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Disrupting Caste Using an Economic To Social Model

“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.” (Wilkerson 17). This is Isabel Wilkerson’s definition of a caste system which she relies upon throughout her book, *Caste, the Origins of our Discontents*, where she takes a deep dive into where these systems come from, how they are enforced and maintained, and what society must do to disrupt them.

In exploring caste systems across the globe, including slavery in the United States, the caste system in India, and Nazi Germany, Wilkerson found that there are eight pillars of thought and practice utilized to maintain caste orders, including divine will, heritability, dehumanization, terror, and labor. Congruently, Wilkerson found that caste systems were mostly founded in the name of capitalism and the monetization of cheap labor: colonists looked to exploit African American labor through means of slavery and then prison, lower castes in India often worked in less desirable labor-intensive occupations in the outdoors, and Nazi Germany constructed

concentration camps as production facilities where they forcibly encamped and exterminated Jewish people and millions of others.

Today, these caste systems not only linger, but have curated socioeconomic systems that are structured within oppression, particularly in the United States. African Americans are statistically less employed than whites and face higher unemployment rates. African Americans are statistically employed less in corporate leadership roles, and studies show that resumes that lack ethnic indicators, such as an ethnic name, are more likely to receive a callback (Gerdeman). African Americans are severely underrepresented in politics, and overall income was 49% lower for African Americans than whites in 2021 (Gal and Kiersz).

When considering these issues in conjunction to the caste system's origins and foundational ideologies, Isabel Wilkerson often discusses social responses that could alleviate racial disparities. When relating caste-enforcing thinking to a viral, lethal contagion, Wilkerson states, "What humanity learned, one would hope, is 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." (Wilkerson 12). In the context of her virus analogy, Wilkerson's proposed social response is, "You don't ball up in a corner with guilt or shame at these discoveries. You don't, if you are wise, forbid any mention of them. In fact, you do the opposite. You educate yourself. You talk to people who have been through it and specialists who have researched it. You learn the consequences and obstacles, the options and treatments. You may pray over it and meditate over it. Then you take precautions to protect yourself and succeeding generations and work to ensure that these things, whatever they are, don't happen again." (Wilkerson 14).

I term Isabel Wilkerson's response to current caste implications as the societal-to-economic model, where social thinking reform leads to economic equality. She uses language such as "knowledge", "caution", "alertness", and "educate" to propose that consciousness and understanding would reap socioeconomic racial equality and caste disruption. While I vehemently agree that progress cannot be made without acknowledging the systemic oppression built upon centuries of caste injustice, I propose that addressing the issue from the other side, the economic side, has the potential to facilitate socioeconomic racial equality more efficiently.

Economic-to-Societal Model

I term my proposed solution as the economic-to-societal model, where economic reform geared towards remedying the racial disparity within the United State's economic structures would facilitate social ideology reform and disrupt the caste system effectively. I formulated this model because I found myself pondering that proposing knowledge and alertness to caste implications such as stereotypes and bias while economic systems currently work to enforce those implications is a great duty, and one that society has shown resistance to. My hope is that this model will level the economic playing field and open the door to conversations and understandings of inherent bias and learned racism that plagues American society.

To explore this model, I will discuss poverty, education, and the criminal justice system: the racial disparities within them, the systems that enforce the disparities, the inadequate legislative response, and how to adequately close the racial gap. It is my belief that adjusting the racism within these structures would allow for African Americans to reach the same economic position as whites, which would then facilitate social equality.

Poverty

An official poverty measure by race and ethnicity shows that African Americans experience poverty at a rate of 19.4%, while white people's rate is 8.1%. After considering government assistance, the rates go down to 11.2% for African Americans, and 5.7% for whites. This suggests that, even with current government aid and economic assistance programs, African Americans struggle with poverty over double as much as white counterparts (Khattar et al.). In 2019, statistics show that African American household income is 40% less than white household incomes. These disparities are linked to statistics that show African Americans are twice as likely to experience unemployment, far more likely to work hourly-wage jobs, and are paid less than white counterparts (Khattar et al.).

The largest current government aid and economic stability programs are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which works to provide access to food, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provides monetary support. Restrictions and requirements related to these programs that also maintain racial disparities include family caps, drug testing, resource limits, and work requirements. White people are the largest beneficiaries of these aid programs, and these policies do not consider racial discrimination in employment, housing, and policing. Instead, they utilize drug use, employment, and economic assets as means to disproportionately serve different communities (Allen).

My economic-to-societal model proposes reevaluating SNAP and TANF to make them more accessible via reducing oppressive restrictions such as work requirements, drug testing, and resource caps. This will make economic aid programs far more available for African Americans, and also linking income to geography when considering aid could lessen the racial disparity.

Associating poverty and government supplements to low-income neighborhoods in areas with high costs of living could benefit communities in food deserts that do not have adequate housing. Relieving poverty in this sense would trickle into relief in most other areas, such as education, crime, housing, healthcare, and employment.

