



# Caste

The Origins  
of Our  
Discontents

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Author of **THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS**



**CASTE**  
THE ORIGINS OF  
OUR DISCONTENTS



**ISABEL WILKERSON**



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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Epigraph*

*The Man in the Crowd*

## Part One: Toxins in the Permafrost and Heat Rising All Around

Chapter One: The Afterlife of Pathogens

*The Vitals of History*

Chapter Two: An Old House and an Infrared Light

Chapter Three: An American Untouchable

*An Invisible Program*

## Part Two: The Arbitrary Construction of Human Divisions

Chapter Four: A Long-Running Play and the Emergence of Caste in America

Chapter Five: “The Container We Have Built for You”

Chapter Six: The Measure of Humanity

Chapter Seven: Through the Fog of Delhi to the Parallels in India and America

Chapter Eight: The Nazis and the Acceleration of Caste

Chapter Nine: *The Evil of Silence*

## Part Three: The Eight Pillars of Caste

The Foundations of Caste: *The Origins of Our Discontents*

Pillar Number One: Divine Will and the Laws of Nature

Pillar Number Two: Heritability

Pillar Number Three: Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating

Pillar Number Four: Purity Versus Pollution

Pillar Number Five: Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill

Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma

Pillar Number Seven: Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control

Pillar Number Eight: Inherent Superiority Versus Inherent Inferiority

## Part Four: The Tentacles of Caste

*Brown Eyes Versus Blue Eyes*

Chapter Ten: Central Miscasting

Chapter Eleven: Dominant Group Status Threat and the Precarity of the Highest Rung

Chapter Twelve: A Scapegoat to Bear the Sins of the World

Chapter Thirteen: The Insecure Alpha and the Purpose of an Underdog

Chapter Fourteen: The Intrusion of Caste in Everyday Life

Chapter Fifteen: The Urgent Necessity of a Bottom Rung

Chapter Sixteen: Last Place Anxiety: Packed in a Flooding Basement

Chapter Seventeen: On the Early Front Lines of Caste

Chapter Eighteen: Satchel Paige and the Illogic of Caste

## Part Five: The Consequences of Caste

Chapter Nineteen: *The Euphoria of Hate*

Chapter Twenty: The Inevitable Narcissism of Caste

Chapter Twenty-one: The German Girl with the Dark, Wavy Hair

Chapter Twenty-two: The Stockholm Syndrome and the Survival of the Subordinate Caste

Chapter Twenty-three: Shock Troops on the Borders of Hierarchy  
Chapter Twenty-four: Cortisol, Telomeres, and the Lethality of Caste

## Part Six: Backlash

Chapter Twenty-five: A Change in the Script  
Chapter Twenty-six: Turning Point and the Resurgence of Caste  
Chapter Twenty-seven: The Symbols of Caste  
Chapter Twenty-eight: Democracy on the Ballot  
Chapter Twenty-nine: The Price We Pay for a Caste System

## Part Seven: Awakening

Chapter Thirty: Shedding the Sacred Thread  
*The Radicalization of the Dominant Caste*  
Chapter Thirty-one: The Heart Is the Last Frontier

Epilogue: A World Without Caste

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

*Bibliography*

*By Isabel Wilkerson*

*About the Author*



*Because even if I should speak,  
no one would believe me.  
And they would not believe me precisely because  
they would know that what I said was true.*

—JAMES BALDWIN

*If the majority knew of the root of this evil,  
then the road to its cure would not be long.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

## The Man in the Crowd

*There is a famous black-and-white photograph from the era of the Third Reich. It is a picture taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, of shipyard workers, a hundred or more, facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are heiling in unison, their right arms rigid in outstretched allegiance to the Führer.*

*If you look closely, you can see a man in the upper right who is different from the others. His face is gentle but unyielding. Modern-day displays of the photograph will often add a helpful red circle around the man or an arrow pointing to him. He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest, as the stiff palms of the others hover just inches from him. He alone is refusing to salute. He is the one man standing against the tide.*

*Looking back from our vantage point, he is the only person in the entire scene who is on the right side of history. Everyone around him is tragically, fatefully, categorically wrong. In that moment, only he could see it.*

