

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.

## **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.

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