



Notes from Roanoke Change Academy's Second *Caste* Discussion

This session began with an acknowledgement of the recent attack on the U.S. Capitol. We began by sharing a passage from page 48 about the intentionality with which the caste system was developed in this country.

Tweet: The group then discussed a tweet Isabel Wilkerson posted on Wednesday, January 6th: “we have seen caste in action with our very eyes” and discussed what she meant by this, and how the events showed the caste system in action. Observations included:

- Photographs of white police officers letting rioters in and of black custodians cleaning up the mess in the rotunda afterwards
- The sense of privilege emanating from the rioters—and the declarations that the Capitol Building belonged to them
- Most members of Congress are White men, just as the vast majority of the insurrectionists seem to have been white men—they see themselves reflected in the government
- The contrasting level of preparedness between this and the Black Lives Matter protests of this past summer
- Some participants found themselves thinking about Pillars 7 and 8 (terror and cruelty and the dominant caste’s sense of superiority) while watching footage of the attack

Pillars of Caste: We then divided into four groups to discuss the level of influence of each of Wilkerson’s 8 pillars of caste on our society. Each group focused on two pillars and share the following thoughts

1) Divine will/the law of nature and heritability:

- This group discussed the historic and current role of churches in perpetuating some ideas
- Since its origins, the United States has had a view of itself as a chosen people
- Some of what we’re seeing is the backlash from Obama’s presidency
- Popular images have a role as well. For example, the way Jesus is typically portrayed as blonde-haired and blue-eyed
- “The black womb became a profit center” for slave owners

2) Endogamy and “the fundamental belief in the purity of the dominant caste” (page 115):

- One participant noted that it is often the children of interracial marriages who are the most impacted and ostracized
- Loving vs. Virginia was recent—in 1967
- A participant was once told that “in Roanoke, you are either black or not black,” illustrating a local perception of races

- The deeply ingrained nature of bias can cause a deep fear of the other. A key question is: how can people get past this?
 - This group discussed the absurdity of segregation measures. One local company used to require black and white employees to drink from the same bucket by using different pitchers. So, these employees were still drinking the same water
 - Personal epiphanies about one's own biases and experiences show that there is hope for individual and systemic change
- 3) Occupational hierarchy and dehumanization
- Consider the role of laws in dehumanization. For example, the German laws stripping Jews of aspects of their identity reflect doing everything possible not to see other humans as human
 - Recent studies show that medical students still think that black people feel less pain than white people
 - Mass incarceration can be considered a form of dehumanization
 - The role of language is significant. One participant asked the group to compare the language describing BLM protestors (saying they should get jobs, etc.) to the initial language around the Capitol insurrectionists
- 4) Terror/cruelty and the dominant caste's sense of superiority
- A participant shared the story of a black relative who, upon his return to the U.S. from military service abroad, was thrust back into discriminatory treatment
 - This group discussed whether all of the pillars stem from the last one—the dominant caste's sense of superiority.

Other Thoughts and Questions:

- Since the caste system was created intentionally, we have to be intentional about the work needed to disrupt it, and to focus on all pillars simultaneously
- Immigrants and other people who don't fit into a well-defined category are also vilified and dehumanized
- If some of these biases are so ingrained, how do we move beyond them? How do we undo these deep-seated beliefs?
- How do we rescue ourselves from the situation we're in? We have to be intentional about taking apart falsehoods and making the truth clear.
- *Sign up for Roanoke County Public Library's exploration of the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at www.roanokecountyva.gov/library

Suggested Reading and Listening

- The Capitol Invaders Enjoyed the Privilege of Not Being Taken Seriously: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-capitol-invaders-enjoyed-the-privilege-of-not-being-taken-seriously>
- *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, by Edward E. Baptist

- Oprah’s Book Club podcast episode with Isabel Wilkerson
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/caste-isabel-wilkerson/id1529009628?i=1000490015934>
- Project Implicit: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- Social Change Ecosystem Map: <https://buildingmovement.org/our-work/movement-building/social-change-ecosystem-map/>
- Virginia Library – Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative
 - Online exhibit: <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/aan/>
 - Feb 3 Virtual event, 6-7 PM - <https://zoom.us/j/91631599943>
- AAUW Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit:
<https://www.aauw.org/resources/member/governance-tools/dei-toolkit/?emci=fb4a1489-2c54-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&emdi=b16b8e2a-3b54-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&ceid=1041600>
- AAUW Town Hall Webinar Jan 19, 4 PM: Register here:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAvde6sqj0oE9ITF34WG6TgtfKB5j8pjnBd?emci=fb4a1489-2c54-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&emdi=b16b8e2a-3b54-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&ceid=1041600>
- National Book Foundation Presents: Black History Reexamined (with Isabel Wilkerson)
Feb. 4, 6 PM: Register here: <https://www.nationalbook.org/events/nbf-presents-black-history-reexamined/>