*His name is believed to have been August Landmesser. At the time, he could not have known the murderous path the hysteria around him would lead to. But he had already seen enough to reject it.*

*He had joined the Nazi Party himself years before. By now though, he knew firsthand that the Nazis were feeding Germans lies about Jews, the outcastes of his era, that, even this early in the Reich, the Nazis had caused terror, heartache, and disruption. He knew that Jews were anything but Untermenschen, that they were German citizens, human as anyone else. He was an Aryan in love with a Jewish woman, but the recently enacted Nuremberg Laws had made their relationship illegal.*

*They were forbidden to marry or to have sexual relations, either of which amounted to what the Nazis called “racial infamy.”*

*His personal experience and close connection to the scapegoated caste allowed him to see past the lies and stereotypes so readily embraced by susceptible members—the majority, sadly—of the dominant caste. Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see.*

*In a totalitarian regime such as that of the Third Reich, it was an act of bravery to stand firm against an ocean. We would all want to believe that we would have been him. We might feel certain that, were we Aryan citizens under the Third Reich, we surely would have seen through it, would have risen above it like him, been that person resisting authoritarianism and brutality in the face of mass hysteria.*

*We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?*

Part One

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TOXINS IN THE PERMAFROST  
AND HEAT RISING ALL  
AROUND

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Afterlife of Pathogens

In the haunted summer of 2016, an unaccustomed heat wave struck the Siberian tundra on the edge of what the ancients once called the End of the Land. Above the Arctic Circle and far from the tectonic plates colliding in American politics, the heat rose beneath the earth's surface and also bore down from above, the air reaching an inconceivable 95 degrees on the Russian peninsula of Yamal. Wildfires flared, and pockets of methane gurgled beneath the normally frozen soil in the polar region.

Soon, the children of the indigenous herdsmen fell sick from a mysterious illness that many people alive had never seen and did not recognize. A twelve-year-old boy developed a high fever and acute stomach pangs, and passed away. Russian authorities declared a state of emergency and began airlifting hundreds of the sickened herding people, the Nenets, to the nearest hospital in Salekhard.

Scientists then identified what had afflicted the Siberian settlements. The aberrant heat had chiseled far deeper into the Russian permafrost than was normal and had exposed a toxin that had been encased since 1941, when the world was last at war. It was the pathogen anthrax, which had killed herds of reindeer all those decades ago and lain hidden in the animal carcasses long since buried in the permafrost. A thawed and tainted carcass rose to the surface that summer, the pathogen awakened, intact and as powerful as it had ever been. The pathogen spores seeped into the grazing land and infected the reindeer and spread to the herders who raised and relied upon them. The anthrax, like the reactivation of the human pathogens of hatred and tribalism in this evolving century, had never died. It lay in wait,

sleeping, until extreme circumstances brought it to the surface and back to life.

On the other side of the planet, the world's oldest and most powerful democracy was in spasms over an election that would transfix the Western world and become a psychic break in American history, one that will likely be studied and dissected for generations. That summer and into the fall and in the ensuing years to come, amid talk of Muslim bans, nasty women, border walls, and shithole nations, it was common to hear in certain circles the disbelieving cries, "This is not America," or "I don't recognize my country," or "This is not who we are." Except that this was and is our country and this was and is who we are, whether we have known or recognized it or not.

The heat rose in the Arctic and in random encounters in America. Late that summer, in New York City, an indigo harbor in a safely blue state, a white man in Brooklyn, an artist, was helping a middle-aged white woman carry her groceries to a southbound subway in the direction of Coney Island.

By then, it was impossible to avoid talk of the campaign. It had been a political season unlike any other. For the first time in history, a woman was running as a major party candidate for president of the United States. A household name, the candidate was a no-nonsense national figure overqualified by some estimates, conventional and measured if uninspiring to her detractors, with a firm grasp of any policy or crisis that she might be called upon to address. Her opponent was an impetuous billionaire, a reality television star prone to insulting most anyone unlike himself, who had never held public office and who pundits believed had no chance of winning his party's primaries much less the presidency.

