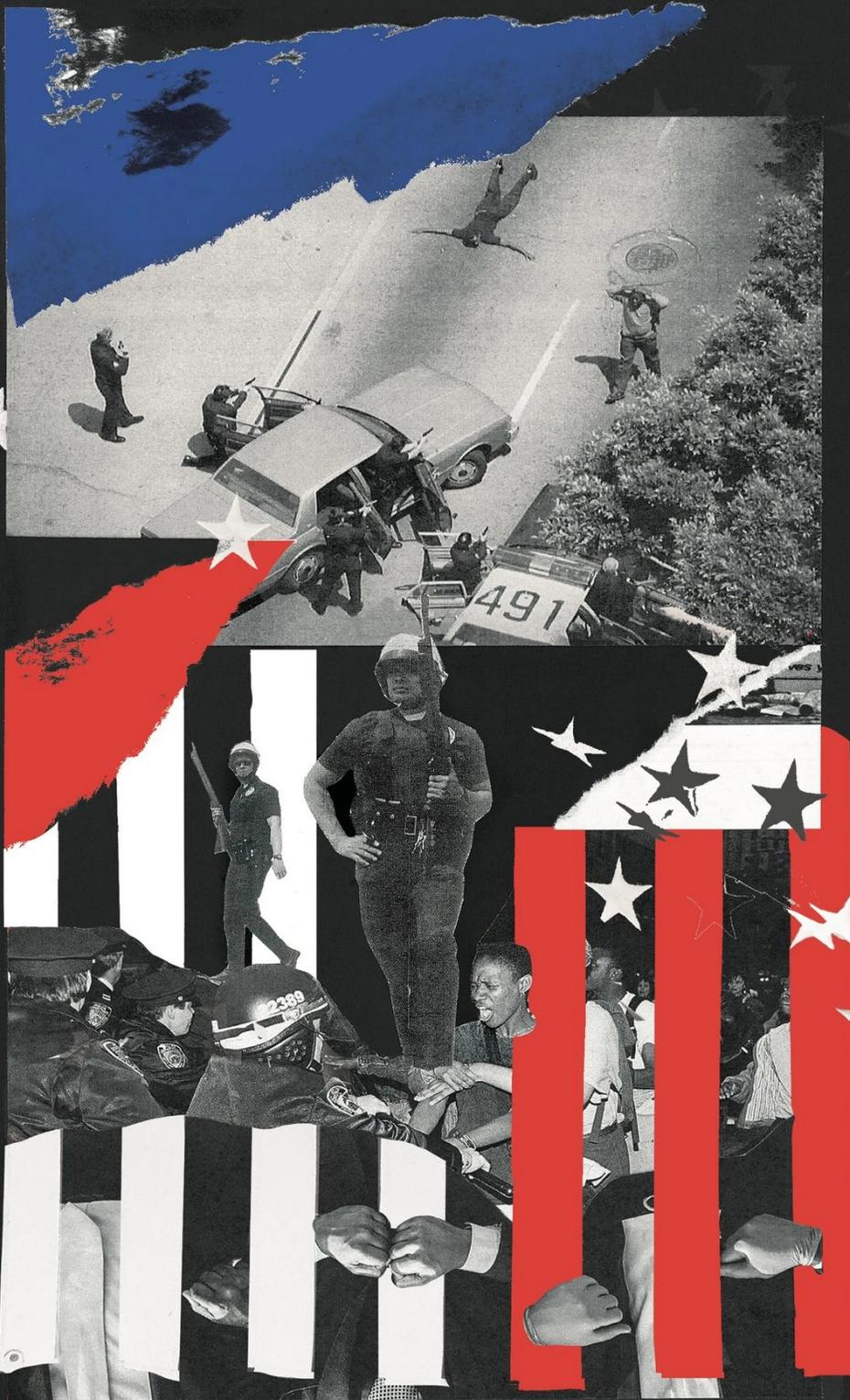


Photo illustration by Chris Burnett

[The 1619 project: reframing the legacy of slavery in the United States.]

A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste, whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranks apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.

Throughout human history, three caste systems have stood out. The lingering, millenniums-long caste system of India. The tragically accelerated, chilling and officially vanquished caste system of Nazi Germany. And the shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the United States. Each version relied on stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the generations.

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power — which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources — which groups are seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority and assumptions of competence — who is accorded these and who is not.

As a means of assigning value to entire swaths of humankind, caste guides each of us often beyond the reaches of our awareness. It embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules, expectations and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species. In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America, race is the primary tool and the visible decoy for caste.

Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division. If we have been trained to see humans in the language of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children, as when learning our mother tongue. Caste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only of how we speak but also of how we process information, the autonomic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it.

Many of us have never taken a class in grammar, yet we know in our bones that a transitive verb takes an object, that a subject needs a predicate; we know without thinking the difference between third-person singular and third-person plural. We may mention “race,” referring to people as Black or white or Latino or Asian or Indigenous, when what lies beneath each label is centuries of history and assigning of assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy.

What people look like, or rather, the race they have been assigned or are perceived to belong to, is the visible cue to their caste. It is the historic flashcard to the public of how they are to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold, whether they belong in this section of town or that seat in a boardroom, whether they should be expected to speak with authority on this or that subject, whether they will be administered pain relief in a hospital, whether they are more or less likely to survive childbirth in the most advanced nation in the world, whether they may be shot by the authorities with impunity.

We know that the letters of the alphabet are neutral and meaningless until they are combined to make a word, which itself has no significance until it is inserted into a sentence and interpreted by those who speak or hear it. In the same way that “black” and “white” were applied to people who were literally neither, but rather gradations of brown and beige and ivory, the caste system sets people at poles from one another and attaches meaning to the extremes, and to the gradations in between, and then reinforces those meanings, replicates them in the roles each caste was and is assigned and permitted or required to perform.

