

Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

Week 4 – Part Four (first half): *Brown Eyes versus Blue Eyes*, Chapters 10, 11, 12, 13

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion.

Question 1:

On p. 175, Wilkerson tells us about her encounter with a man who had emigrated from India to the UK. He asks, if the US has a caste system, which caste is she?

She writes: “That is the question that many Indians ask, in one form or another, upon meeting a fellow Indian. It is a line of inquiry that those in the lowest caste know is coming and that they dread.”

And: “I had not expected this question. Nobody had ever asked me before. How could he not know? Was he merely being polite?”

Wilkerson assumes that caste is obvious to all Americans. Do you agree? In what ways might having unspoken caste assumptions make it harder or easier to shift public attitudes than it would be if caste were something we spoke about more readily, in the way Wilkerson suggests that one does in India?

Question 2:

In Chapter 11, Wilkerson discusses the recent and well-publicized increase in death rates for middle-aged white Americans. Many of these “deaths of despair” have been attributed to the opioid crisis. What would media coverage of the crack and opioid epidemics have looked like in a truly equitable society? How might our systems of criminal justice and mental health have evolved differently without caste?

Question 3:

In Chapter 11, Wilkerson quotes the mid-20th century sociologist Gunnar Myrdal as claiming that working class whites need caste more than the upper white classes. Is this a fair assessment? Wilkerson has been criticized for implicit (or maybe explicit!) classism in this book. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how would you re-shape her argument? You may wish to consider the story of the West Highland terrier (Chapter 13) in your response.

Question 4:

In Chapter 12, Wilkerson is critical of Western response to the 2013-2014 Ebola outbreak in Europe. In the current pandemic, African nations are generally faring much better than Western nations. How might caste play a role in the poor response of the US and most of Europe to the global pandemic?