Before the campaign was over, the male candidate would stalk the female candidate from behind during a debate seen all over the world. He would boast of grabbing women by their genitals, mock the disabled, encourage violence against the press and against those who disagreed with him. His followers jeered the female candidate, chanting "Lock her up!" at mass rallies over which the billionaire presided. His comments and activities were deemed so coarse that some news reports were preceded by parental advisories.



Here was a candidate “so transparently unqualified for the job,” wrote *The Guardian* in 2016, “that his candidacy seemed more like a prank than a serious bid for the White House.”

On the face of it, what is commonly termed race in America was not at issue. Both candidates were white, born to the country’s historic dominant majority. But the woman candidate represented the more liberal party made up of a patchwork of coalitions of, roughly speaking, the humanitarian-minded and the marginalized. The male candidate represented the conservative party that in recent decades had come to be seen as protecting an old social order benefitting and appealing largely to white voters.

The candidates were polar opposites, equally loathed by the fans of their respective adversary. The extremes of that season forced Americans to take sides and declare their allegiances or find a way to dance around them. So, on an otherwise ordinary day, as the Brooklyn artist was helping the older woman with her groceries, she turned to him, unbidden, and wanted to know who he was voting for. The artist, being a progressive, said he was planning to vote for the Democrat, the more experienced candidate. The older woman with the groceries must have suspected as much and was displeased with his answer. She, like millions of other Americans in the historic majority, had brightened to the blunt-spoken appeals of the nativist billionaire.

Only weeks before, the billionaire had said that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and his followers would still vote for him, devoted as they were. The woman overladen with groceries was one of them. In the bluest of sanctuaries, she had heard his call and decoded his messages. She took it upon herself to instruct the artist on the error of his thinking and why it was urgent that he vote the right way.

“Yes, I know he mouths off at times,” she conceded, drawing closer to her potential convert. “But, he will restore our sovereignty.”

It was then, before the debates and cascading revelations to come, that the Brooklyn man realized that, despite the odds and all historic precedent, a reality star with the least formal experience of perhaps anyone who had ever run for president could become the leader of the free world.

The campaign had become more than a political rivalry—it was an existential fight for primacy in a country whose demographics had been

shifting beneath us all. People who looked like the Brooklyn artist and the woman headed toward Coney Island, those whose ancestry traced back to Europe, had been in the historic ruling majority, the dominant racial caste in an unspoken hierarchy, since before the founding of the republic. But in the years leading to this moment, it had begun to spread on talk radio and cable television that the white share of the population was shrinking. In the summer of 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau announced its projection that, by 2042, for the first time in American history, whites would no longer be the majority in a country that had known of no other configuration, no other way to be.

Then, that fall, in the midst of what seemed a cataclysmic financial crisis and as if to announce a potential slide from preeminence for the caste that had long been dominant, an African-American, a man from what was historically the lowest caste, was elected president of the United States. His ascension incited both premature declarations of a post-racial world and an entire movement whose sole purpose was to prove that he had not been born in the United States, a campaign led by the billionaire who was now in 2016 running for president himself.

A low rumble had been churning beneath the surface, neurons excited by the prospect of a cocksure champion for the dominant caste, a mouthpiece for their anxieties. Some people grew bolder because of it. A police commander in southern New Jersey talked about mowing down African-Americans and complained that the woman candidate, the Democrat, would “give in to all the minorities.” That September, he beat a handcuffed black teenager who had been arrested for swimming in a pool without authorization. The commander grabbed the teenager’s head and, witnesses said, rammed it “like a basketball” into a metal doorjamb. As the election drew near, the commander told his officers that the reality television star “is the last hope for white people.”

Observers the world over recognized the significance of the election. Onlookers in Berlin and Johannesburg, Delhi and Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo, stayed up late into the night or the next morning to watch the returns that first Tuesday in November 2016. Inexplicably to many outside the United States, the outcome would turn not on the popular vote, but on the Electoral College, an American invention from the founding era of slavery

by which each state has a say in declaring the winner based on the electoral votes assigned them and the outcome of the popular ballot in their jurisdiction.

By then, there had been only five elections in the country's history in which the Electoral College or a similar mechanism had overruled the popular vote, two such cases occurring in the twenty-first century alone. One of those two was the election of 2016, a collision of unusual circumstance.