And yet, in recent decades, we have learned from the human genome that all human beings are 99.9 percent the same. “Race is a social concept, not a scientific one,” said J. Craig Venter, the genomics expert who ran Celera Genomics when the initial sequencing was completed in 2000. “We all evolved in the last 100,000 years from the small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa and colonized the world.” Which means that an entire racial caste system, the catalyst of hatreds and civil war, was built on what the anthropologist Ashley Montagu called “an arbitrary and superficial selection of traits,” derived from a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of genes that make up a human being. “The idea of race,” Montagu wrote, “was, in fact, the deliberate creation of an exploiting class seeking to maintain and defend its privileges against what was profitably regarded as an inferior social caste.”

Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and recede in times of relative calm, it is an ever-present through line in the country’s operation.

Caste is rigid and deep; race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the United States. While the requirements to qualify as white have changed over the centuries, the fact of a dominant caste has remained constant from its inception — whoever fit the definition of white, at whatever point in history, was granted the legal rights and privileges of the dominant caste. Perhaps more critical and tragic, at the other end of the ladder, the subordinated caste, too, has been fixed from the beginning as the psychological floor beneath which all other castes cannot fall.

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.



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in India, whose nonviolent-protest movement inspired his own. Royal Studio via American Friends Service Committee

In the early winter of 1959, after leading the Montgomery bus boycott that arose from the arrest of Rosa Parks and before the trials and triumphs to come, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, landed in India, in the city then known as Bombay, to visit the land of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the father of nonviolent protest. They were covered in garlands upon arrival, and King told reporters, “To other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.”

He had long dreamed of going to India, and they stayed for more than a month, welcomed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. King wanted to see for himself the place whose fight for freedom from British rule had inspired his fight for justice in America. He wanted to see the so-called untouchables, the lowest caste in the ancient Indian caste system, whom he had read of and had sympathy for, and who were left behind after India gained its independence the decade before.

He discovered that people in India had been following the trials of his own oppressed people in America, knew of the bus boycott he led. Wherever he went, people on the streets of Bombay and Delhi crowded around him for an autograph.

One afternoon, King and his wife journeyed to the southern tip of the country, to the city then known as Trivandrum in the state of Kerala, and visited with high school students whose families had been untouchables. The principal made the introduction.

“Young people,” he said, “I would like to present to you a fellow untouchable from the United States of America.”

King was floored. He had not expected that word to be applied to him. He was, in fact, put off by it at first. He had flown in from another continent, had dined with the prime minister. He did not see the connection, did not see what the Indian caste system had to do directly with him, did not immediately see why the lowest-caste people in India would view him, an American Negro and a distinguished visitor, as low-caste like themselves, see him as one of them.

“For a moment,” he would later recall, “I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable.”

Then he began to think about the reality of the lives of the people he was fighting for — 20 million people, consigned to the lowest rank in America for centuries, “still smothering in an airtight cage of poverty,” quarantined in isolated ghettos, exiled in their own country.

And he said to himself, “Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable.” In that moment, he realized that the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India and that he had lived under that system all his life. It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in America. He would later describe this awakening at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta in 1965 during his sermon for the Fourth of July.

“Caste” is not a word often applied to the United States. It is considered the language of India or feudal Europe. But some anthropologists and scholars of race in America have made use of the word for decades. Before the modern era, one of the earliest Americans to take up the idea of caste was the antebellum abolitionist and U.S. senator Charles Sumner as he fought against segregation in the North. “The separation of children in the Public Schools of Boston, on account of color or race,” he wrote, “is in the nature of Caste, and on this account is a violation of Equality.” He quoted a native of India: “Caste makes distinctions among creatures where God has made none.”

What are the origins and workings of the hierarchy that intrudes upon the daily life and life chances of every American? That had intruded upon my own life with disturbing regularity and consequences? I wanted to understand the origins and evolution of classifying and elevating one group of people over another and the consequences of doing so to the presumed beneficiaries and to those targeted as beneath them. Moving about the world as a living, breathing caste experiment myself, I wanted to understand the hierarchies that I and many millions of others have had to navigate to pursue our work and dreams.



An Atlanta trolley in 1956, before the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on all public buses. Horace Cort/Associated Press

The R Word

Once awakened to the underlying power of caste, we can better see the tool of race for what it is. What we face in our current day is not the classical racism of our ancestors' era but a mutation of the software that adjusts to the updated needs of the operating system. In the half century since civil rights protests forced the United States to make state-sanctioned discrimination illegal, what Americans consider to be racism has shifted, and now the word is one of the most contentious and misunderstood in American culture. For many in the dominant caste, the word is radioactive — resented, feared, denied, lobbed back toward anyone who dares to suggest it. Resistance to the word often derails any discussion of the underlying behavior it is meant to describe, thus eroding it of meaning.

Social scientists often define racism as the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism, like sexism, as primarily the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power, as men have power over women, white people over people of color and the dominant over the subordinate.

But over time, racism has often been reduced to a feeling, a character flaw, conflated with prejudice, connected to whether one is a good person or not. It has come to mean overt and declared hatred of a person or group because of the race ascribed to them, a perspective few would ever own up to. While people will admit to or call out sexism or xenophobia or homophobia, people may immediately deflect accusations of racism, saying they don't have "a racist bone in their body" or are the "least racist person you could ever meet," that they "don't see color," that their "best friend is Black," and they may have even convinced themselves on a conscious level of these things.

What does racism mean in an era when even extremists won't admit to it? What is the litmus test for racism? Who is racist in a society where someone can refuse to rent to people of color, arrest brown immigrants en masse or display a Confederate flag but not be "certified" as a racist unless he or she confesses to it or is caught using derogatory signage or slurs? The instinctive desire to reject the very idea of current discrimination on the basis of a chemical compound in the skin is an unconscious admission of the absurdity of race as a concept.

