

STRUCTURES OF OPPRESSION

Querying Analogies of Race and Caste

THE SITUATION OF African-Americans in the US: the condition of ‘untouchables’ in India—are they comparable, as forms of oppression? For many, the answer would be, frankly, no.¹ True, both groups encounter deep-rooted social prejudice, at odds with the proclaimed liberal-democratic values of their societies and roundly condemned by mainstream opinion. In both cases, intensive exploitation of labour has historically been coupled with social segregation and separate housing (with the exception of household menials). In both countries, discrimination on grounds of caste or race has been outlawed—in India’s 1950 Constitution and America’s 1964 Civil Rights Act—and affirmative-action measures introduced, yet inequalities persist. Per capita incarceration rates for both populations are disproportionately high, as are levels of state and civil violence meted out against them. One might even match their respective sets of political prisoners, for all their differences: for every Mumia Abu-Jamal in a US jail there is an Anand Teltumbde, a leading Dalit Studies scholar, locked up under the notorious Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in a stifling Indian prison.²

Nevertheless, the differences are glaring. First, there is history. The story of African-Americans as a people has been short but dramatic, packed with jarring shifts every two generations between different political-economic regimes: from slave labour to sharecropping to urban-proletarian life, and thence to the present class bifurcation between educated professionals and low-paid work or joblessness. The guardians of India’s caste system would date it back two thousand years, when the first-century AD *Laws of Manu* divided the twice-born *varnas*

from the low-caste *shudra* and, lower still, the non-*varna* outsiders and untouchables, of whom 80 per cent are still stuck in the countryside; for them, change has been molecular at best.

Second, there is the radically different location of the two countries within the world market—the richest, most technologically developed, compared to one of the poorest. Per capita income in the US is ten times higher; the depths of poverty and illiteracy in India, the tens of millions of households without sanitation or mains electricity, are unknown even in the most deprived districts of America. Third, structure. Caste in India forms the world's most elaborate, hierarchical and fetishized system of social stratification, with many thousands of regional *jati* (birth communities) ranked in order of holiness and purity, from the highest brahmins to the lowest untouchables. While the US racial order is also *sui generis*, nothing like this religiously sanctioned pyramid prevails. Social mobility in the US is low, for an advanced-capitalist country; it ranks 27th on the WEF's global mobility index. But India ranks 76th, virtually rock-bottom, among the world's most rigidly stratified societies.

Fourth, the signs and meanings of US racism and Indian caste/untouchability are quite distinct. In the American case, the marker is ethnic: presumed ancestral descent from the African slave population.

¹ Our thanks to Achin Vanaik and members of NLR's editorial committee for their helpful and stimulating comments. Needless to say, any mistakes are our own.

² Anand Teltumbde, author *inter alia* of *The Persistence of Caste* (2010), *Dalits: Past, Present and Future* (2016) and *Republic of Caste* (2018), was arrested by the National Investigative Agency in April 2020 for allegedly plotting to assassinate Modi. He has been repeatedly denied bail, but there is no trial in the offing either. Teltumbde is one of sixteen held on related charges, of whom one has died in prison. The political logic behind his arrest has to do with targeting leftists as alleged armed-struggle 'Maoists' in order to arrest them under the preventive UAP Act. Born in 1950 to a family of agricultural labourers in Maharashtra, Teltumbde studied engineering and teaches at the Goa Institute of Management. The other prisoners were linked to the Elgar Parishad cultural festival, held in Pune on 31 December 2017. They were charged with instigating violence at a large Dalit commemoration the next day in the village of Bhima Koregaon, 30km away—where eyewitnesses said the aggression was provoked by right-wing Hindutva figures. Teltumbde's younger brother, Milind, was a leading figure in the Communist Party of India (Maoist); he was gunned down by security forces in a massacre that left 26 dead in November 2021. For the arrests, see Rajshree Chandra, 'Bhima Koregaon Case: Trying Without a Trial Is the Intent of Draconian UAPA Law', *The Wire*, 9 July 2021.