The election would set the United States on a course toward isolationism, tribalism, the walling in and protecting of one's own, the worship of wealth and acquisition at the expense of others, even of the planet itself. After the votes had been counted and the billionaire declared the winner, to the shock of the world and of those perhaps less steeped in the country's racial and political history, a man on a golf course in Georgia could feel freer to express himself. He was a son of the Confederacy, which had gone to war against the United States for the right to enslave other humans. The election was a victory for him and for the social order he had been born to. He said to those around him, "I remember a time when everybody knew their place. Time we got back to that."

The sentiment of returning to an old order of things, the closed hierarchy of the ancestors, soon spread across the land in a headline-grabbing wave of hate crime and mass violence. Shortly after Inauguration Day, a white man in Kansas shot and killed an Indian engineer, telling the immigrant and his Indian co-worker to "get out of my country" as he fired upon them. The next month, a clean-cut white army veteran caught a bus from Baltimore to New York on a mission to kill black people. He stalked a sixty-six-year-old black man in Times Square and stabbed him to death with a sword. The attacker would become the first white supremacist convicted on terrorism charges in the state of New York.

On a packed commuter train in Portland, Oregon, a white man hurling racial and anti-Muslim epithets, attacked two teenaged girls, one of whom was wearing a hijab. "Get the fuck out," he ranted. "We need Americans here." When three white men rose to the girls' defense, the attacker stabbed the men for doing so. "I'm a patriot," the attacker told the police en route to jail, "and I hope everyone I stabbed died." Tragically two of the men did

not survive their wounds. Then in that summer of 2017, a white supremacist drove into a crowd of anti-hate protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing a young white woman, Heather Heyer, in a standoff over monuments to the Confederacy that drew the eyes of the world.

The year 2017 would become the deadliest to date for mass shootings in modern American history. In Las Vegas, there occurred the country's largest such massacre, followed by one mass shooting after another in public schools, parking lots, city streets, and superstores across the nation. In the fall of 2018, eleven worshippers were slain at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh in the worst anti-Semitic attack on U.S. soil. Outside Louisville, Kentucky, a man attempted a similar assault on a black church, yanking the locked doors to try to break in and shoot parishioners at their Bible study. Unable to pry the doors open, the man went to a nearby supermarket and killed the first black people he saw—a black woman in the parking lot headed in for groceries and a black man buying poster board with his grandson. An armed bystander happened to see the shooter in the parking lot, which got the shooter's attention. "Don't shoot me," the shooter told the onlooker, "and I won't shoot you," according to news reports. "Whites don't kill whites."

In the ensuing months, as the new president pulled out of treaties and entreated dictators, many observers despaired of the end of democracy and feared for the republic. On his own, the new leader withdrew the world's oldest democracy from the 2016 Paris Agreement, in which the nations of the world had come together to battle climate change, leaving many to anguish over an already losing race to protect the planet.

Soon, a group of leading psychiatrists, whose profession permits them to speak of their diagnoses only in the event of a person's danger to oneself or to others, took the extraordinary step of forewarning the American public that the newly installed leader of the free world was a malignant narcissist, a danger to the public. By the second year of the administration, brown children were behind bars at the southern border, separated from their parents as they sought asylum. The decades-old protections of air and water and endangered species were summarily rolled back. Multiple campaign advisors faced prison terms in widening investigations into corruption, and a sitting president was being described as an agent of a foreign power.

The opposition party had lost all three branches of government and fretted over what to do. It managed to win back the House of Representatives in 2018, but this left the party with only one-sixth of the government—meaning one-half of the legislative branch—and thus hesitant at first to begin impeachment proceedings that were its purview. Many feared a backlash, feared riling up the billionaire’s base, in part because, though it represented a minority of the electorate, his base was made up overwhelmingly of people in the dominant caste. The single-mindedness of the president’s followers and the anguish of the opposition seemed to compromise the system of checks and balances thought to be built into the foundation and meant that, for a time, the United States was not, in the words of a Democratic Party chair in South Carolina, a “fully functional democracy.”