With no universally agreed-upon definition, we might see racism as a continuum rather than an absolute. We might release ourselves of the purity test of whether someone is or is not racist and exchange that mind-set for one that sees people as existing on a scale based on the toxins they have absorbed from the polluted and inescapable air of social instruction we receive from childhood.

Caste, on the other hand, predates the notion of race and has survived the era of formal state-sponsored racism long officially practiced in the mainstream. The modern-day version of easily deniable racism may be able to cloak the invisible structure that created and maintains hierarchy and inequality. But caste does not allow us to ignore structure. Caste is structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like. Caste is a living, breathing entity. It is like a corporation that seeks to sustain itself at all costs. To achieve a truly egalitarian world requires looking deeper than what we think we see.

Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy. Caste pushes back against an African-American woman who, without humor or apology, takes a seat at the head of the table speaking Russian. It prefers an Asian-American man to put his technological expertise at the service of the company but not aspire to chief executive. Yet it sees as logical a white 16-year-old serving as store manager over employees from the subordinate caste three times his age. 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 unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things.

What is the difference between racism and casteism? Because caste and race are interwoven in America, it can be hard to separate the two. Any action or institution that mocks, harms, assumes or attaches inferiority or stereotype on the basis of the social construct of race can be considered racism. Any action or structure that seeks to limit, hold back or put someone in a defined ranking, seeks to keep someone in their place by elevating or denigrating that person on the basis of their perceived category, can be seen as casteism.

Casteism is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage or privilege or to elevate yourself above others or keep others beneath you. For those in the marginalized castes, casteism can mean seeking to keep those on your disfavored rung from gaining on you, to curry the favor and remain in the good graces of the dominant caste, all of which serve to keep the structure intact.

In the United States, racism and casteism frequently occur at the same time, or overlap or figure into the same scenario. Casteism is about positioning and restricting those positions, vis-à-vis others. What race and its precursor, racism, do extraordinarily well is to confuse and distract from the underlying structural and more powerful Sith lord of caste. Like the cast on a broken arm, like the cast in a play, a caste system holds everyone in a fixed place.

For this reason, many people — including those we might see as good and kind people — could be casteist, meaning invested in keeping the hierarchy as it is or content to do nothing to change it, but not racist in the classical sense, not active and openly hateful of this or that group. Actual racists, actual haters, would by definition be casteist, as their hatred demands that those they perceive as beneath them know and keep their place in the hierarchy.

In everyday terms, it is not racism that prompts a white shopper in a clothing store to go up to a random Black or brown person who is also shopping and to ask for a sweater in a different size, or for a white guest at a party to ask a Black or brown person who is also a guest to fetch a drink, as happened to Barack Obama as a state senator, or even perhaps a judge to sentence a subordinate-caste person for an offense for which a dominant-caste person might not even be charged. It is caste or rather the policing of and adherence to the caste system. It's the autonomic, unconscious, reflexive response to expectations from a thousand imaging inputs and neurological societal downloads that affix people to certain roles based upon what they look like and what they historically have been assigned to or the characteristics and stereotypes by which they have been categorized. No ethnic or racial category is immune to the messaging we all receive about the hierarchy, and thus no one escapes its consequences.

When we assume that a woman is not equipped to lead the meeting or the company or the country, or that a person of color or an immigrant could not be the one in authority, is not a resident of a certain community, could not have attended a particular school or deserved to have attended a particular school, when we feel a pang of shock and resentment, a personal wounding and sense of unfairness and perhaps even shame at our discomfort upon seeing someone from a marginalized group in a job or car or house or college or appointment more prestigious than we

have been led to expect, we are reflecting the efficient encoding of caste, the subconscious recognition that the person has stepped out of his or her assumed place in our society. We are responding to our embedded instructions of who should be where and who should be doing what, the breaching of the structure and boundaries that are the hallmarks of caste.

Race and caste are not the cause of and do not account for every poor outcome or unpleasant encounter. But caste becomes a factor, to whatever infinitesimal degree, in interactions and decisions across gender, ethnicity, race, immigrant status, sexual orientation, age or religion that have consequences in our everyday lives and in policies that affect our country and beyond. It may not be as all-consuming as its targets may perceive it to be, but neither is it the ancient relic, the long-ago anachronism, that post-racialists, post-haters of everything, keep wishing away. Its invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. Caste, along with its faithful servant race, is an X-factor in most any American equation, and any answer one might ever come up with to address our current challenges is flawed without it.

Through the Fog of Delhi to the Parallels in India and America

My flight to India landed in a gray veil that hid the terminal and its tower at the international airport in Delhi. It was January 2018, my first moments on the subcontinent. The pilot searched for a jetway through the drapery of mist. It was 2 in the morning, and it was as if we had landed in a steam kettle, were still airborne in a cloud, the night air pressing against cabin windows, and we could see nothing of the ground. I had not heard of rain in the forecast and was fascinated by this supernatural fog in the middle of the night, until I realized that it was not fog at all but smoke — from coal plants, cars and burning stubble — trapped in stagnant wind. The pollution was a shroud at first to seeing India as it truly was.

At daybreak, the sun pushed through the haze, and once I connected with my hosts, I raced along with them to cross an intersection, an open stretch of asphalt with cars hurtling in every direction with no lanes or speed limits. We made our way along the side streets to the conference we were attending. I saw the wayside altars and mushroom temples with their garlands and silk flowers to the Hindu deities at the base of the sacred fig trees. There, commuters can pause for reflection as they head to work or an exam or a doctor's visit. The sidewalk shrines seemed exotic to me until I thought of the American ritual of spontaneous altars of flowers and balloons at the site of something very different, at the site of an accident or tragedy, as for Heather Heyer, the counterprotester killed at the infamous neo-Confederate rally in Charlottesville, Va., just months before. Both reflect a human desire to connect with and honor something or someone beyond ourselves.