In India, it may be surname, neighbourhood, job or even bearing and demeanour—anything that signals birth into an endogamous regional *jati*, once linked to hereditary occupation, or origin. Fifth, and relatedly, culture and society. A few years ago, at the height of the Movement for Black Lives, an orange bus packed with *safai karmachari* activists set out across India on a Bhim Yatra—a pilgrimage in the name of Bhimrao Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader—with the slogan, ‘Stop Killing Us’. The *safai karmachari* are ‘manual scavengers’, their hereditary task to clean up human excrement. Technically the ‘hazardous’ cleaning of sewers and septic tanks is banned, but many can’t afford not to take the work, if they are pressurized to do so—‘the manifestation of caste and untouchability’, they protest.³ The socio-economic conditions that could give rise to such a situation simply do not exist in the US.

2

On all these measures, there are few obvious points of contact between the two systems. As former New World slave societies, Brazil and Cuba are more illuminating comparators for the US, as Robin Blackburn has shown in his panoramic, indispensable studies, *The Making of New World Slavery* and *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, complemented by the more thematic and US-centred analysis in *The American Crucible*.⁴ And yet, the notion of US society as a racialized caste system—the category taken directly from the Indian Subcontinent, as we shall see—does keep recurring. For the most part it has been used in a spirit of solidarity, and there is a long history of mutual recognition between the two groups. In 1849, Charles Sumner thundered against the segregation of Massachusetts schools as constituting ‘a system of Caste odious as that of the Hindoos’. But the term was also appropriated approvingly by spokesmen of the slaveocracy. ‘Free negroes belong to a degraded caste of society’, decreed a South Carolina judge in 1832. ‘According to their condition, they ought by law be compelled to demean themselves as

³ Safai Karmachari Andolan, ‘Bhim Yatra’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2 Jan 2016; Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Inequality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*, New Delhi 2018, p. 38.

⁴ Robin Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery* (1997), *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988), *The American Crucible* (2011) are all published by Verso. Two further volumes are in the works.

inferiors, from whom submission and respect to the whites, in all their intercourse in society, is demanded'.⁵

Its critics replied in kind. Frederick Douglass wrote scathingly of 'the spirit of caste' fostered by segregated railroad carriages in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Du Bois historicized the term, distinguishing between a 'caste of condition' under the Slave Code and a 'caste of race' under Jim Crow. 'Yes, I am an untouchable', declared MLK in 1965, 'and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable.'⁶ The identification was reciprocated. Jotirao Phule's 1873 anti-brahminical polemic was titled *Slavery* and dedicated to 'the good people of the United States' who had accomplished Abolition. Ambedkar too made the connection in his essay 'Slaves and Untouchables', envying the former.⁷

More recently, Loïc Wacquant has provided perhaps the most systematic account to date of the American racial order as a caste system. Wacquant's essay in NLR analysed four 'genealogically linked' regimes—chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the ghetto and the carceral system—that he saw as functionally analogous instruments for the conjoint 'extraction of labour and social ostracization' of an outcast group, deemed unassimilable by virtue of a three-fold stigma: descendants of slaves in the land of the free, disenfranchised in the cradle of democracy, lacking an identifiable nation of origin in the country of immigrants.⁸ Michelle Alexander drew explicitly on Wacquant's caste framework in her eloquent indictment of mass incarceration, *The New Jim Crow* (2010). Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020), setting out to discover the basis for continuing elite-level racism

⁵ Charles Sumner, 'Equality Before the Law: Unconstitutionality of Separate Colored Schools in Massachusetts', 1849, available on the *Black Past* website; John O'Neill, Court of Appeals of South Carolina, *State vs Harden* (1832), cited in Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*, Tuscaloosa 1965, p. 27.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, chap xxv, 'Various Incidents', pp. 130–3; W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Study of the Negro Problems', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, no. 11, 1898; Martin Luther King, Sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 4 July 1965, cited in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York 1998, p. 131.

⁷ Jotirao Govindrao Phule, *Slavery (in the Civilized British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)*, n.p. 1873, pp. 9–10; B. R. Ambedkar, 'Slaves and Untouchables', *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5, New Delhi 2014 [1989], pp. 9–18, at p. 15.

⁸ Loïc Wacquant, 'From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the "Race Question" in the US', NLR 13, Jan–Feb 2002.

in the age of Obama, identifies eight common features shared by the US and the Indian *varna-jati* system, to which she adds—raising a few eyebrows—the condition of the Jews in Nazi Germany.