At the start of the third year, the president was impeached by opponents in the lower chamber and acquitted by loyalists in the Senate, their votes falling along party lines that reflected the fractures in the country as a whole. It was only the third such impeachment trial in American history. By now, more than three hundred days had passed without a White House press briefing, a Washington ritual of accountability. It had fallen away so quietly that few seemed to notice this additional breach of normalcy.

Then the worst pandemic in more than a century brought humanity to a standstill. The president dismissed it as a Chinese virus that would disappear like a miracle, called the growing uproar a hoax, disparaged those who disagreed or sought to forewarn him. Within weeks, the United States would be afflicted with the largest outbreak in the world, governors pleading for test kits and ventilators, nurses seen wrapping themselves in trash bags to shield against contagion as they aided the sick. The country was losing the capacity to be shocked; the unfathomable became just another part of one’s day.

What had happened to America? What could account for tens of millions of voters choosing to veer from all custom and to put the country and thus the world in the hands of an untested celebrity, one who had never served in either war or public office, unlike every man before him, and one whose rhetoric seemed a homing device for extremists? Were the coal miners and auto workers restless in a stagnating economy? Were the people in the

heartland lashing back at the coastal elites? Was it that a portion of the electorate was just ready for a change? Was it really true that the woman in the race, the first to make it this close to the nation's highest office, had run an "unholy mess" of a campaign, as two veteran political journalists put it? Was it that urban (meaning black) voters did not turn out, and the evangelical (meaning white) voters did? How could so many people, ordinary working folks, who needed healthcare and education for their children, protection of the water they drink and the wages they depended upon, "vote against their own interests," as many progressives were heard to say in the fog of that turning point in political history? These were all popular theories in the aftermath, and there may have been some element of truth in a few of them.

The earth had shifted overnight, or so it appeared. We have long defined earthquakes as arising from the collision of tectonic plates that force one wedge of earth beneath the other, believed that the internal shoving match under the surface is all too easily recognizable. In classic earthquakes, we can feel the ground shudder and crack beneath us, we can see the devastation of the landscape or the tsunamis that follow.

What scientists have only recently discovered is that the more familiar earthquakes, those that are easily measured while in progress and instantaneous in their destruction, are often preceded by longer, slow-moving, catastrophic disruptions rumbling twenty miles or more beneath us, too deep to be felt and too quiet to be measured for most of human history. They are as potent as those we can see and feel, but they have long gone undetected because they work in silence, unrecognized until a major quake announces itself on the surface. Only recently have geophysicists had technology sensitive enough to detect the unseen stirrings deeper in the earth's core. They are called silent earthquakes. And only recently have circumstances forced us, in this current era of human rupture, to search for the unseen stirrings of the human heart, to discover the origins of our discontents.

By the time of the American election that fateful year, back on the northernmost edge of the world, the Siberians were trying to recover from the heat that had stricken them months before. Dozens of the indigenous herding people had been relocated, some quarantined and their tents



disinfected. The authorities embarked on mass vaccinations of the surviving reindeer and their herders. They had gone for years without vaccinations because it had been decades since the last outbreak, and they felt the problem was in the past. “An apparent mistake,” a Russian biologist told a Russian news site. The military had to weigh how best to dispose of the two thousand dead reindeer to keep the spores from spreading again. It was not safe merely to bury the carcasses to rid themselves of the pathogen. They would have to incinerate them in combustion fields at up to five hundred degrees Celsius, then douse the cinders and surrounding land with bleach to kill the spores to protect the people going forward.

Above all, and more vexing for humanity at large, was the sobering message of 2016 and the waning second decade of a still-new millennium: that rising heat in the earth’s oceans and in the human heart could revive long-buried threats, that some pathogens could never be killed, only contained, perhaps at best managed with ever-improving vaccines against their expected mutations.

What humanity learned, one would hope, was that an ancient and hardy virus required perhaps more than anything, knowledge of its ever-present danger, caution to protect against exposure, and alertness to the power of its longevity, its ability to mutate, survive and hibernate until reawakened. It seemed these contagions could not be destroyed, not yet anyway, only managed and anticipated, as with any virus, and that foresight and vigilance, the wisdom of never taking them for granted, never underestimating their persistence, was perhaps the most effective antidote, for now.