The United States and India are profoundly different from each other — in culture, technology, economics, history, ethnic composition. And yet, many generations ago, these two great lands paralleled each other, each protected by oceans, fertile and coveted and ruled for a time by the British. Each adopted social hierarchies and abides great chasms between the highest and the lowest in their respective lands. Each was conquered by people said to be Aryans arriving, in one case, from across the Atlantic Ocean, in the other, from the north. Those deemed lowest in each country would serve those deemed high. The younger country, the United States, would become the most powerful democracy on Earth. The older country, India, would become the largest.

Their hierarchies are profoundly different. And yet, as if operating from the same instruction manual translated to fit their distinctive cultures, both countries adopted similar methods of maintaining rigid lines of demarcation and protocols. Both countries kept their dominant caste separate, apart and above those deemed lower. Both exiled their Indigenous peoples — the Adivasi in India, the Native Americans in the United States — to remote lands and to the unseen margins of society. Both countries enacted an amalgam of laws to chain the lowliest group — Dalits in India (formerly known as the untouchables) and African-Americans in the United States — to the bottom, using terror and force to keep them there.

“Perhaps only the Jews have as long a history of suffering from discrimination as the Dalits,” the American civil rights advocate Yussuf Naim Kly wrote in 1987. “However, when we consider the nature of the suffering endured by the Dalits, it is the African-American parallel of enslavement, apartheid and forced assimilation that comes to mind.”

The United States and India have since abolished the formal laws that defined their caste systems — the United States in a series of civil rights laws in the 1960s and India more than a decade before, starting in 1949 — but both caste systems live on in hearts and habits, institutions and infrastructures. Both countries still live with the residue of codes that prevailed for far longer than they have not.

In both countries and often at the same time, the lowest castes toiled for their masters — African-Americans in the tobacco fields along the Chesapeake or in the cotton fields of Mississippi, Dalits plucking tea in Kerala and cotton in Nandurbar. Both worked as enslaved people and later for the right to live on the land that they were farming, African-Americans in the system of sharecropping, Dalits in the Indian equivalent, known as *saldari*, both still confined to their fixed roles at the bottom of their respective societies.

While doors have opened to the subordinated castes in India and in America in the decades since discrimination was officially prohibited, the same spasms of resistance have afflicted both countries. What is called “affirmative action” in the United States is called “reservations” in India, and they are equally unpopular with the upper castes in both countries, language tracking in lock step, with complaints of reverse discrimination in one and reverse casteism in the other.

There are many overarching similarities to the countries’ caste systems, but they are not the same in how they are structured or operate. The American system was founded as a primarily two-tiered hierarchy with its contours defined by the uppermost group, those identified as white, and by the subordinated group, those identified as Black, with immigrants from outside Europe forming blurred middle castes that sought to adjust themselves within a bipolar structure, and Native Americans largely exiled outside it.

The Indian caste system, by contrast, is an elaborate fretwork of thousands of subcastes, or *jatis*, correlated to region and village, which fall under the four main *varnas* — the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, the Shudra and the excluded fifth, the Dalits. It is further complicated by non-Hindus — including Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians — who are outside the original caste system but have incorporated themselves into the workings of the country, at times in the face of resistance and attack, and may or may not have informal rankings among themselves and in relation to the *varnas*.

The Indian caste system historically has been said to be stable and unquestioned by those within it, bound as it is by religion and the Hindu belief in reincarnation, the belief that a person carries out in this life the karma of the previous ones, suffers the punishment or reaps the rewards for deeds in a past life, and that the more keenly you follow the rules for the caste you were born into, the higher your station will be in the next life.

Some observers say that this is what distinguishes the Indian caste system from any other, that people in the lowest caste accept their lot, that it is fixed and unbending, that Dalits presumably live out their karma decreed by the gods and do their lowly work without complaint, knowing not to dream of anything more. In order to survive, some people in a subordinated caste may learn and believe that resistance is futile. But this condescending view disregards generations of resistance, and the work of the beloved Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar and the reformer Jyotiba Phule before him. It was also wrongly assumed of enslaved Africans, and it disregards a fundamental truth of the species, that all human beings want to be free.

The Dalits were no more contented with their lot than anyone would be. In a caste system, conflating compliance with approval is dehumanizing in itself. Many Dalits looked out beyond their homeland, surveyed the oppressed people all over the world and identified the people closest to their lamentations. They recognized a shared fate with African-Americans, few of whom would have known of the suffering of Dalits. Some Dalits felt so strong a kinship with one wing of the American civil rights movement and followed it so closely that in the 1970s they created the Dalit Panthers, inspired by the Black Panther Party.

Several years ago, a group of largely African-American professors made a trip to a rural village in the Indian state Uttar Pradesh. There, hundreds of villagers from the lowliest subcaste, the scavengers, came together for a ceremony to welcome the Americans.

The villagers sang Dalit liberation songs for the occasion. Then they turned to their American guests and invited them to sing a liberation song of their own. A law professor from Indiana University, Kenneth Dau-Schmidt, began a song that the civil rights marchers sang in Birmingham and Selma before they faced sheriffs' dogs and fire hoses. As he reached the refrain, the Dalit hosts joined in and began to sing with their American counterparts. Across the oceans, they well knew the words to "We Shall Overcome."



Abe Livingston, a formerly enslaved man, in Beaumont, Tex., in 1937. WPA, via Library of Congress

The Mudsill and the Jatis

When a house is being built, the single most important piece of the framework is the first wood beam secured to the foundation. That piece is called the mudsill, the sill plate that runs along the base of a house and anchors the entire structure above it. The studs and subfloors, the ceilings and windows, the doors and roofing, all the components that make it a house are built on top of the mudsill. In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.