3

In their critique of Wilkerson's *Caste* in NLR 131, Sujatha Gidla and Alan Horn suggest, intriguingly, that 'caste' terminology recurs in periods of downturn and defeat for Black Americans, invoking as it does the notion of an immovable system of racialized subordination.⁹ They situate this approach in the context of the 1940s 'caste school of race relations' in the US social sciences—the work of Chicago anthropologists Robert Park, William Lloyd Warner, Allison Davis and others, borrowed and popularized by Gunnar Myrdal in *An American Dilemma* (1948)—who conducted their research towards the end of the Jim Crow era. One of the great merits of Gidla and Horn's essay is to bring to light the extraordinarily rich constellation of counter-hegemonic thinkers on these themes in the late 1930s and 40s. Foremost among them is Oliver Cox, the critical nemesis of the Chicago 'caste school' with his Marxian masterwork, *Caste, Class and Race* (1949).

Against the Chicagoans' description of the Jim Crow South as a static 'racial caste' system, Cox—a Trinidadian writing from the Tuskegee Institute in the depths of Alabama—saw it as a fluid, fast-changing front in a wider class battle. For Cox, racial antagonisms were not the upshot of immemorial antipathies but of practical exploitative relations, for which prejudices provided 'socio-attitudinal facilitation'.¹⁰ Cox depicted the American South as an unstable, hyper-exploitative social order, requiring a dense matrix of violence to sustain it, tightly meshed with the financial and business interests of the North. He sketched the emergence not of castes but of 'political classes'—the capitalist oligarchy and its opponents, pitched against each other in a fierce struggle over the advance of democracy. Alongside this, Gidla and Horn set Abram Leon's *The Jewish Question* (1946), written in Nazi-occupied Belgium where Leon was an organizer of the underground resistance, before

⁹ Sujatha Gidla and Alan Horn, 'Caste, Race—and Class', NLR 131, Sept–Oct 2021.

¹⁰ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, New York 1948, pp. 226, 332.

he was captured and sent to his death at Auschwitz. Leon proposed the category not of a caste but of a 'people-class' to characterize the position of the Jews within the pre-industrial economies of Eastern Europe.¹¹ To this body of thought, one might add Ambedkar's searing indictment of India's brahminized nationalist intelligentsia in 'Annihilation of Caste' (1937).

In their contribution, Gidla and Horn propose instead to use the concept of 'caste' in a more limited sense—denoting an outcast, pariah population, like the Burakumin of Japan, a group 'isolated by dint of a traditional economic function, based on hereditary divisions of labour'. Castes in this sense, Gidla and Horn explain, are relics of the pre-capitalist era. Many of them—for example, the Cagot woodworkers in France—disappeared in the course of capitalist development. Black people in America, as a group set apart by the legacy of chattel slavery, could be counted in this category, they argue. This pariah status could be turned to capital's advantage, in keeping a multi-ethnic workforce divided as a bulwark against integrated class struggle.¹² But to keep a section of the US-born population in bondage, 'special measures were required to cement their status as perpetual outsiders—to constitute them as a caste.' Restricted manumission, high runaway-recapture rates, the unprecedented segregation of free Blacks—forced to bear the burden of proof when their liberty was challenged, with chattel slavery the 'presumptive condition' of any American of African descent—as well as the 'one-drop' rule of racial classification, served to create a condition in which, as Frederick Douglass put it, colour became 'coupled in the public mind with the degradation of slavery and servitude'. *Contra* Wilkerson, Gidla and Horn insist that this system has been fostered by a tiny white ruling class, not the white majority—'white workers have no stake in the system of exploitation that black oppression is designed to uphold' and, while some whites are privileged, "white privilege" as such is a myth.¹³

¹¹ There are clear parallels with Yuri Slezkine's characterization of Gujaratis in East Africa, diaspora Chinese in Southeast Asia, Armenians in West Asia and Jews in pre-1914 Eastern Europe as commercial-transnational 'Mercurians', in contrast to the state-building 'Apollonian' peoples among whom they lived: Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton 2004.

¹² Gidla and Horn, 'Caste, Race—and Class', pp. 29, 34.

¹³ Gidla and Horn, 'Caste, Race—and Class', pp. 31–5.