Education

In 2017, studies found that 45% of African American students attended high-poverty schools compared to 8% of white students. Assessments show that in 2019, 13 out of every 100 African American students were proficient in math, and 15 out of 100 were proficient in reading. In 2018, African American student dropout rate was 2.4% higher than their white counterparts (Cai). One 2021 study that focused on a single school district found that in recent years, 26% of African American students were served suspensions for minor infractions compared to 2% of white students (“For Black Students, Unfairly Harsh Discipline Can Lead to Lower Grades”). A 2016 study shows that “School districts that predominantly serve students of color received \$23 billion less in funding than mostly white school districts” (Mervosh).

To combat issues within grade school education, legislation such as Affirmative Action and the Every Child Succeeds Act (ECSA) are in place. Affirmative Action works to ensure spots in higher education institutions are allotted to disadvantaged populations, such as African Americans, and ECSA uses standardized testing to measure student access and delegate funds. Affirmative Action is not currently implemented in grade schools, and ECSA does not consider socioeconomic positions (Sances).

The economic-to-societal model proposes supplementing, funding, and resourcing poorer school districts, particularly in high-volume areas such as metropolitan cities, expanding

Affirmative Action principles to primary and secondary education, and considering socioeconomic backgrounds in ECSA. Delegating resources to school districts whose geographic location supports a diverse student body would lessen the racial disparity in education while supporting students in underfunded public institutions. Expanding Affirmative Action to private grade schools and inaccessible public schools would allow disadvantaged populations access to higher-regarded education while increasing diversity, and implementing socioeconomic considerations in ECSA would facilitate diversity within education while providing more support to underachieving school districts that serve high-poverty populations. Accessible education would also fundamentally reduce disparities in crime, poverty, and employment.

Criminal Justice

Systemic racism within America's criminal justice system has become one of the most thinly-veiled economic structures of oppression in current times. In the United States, an African American is 5 times as likely to be stopped without just cause than a white person ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet"). One out of every three African American men today are projected to be sentenced to prison compared to one in every 17 white men. In terms of drug-related offenses, African Americans make up 33% of that respective prison population despite only 5% of African Americans being drug users ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet"). African Americans make up 13.4% of the U.S. population, but comprise 22% of fatal police shootings and 35% of death penalty executions. African Americans are incarcerated 5 times more than white people and make up 38.5% of the prison population ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet").

There have been a myriad of local and state level policing reforms after the 2020 killing of George Floyd at the hands of the police and resulting social movements. These reforms

include, but are not limited to, police cuts and budget delegation to community support, imposing crisis response teams, reduced police presence in schools, reforming police use of force, and implementing new police misconduct procedures (Subramanian).

These reforms are few and far between in the country, and do very little to alleviate the racial disparity in policing and imprisonment. The economic-to-societal model aims to implement legislation at the federal level to limit both police interaction with African Americans and the resulting disproportionate sentencing. This legislation includes: imposing federal policing standards, eliminating three strikes laws and truth in sentencing, decriminalizing drug use, and reevaluating punishments for nonviolent offenses. Federal standards would work to alleviate police bias in all corners of the U.S., eliminating constricting practices in sentencing would allow for African Americans to receive the same leniency as white people, and decriminalizing drug use while reevaluating punishments for nonviolent offenses will lessen the effects of mass incarceration.

Conclusion

My proposed economic-to-societal model begs the question, “How can relief-based reforms be implemented before acknowledging that relief is needed?” It is important to note that, similar to the oppressive nature of these systems, these relief-based reforms are not meant to *directly* favor racial equality. Reassessing the distribution and increasing access to assistance programs aids everyone in poverty. Funding public education, especially in areas of extreme need, serves everyone in the districts. Restricting police forces limits the authoritarian nature of policing for everyone, while adjusting the prison industrial complex applies to everyone entangled in the criminal justice system while reducing the burden it imposes on taxpayers. Since

these systems disproportionately affected those in the lowest caste, restructuring them will disproportionately affect them as well. If aid and services are distributed honestly and adequately, they will *indirectly* eliminate racial disparities that persisted from American slavery while stripping the dominant caste of the systems they wielded to oppress.

It also begs the question, “Why aren’t these reforms implemented today?” The reason why these disparities persist in today’s world is due to the stereotypes and bias that were passed down generations for centuries. High levels of African Americans in poverty, with a lack of proper education, and presence in the criminal justice system is not commonly looked at as an injustice by enough citizens of this country due to the systemic oppression rooted in this country’s being. The African American population struggling with poverty, inadequate education, and targeted policing more than white counterparts curates a feedback loop that allows for racial disparities to be the norm. This coupled with a severe lack of representation in politics, monetization of policing and the court systems, and privatization of the prison industrial complex allows that feedback loop to benefit the white people who installed and reign over those systems.

Reforming societal notions and inherent racial bias is the one way to disrupt the caste system, but to do so in a climate of systemic oppression and structural racism has shown to be a slow and agonizing climb up a steep mountain. Supplementing everyone in poverty, providing access to education to every student stuck in underfunded school districts, and reforming the criminal justice system for everyone will benefit the oppressed population disproportionately, allowing for conversations regarding disruption to occur on a level playing field. Economic

stability is the most efficient way to facilitate social awareness, and socioeconomic equality that could completely disrupt the caste system in America.

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