In the Indian caste system, an infinitely more elaborate hierarchy, the subcaste, or *jati*, to which a person was born established the occupation their family fulfilled, from cleaners of latrines to priests in the temples. Those born to families who collected refuse or tanned the hides of animals or handled the dead were seen as the most polluted and lowest in the hierarchy, untouchable because of the dreaded and thankless though necessary task they were presumably born to fulfill.

Similarly, African-Americans, throughout most of their time in this land, were relegated to the dirtiest, most demeaning and least desirable jobs by definition. After enslavement and well into the 20th century, they were primarily restricted to the role of sharecroppers and servants — domestics, lawn boys, chauffeurs and janitors. The most that those who managed to get an education could hope for was to teach, minister to, attend to the health needs of or bury other subordinate-caste people.

The state of South Carolina, right after the Civil War, effectively prohibited Black people from performing any labor other than farm or domestic work, defining their place in the caste system. In North Carolina, during slavery, people in the lowest caste were forbidden to sell or trade goods of any kind or be subject to 39 lashes, a custom that echoed into the era of sharecropping. This blocked the main route to earning money from their own farm labors and forced them into economic dependence on the dominant caste, as intended.

“Anything that causes the Negro to aspire to rise above the plow handle, the cook pot — in a word the functions of a servant,” said Gov. James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, elected in 1903, “will be the worst thing on earth for the Negro. God Almighty designed him for a menial; he is fit for nothing else.”

Those who managed to go North after the Civil War and in the bigger waves of the Great Migration, starting during World War I, found that they could escape the South but not their caste.

They entered the North at the bottom, beneath Southern and Eastern Europeans who might not yet have learned English but who were permitted into unions and into better-served neighborhoods that barred Black citizens whose labor had cleared the wilderness and built the country’s wealth. While there was no federal law restricting people to certain occupations on the basis of race, statutes in the South and custom in the North kept lower-caste people in their place. Northern industries often hired African-Americans only as strikebreakers, and unions blocked them from entire trades reserved for whites, such as pipe fitters or plumbers. City inspectors would refuse to sign off on the work of Black electricians. A factory in Milwaukee turned away Black men seeking jobs as they walked toward the front gate. Even before many Black Southerners arrived in the North, Black people in New York and Philadelphia were denied licenses merely to drive carts.

Thus, the caste lines in America may have at one time appeared even starker than those in India. In 1890, “85 percent of Black men and 96 percent of Black women were employed in just two occupational categories,” wrote the sociologist Stephen Steinberg, “agriculture and domestic or personal service.” Forty years later, as the Depression set in and as African-Americans moved to Northern cities, the percentages of Black people at the bottom of the labor hierarchy remained the same, though by then, nearly half of Black men were doing manual labor that called merely for a strong back. Only 5 percent were listed as white-collar workers — many of them ministers, teachers and small-business owners who catered to other Black people.

The historic association between menial labor and Blackness served to further entrap Black people in a circle of subservience in the American mind. They were punished for being in the condition that they were forced to endure. And the image of servitude shadowed them into freedom.

As the caste system evolved in the 20th century, the dominant caste found ever more elaborate ways to enforce occupational hierarchy. “If white and colored persons are employed together,” the sociologist Bertram Doyle wrote in the 1930s, “they do not engage in the same tasks, generally, and certainly not as equals.” He continued: “Negroes are seldom, if ever, put into authority over white persons. Moreover, the Negro expects to remain in the lower ranks; rising, if at all, only over other Negroes.” No matter how well he does his job, Doyle wrote, “he cannot often hope for promotion.”

Since the early 20th century, the wealthiest African-Americans — from Louis Armstrong to Muhammad Ali — have traditionally been entertainers and athletes. Even now, in a recent ranking of the richest African-Americans, 17 of the top 20 — from Oprah Winfrey to Jay-Z to Michael Jordan — made their wealth as innovators, and then moguls, in the entertainment industry or in sports.

Historically, this group would come to predominate the realm carved out for them, often celebrated unless they went head to head against a person in the dominant caste, as did the Black boxer Jack Johnson when he was pitted against the white boxer James J. Jeffries in 1910. Many white people resented Johnson after he became the first Black heavyweight champion in 1908. They mounted a campaign to coax Jeffries, the undefeated former champion, out of retirement to reclaim the title they believed was theirs. In an era of virulent race hatred, the press stoked passions by calling Jeffries “the Great White Hope.”

The two faced off on the Fourth of July at a packed stadium built just for the occasion in Reno, Nev. It was billed as the “Fight of the Century,” with bookies heavily favoring Jeffries to win. Johnson knocked Jeffries down in the 15th round and was declared the victor, to jeers and epithets. It was taken as an affront to white sovereignty and triggered white riots across the country, in the North and the South, including 11 separate ones in New York City, where white mobs set fire to Black tenements and tried to lynch two Black men over the defeat. The message was that, even in an arena into which the lowest caste had been permitted, they were to know and remain in their place.

Mistaken Identity

Some years ago, I was a national correspondent at The New York Times, based in Chicago, and decided to do a lighthearted piece about Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, a prime stretch of Michigan Avenue that had always been the city’s showcase, but now several big luxury names from New York and elsewhere were about to take up residence. I figured retailers would be delighted to talk. As I planned the article, I reached out to them for interviews. Everyone I called was thrilled to describe their foray into Chicago and to sit down with The Times.

The interviews went as expected until the last one. I had arrived a few minutes early to make sure we could start on time, given the deadline I was facing.

The boutique was empty at this quiet hour of the late afternoon. The manager’s assistant told me the manager would be arriving soon from another appointment. She went to a back corner as I stood alone in the showroom. A man in a business suit and tie finally walked in, harried and breathless. From the back corner, she nodded that this was he, so I went up to introduce myself and get started. He was out of breath, had been rushing, coat still on, checking his watch.

“Oh, I can’t talk with you now,” he said, brushing past me. “I’m very, very busy. I’m running late for an appointment.”

I was confused at first. Might he have made another appointment for the exact same time? Why would he schedule two appointments at once? There was no one else in the boutique but the two of us and his assistant in back.

“I think I’m your appointment,” I said.

“No, this a very important appointment with The New York Times,” he said, pulling off his coat. “I can’t talk with you now. I’ll have to talk with you some other time.”

“But I am with The New York Times,” I told him, pen and notebook in hand. “I talked with you on the phone. I’m the one who made the appointment with you for 4:30.”

“What’s the name?”

“Isabel Wilkerson with The New York Times.”

“How do I know that?” he shot back, growing impatient. “Look, I said I don’t have time to talk with you right now. She’ll be here any minute.”

He looked to the front entrance and again at his watch.

“But I am Isabel. We should be having the interview right now.”

He let out a sigh. “What kind of identification do you have? Do you have a business card?”

This was the last interview for the piece, and I had handed them all out by the time I got to him.

“I’ve been interviewing all day,” I told him. “I happen to be out of them now.”

“What about ID? You have a license on you?”

“I shouldn’t have to show you my license, but here it is.”

He gave it a cursory look.

“You don’t have anything that has The New York Times on it?”

“Why would I be here if I weren’t here to interview you? All of this time has passed. We’ve been standing here, and no one else has shown up.”

“She must be running late. I’m going to have to ask you to leave so I can get ready for my appointment.”

I left and walked back to the Times bureau, dazed and incensed, trying to figure out what had just happened. This was the first time I had ever been accused of impersonating myself. His caste notions of who should be doing what in society had so blinded him that he dismissed the idea that the reporter he was anxiously awaiting, excited to talk to, was standing right in front him. It seemed not to occur to him that a New York Times national correspondent could come in a container such as mine, despite every indication that I was she.

The article ran that Sunday. Because I had not been able to interview him, he didn’t get a mention. It would have amounted to a nice bit of publicity for him, but the other interviews made it unnecessary in the end. I sent him a clip of the piece along with the business card that he had asked for. To this day, I won’t step inside that shop. I will not mention the name, not because of censorship or a desire to protect any company’s reputation but because of our cultural tendency to believe that if we just identify the presumed-to-be-rare offending outlier, we will have rooted out the problem. The problem could have happened anyplace, because the problem is, in fact, at the root.

The Race to Get Under the White Tent

At the turn of the 20th century, as the country began refining the rules of admittance to the dominant caste and further tightened the restrictions on those at the bottom, Ybor City, Fla., as elsewhere in the South, began to segregate its streetcars. Cubans there, uncertain as to how they would be classified, were relieved “to discover that they were allowed to sit in the white section,” according to the historical researcher Jan Voogd.

By extending the dream of dominion over the land and all others in it to anyone who could meet the definition of white, the American caste system became an all-or-nothing gambit for the top rung.

Those permitted under the white tent could reap the rewards of full citizenship, rise to positions of high status (or as far as their talents could take them), get access to the best the country had to offer or, at the very least, be accorded respect in everyday interactions from subordinate groups who risked assault for any misstep. A two-tiered caste system raised the stakes for whiteness, leading to court dockets filled with people on the borderline seeking admission to the upper caste.

A Japanese immigrant named Takao Ozawa had lived in the United States for more than 20 years. He tried to make the case that he was worthy of citizenship and should qualify as white because his skin was lighter than that of many “white people.” What did it mean to be white if someone with actual white skin was not white? His case went all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1922, the court held unanimously that white meant not skin color but “Caucasian,” and that Japanese were not Caucasian, notwithstanding the fact that few white Americans had origins in the Caucasus Mountains of Eurasia either and that those who did were at that very moment being kept out, too.

The Ozawa decision and others of that era were a heartbreaking catastrophe for Asians seeking citizenship. With pro-Western European sentiment running high, the government began rescinding the naturalized citizenship of people of Asian descent who were already here. This amounted to an abandonment of people who had lived legally in the United States for most of their adult lives, as would echo a century later with undocumented immigrants crossing the U.S. border with Mexico.

An Indian immigrant named Vaishno Das Bagai had been in the United States for 10 years when he was stripped of his citizenship in 1925 as a result of these rulings. By that time, he had a wife and three children and his own general store on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. He lost the business he had built, because of a California law restricting the economic rights of people who were not citizens. He was left without a passport and thus was thwarted in his attempt to get back to India, and made a man without a country. He was far from his original home and rejected by his new one. One day, he traveled alone to San Jose and rented a room. There, he turned on the gas and ended his life.

No matter which route a borderline applicant took to gain acceptance, the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms. What a thin, frayed thread held the illusions together. A Japanese novelist once noted that, on paper anyway, it was a single apostrophe that stood between rejection and citizenship for a Japanese Ohara versus an Irish O'Hara.

These cases laid bare not just the absurdity but the inaccuracy of these artificial labels and the perception of purity or pollution implied by them. At the same time, they exposed the unyielding rigidity of a caste system, defiant in the face of evidence contrary to its foundation, how it holds fast against the assault of logic.



A protest against the integration of a school in Little Rock, Ark., in 1959. John T. Bledsoe/Library of Congress

The Intrusion of Caste in Everyday Life

On an otherwise ordinary Sunday afternoon in October 2018, a white woman began to track a Black man in Georgia when she saw him out and about with two white children. The Black man, Corey Lewis, was the children's babysitter, and from her car, the woman stalked him as he drove them from a Walmart to a gas station and then to his home. She first began tracking Lewis after he did not permit her, a complete stranger, to talk with the older of the two children to confirm to her satisfaction that they were all right.

If there is anything that distinguishes caste in America, it is, first, the policing of roles and behavior expected of people based on what they look like, and second, the monitoring of boundaries — the disregard for the boundaries of subordinated castes or the passionate construction of them by those in the dominating caste, to keep the hierarchy in place.

Modern-day caste protocols are often less about overt attacks or conscious hostility. They are like the wind, powerful enough to knock you down but invisible as they go about their work. They are sustained by the muscle memory of relative rank and the expectations of how one person interacts with others based on their place in the hierarchy. It is a form of status hypervigilance, the entitlement of the dominant caste to step in and assert itself wherever it chooses, to monitor or dismiss those deemed beneath them, as they see fit.

That afternoon, Lewis, a youth mentor who runs an after-school program, took notice of the woman trailing him and started recording the situation on his cellphone. In a video, the children can be seen calm and unfazed, buckled in their seatbelts in the back of his car.

His voice is strained and disbelieving. “This lady is following me,” he says, “because I got two kids in the back seat that do not look like me.”

The woman called 911 and asked if she should keep following him. She continued to trail him even though she was told not to. Soon after Lewis arrived home with the children, a patrol car pulled up behind him. An officer got out and headed toward him.

The officer told the children, a 6-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl, to step out of Lewis’s car, and Lewis’s voice began to grow tense. The outcome of this police encounter and his safety and very life depended on what those children said, and he asked them to please tell the officer who he was.

“Please,” he said to them.

The officer asked the children repeatedly, “Are y’all OK?”

“Jesus have mercy — what is wrong with this country?” a Black woman outside cried.

Satisfied that Lewis was, in fact, their babysitter and that the children were not in danger, the officer took the additional step of calling the parents, who were out at dinner.

“It just knocked us out of our chair,” the children’s father, David Parker, told *The New York Times*.

Caste had intruded into all of their lives. Caste entitlement is not about luxury cars and watches, country clubs and private banks, but knowing without thinking that you are one up from another based on rules not set down on paper but reinforced in commercials, television shows and billboards, from boardrooms to newsrooms to gated subdivisions to who gets killed first in the first half-hour of a movie, and affects everyone up and down the hierarchy. This is the blindsiding banality of caste.

After the incident, a reporter asked the 10-year-old girl, Addison, what she would tell the woman who followed them that day. Her father told *The Times* her response: “I would just ask her to, next time, try to see us as three people rather than three skin colors, because we might’ve been Mr. Lewis’s adopted children.”

The Inevitable Narcissism of Caste

Through no fault of any individual born to it, a caste system centers the dominant caste as the sun around which all other castes revolve and defines it as the default-setting standard of normalcy, of intellect, of beauty, against which all others are measured, ranked in descending order by their physiological proximity to the dominant caste.

They are surrounded by images of themselves, from cereal commercials to sitcoms, as deserving, hardworking and superior in most aspects of American life, and it would be the rare person who would not absorb the constructed centrality of the dominant group. It would be the rare outliers who would go out of their way to experience the world from the perspective of those considered below them, or even to think about them one way or the other, and the caste system does not require it of them.

Society builds a trapdoor of self-reference that, without any effort on the part of people in the dominant caste, unwittingly forces on them a narcissistic isolation from those assigned to lower categories. It replicates the structure of narcissistic family systems, the interplay of competing supporting roles — the golden-child middle castes of so-called model minorities, the lost-child Indigenous peoples and the scapegoat caste at the bottom.

The centrality of the dominant caste is not lost on those considered beneath them in the hierarchy. The highest and lowest rungs are seen as so far apart as to seem planted in place, immovable. Thus those straddling the middle may succumb to the greatest angst and uncertainty as they aspire to a higher rung.

Everyone in the caste system is trained to covet proximity to the dominant caste: an Iranian immigrant feeling the need to mention that a relative had blond hair as a child; a second-generation child of Caribbean immigrants quick to clarify that they are Dominican and categorically not African-American; a Mexican immigrant boasting that one of his grandfathers back in Mexico “looked just like an American” — blond hair and blue eyes — at which point he was reminded by an African-American that Americans come in all colors of hair and eyes.

Those accustomed to being the measure of all that is human can come to depend on the reassurance that while they may have troubles in their lives, at least they are not at the bottom. As long as the designated bottom dwellers remain in their designated place, their own identities and futures seem secure.

“No matter how degraded their lives, white people are still allowed to believe that they possess the blood, the genes, the patrimony of superiority,” the political scientist Andrew Hacker wrote in his 1992 book, “Two Nations.” “No matter what happens, they can never become ‘Black.’” Hacker continued, “White Americans of all classes have found it comforting to preserve Blacks as a subordinate caste: a presence that despite all its pain and problems still provides whites with some solace in a stressful world.”

We are accustomed to the concept of narcissism — a complex condition of self-aggrandizing entitlement and disregard of others, growing out of a hollow insecurity — as it applies to individuals. But some scholars apply it to the behavior of nations, tribes and subgroups. Freud was among the earliest psychoanalysts to connect a psychiatric diagnosis to Narcissus of Greek mythology, the son of the river god who fell in love with his own image in a pool of water and, not realizing that it was he who was “spurning” his affection, died in despair. “Narcissus could not conceive that he was in love with his own reflection,” wrote the Harvard clinical psychologist Elsa Ronningstam in her 2005 book, “Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality.” “He was caught in an illusion.”

So, too, with groups trained to believe in their inherent sovereignty. “The essence of this overestimation of one’s own position and the hate for all who differ from it is narcissism,” wrote Erich Fromm, a leading psychoanalyst and social theorist of the 20th century. “He is nothing,” Fromm wrote, “but if he can identify with his nation, or can transfer his personal narcissism to the nation, then he is everything.”

Fromm well knew the perils of group narcissism from both his training in psychoanalysis and his personal experience. He was born into a Jewish family in Germany and came of age during World War I, witnessing the hatred and fervor that took hold in that conflict, only to see it resurface again with the ascension of the Third Reich. He managed to flee Germany after the Nazis took power in 1933, forced to abandon the psychoanalytic institute he had built, and immigrated to the United States.

He saw firsthand, and through a psychoanalyst’s lens, the seductive power of nationalistic appeals to the anxieties of ordinary people. When a person is deeply invested in his group’s dominance, he “has a euphoric ‘on-top-of-the-world’ feeling, while in reality he is in a state of self-inflation,” Fromm wrote. “This leads to a severe distortion of his capacity to think and to judge. ... He and his are overevaluated. Everything outside is underevaluated.” And underneath may lie the fear that he cannot live up to the constructed ideal of his own perfection.

History has shown that nations and groups will conquer, colonize, enslave and kill to maintain the illusion of their primacy. Their investment in this illusion gives them as much of a stake in the inferiority of those deemed beneath them as in their own presumed superiority. “The survival of a group,” Fromm wrote, “depends to some extent on the

fact that its members consider its importance as great as or greater than that of their own lives.”

Thus, when under threat, they are willing to sacrifice themselves and their ideals for the survival of the group from which they draw their self-esteem. The political theorist Takamichi Sakurai, in his 2018 examination of Western and Eastern perspectives on the topic, and channeling Fromm, wrote bluntly: “Group narcissism leads people to fascism.” He went on, “An extreme form of group narcissism means malignant narcissism, which gives rise to a fanatical fascist politics, an extreme racialism and so on.”

Fromm identified this kind of group narcissism in two nations in particular: “the racial narcissism which existed in Hitler’s Germany, and which is found in the American South,” he wrote in 1964, at the height of the civil rights era. In both instances, Fromm found the working class to be among the most susceptible, harboring an “inflated image of itself as the most admirable group in the world, and of being superior to another racial group that is singled out as inferior,” he wrote. A person in this group “feels: ‘Even though I am poor and uncultured, I am somebody important because I belong to the most admirable group in the world — I am white’; or ‘I am an Aryan.’”

A group whipped into narcissistic fervor “is eager to have a leader with whom it can identify,” Fromm wrote. “The leader is then admired by the group which projects its narcissism onto him.” The right kind of leader can inspire a symbiotic connection that supplants logic. The susceptible group, Fromm teaches us, sees itself in the narcissistic leader, becomes one with the leader, sees his fortunes and his fate as their own.

The Price We Pay for a Caste System

In the winter of 2019, an invisible life form awakened in the Eastern Hemisphere and began to spread across the oceans.

The earth’s most powerful nation watched as faraway workers in hazmat gear tested for what no one could see, and deluded itself into believing that American exceptionalism would somehow grant it immunity from the sorrows of other countries.

Yet the virus arrived on these shores, and it planted itself in the gaps of disparity, the torn kinships and fraying infrastructure in the country’s caste system, just as it exploited the weakened immune system in the human body.

Soon, America had the largest coronavirus outbreak in the world. The virus exposed both the vulnerability of all humans and the layers of hierarchy.

While anyone could contract the virus, it was Asian-Americans who were scapegoated for it merely because they looked like the people from the part of the world that the virus first struck. As the crisis wore on, it was African-Americans and Latinos who began dying at higher rates. Pre-existing conditions, often tied to the stresses on marginalized people, contributed to the divergence. But it was the castelike occupations at the bottom of the hierarchy — grocery clerks, bus drivers, package deliverers, sanitation workers, low-paying jobs with high levels of public contact — that put them at greater risk of contracting the virus in the first place. These are among the muddiest jobs in a pandemic, the jobs less likely to guarantee health coverage or sick days but that sustain the rest of society, allowing others to shelter in place.

As the number of deaths climbed to the highest of all nations, America — and those looking to it for leadership — had to come to terms with the untested fragilities of its social ecosystem. The pandemic, and the country’s fitful, often self-centered lack of readiness, exposed “a failure of character unparalleled in U.S. history,” Stephen Walt, a professor of international relations at Harvard University, wrote in *Foreign Policy*. The pandemic forced the nation to open its eyes to what it might not have wanted to see but needed to see.

“This is a civilization searching for its humanity,” Gary Michael Tartakov, a social and cultural historian, said to me as we discussed caste in America at a conference in 2018. “It dehumanized others to build its civilization. Now it needs to find its own.”

It was earlier that spring that I was forced to face the mystery of the misshapen corner of the ceiling in my own old house and summoned inspectors to try to solve it. One man used an infrared light. Others went into the attic and onto the roof. The bow in the corner had come from a long-ago leak that had grown beyond notice, unattended by a series of previous owners, the moisture from the original leak long evaporated but leaving the plaster weakened over time, heavy and tugging at adjacent seams, inch by inch, until a section of the ceiling was now threatening to cave in on itself and perhaps take the rest of the ceiling with it.

I hadn't caused this problem, hadn't been there when the leak first crept toward the ceiling. In fact, I had been the one to install the new roof. But it fell to me to fix it or suffer the consequences. Contractors offered to trim it out and Sheetrock over it. A plasterer said he could replaster the fragile section to blend with the rest of the old ceiling. It would be indistinguishable to the naked eye but would not protect against further weakness in what remained of the original plaster, strained as it was from the adjacent frailties.

The only way to truly fix it, he said, was to tear out the plaster, down to the beams, inspect and rebuild the rotting lath and replaster the entire ceiling. And so we did. It took days to scrape and inspect, recast and reconstruct. When it was done, it was quietly glorious, as ceilings go.

And I could breathe free, knowing, as we now are called upon to do in our era, in the house we all live in, that it was sound and secure, not merely patched and papered over, but maybe even better than it was, for ourselves and for the generations that come after us.