How convincing is Gidla and Horn's category of the outcast group—exemplified by the 'untouchable' Burakumin—as a characterization of African-Americans' historical position? Like Wacquant's, their usage has the merit of combining both economic and cultural dimensions: 'no other group has been so chronically and severely isolated while at the same time being so ruthlessly exploited', they write. Nevertheless, the analogy with the Burakumin, a mere 2 per cent of Japan's population, fails to account for the explosive political centrality of the 'race question' in the US, or for the scale of the repressive apparatus used against Black Americans. At the same time, the category of 'caste' offers no purchase on the social differentiation within the African-American population, nor on the ceaseless flux—in demography, economy, culture, world status—of American society itself, re-shaping the many population groups within it. Since the 1980s, hyper-exploitation has been replaced by high levels of unemployment among Black men, while social isolation has been qualified by iconic cultural roles and by substantial professional-class integration.

Although Gidla and Horn say little about the Indian caste system here, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) is widely acknowledged as a landmark contribution on the subject. Written with novelistic intensity, it is an epic account told through the stories of one untouchable family in southern India, against the warp and weft of relentless caste-based bullying and humiliation. It begins in the late nineteenth century when Gidla's forbears—a nomadic clan of forest dwellers who worshipped their own tribal goddesses—were driven from their forest home as it was cleared for British teak plantations. They established a farming settlement, where they were discovered by the landowner's agent, who first levied tax from them and then, as they fell into debt to him, expropriated their land as payment and reduced them to landless labourers, incorporated into the lowest levels of the Hindu system as untouchable *malas*, menial village servants, at the beck and call of higher castes. Christian missionaries from Canada baptized the villagers, and one wing of the family was educated by them, the children and grandchildren—Satyam and his sister Manjula, Gidla's mother—growing up to be school and college teachers; the others remained coolie labourers all their lives.

Satyam, born in 1931, is a schoolboy as the Quit India movement unfolds, an ardent Bose supporter, discovering radical Telugu poetry in the school library, electrified by news of the armed peasants' revolt in neighbouring Telangana against the landlords' atrocities and later enraged by Nehru's military crackdown. Satyam becomes a youthful communist agitator among the Dalit colonies of the region, braving attacks by upper-caste thugs wielding iron bars and bicycle chains, organizing street theatre groups among the lowest of the low, fighting anti-eviction battles, running political-education classes at a roadside tea stall. Taking the Chinese side in the Sino-Soviet split—and the Indo-China war—Satyam and his comrades break with the CPI(M) in 1967 after the Naxalbari uprising in West Bengal and take up rural armed struggle themselves, launching the Naxalite revolt that still simmers in India's forests.¹⁴ Satyam—aka K. G. Satyamurthy, a celebrated Telugu poet—went on to found the People's War Group, and died penniless in 2012.

Thwarting—though also fuelling—this militancy are the inescapable cleavages of caste and untouchability, the myriad frictions between regional *jati* groupings—*kamma* and *reddy* landowners, *golla* cattle herders, *vaddera* stoneworkers, the multiple strata of untouchables: *malas*, *madigas*, *pakis*. Gidla herself attends a school where the Dalit students sit on the floor, leaving the benches for the caste children. The story is also deeply gendered. While Gidla describes generations of resourceful, independent-minded women—from her great-grandmother Marthamma, a poor untouchable widow who accompanied her children to the mission school and so learned to read, to the indomitable Manjula, who fought her way through the higher-education system, despite vindictive downgrades by (male) upper-caste professors—they operate within an androcentric order. Gidla's parents were university lecturers, middle-class by any standard of the time, but they lived peripatetically not least because of Manjula's political involvement. Though caste structures might vary where they went ('in Srikakulam, the *kalingas*, although officially a backward caste, occupy the same social and economic status as do the *kammans* in Krishna district'), their own caste designation was immutable, fastened tight by marriage and a network of family dependents, despite their own social mobility.

¹⁴ See Achin Vanaiak, 'Subcontinental Strategies', NLR 70, July–Aug 2011; and Kheya Bag, 'Red Flags in the Forest', NLR 118, July–Aug 2019.

The contrasts between the world of *Ants Among Elephants* and contemporary American society are stark—and yet, Gidla writes, when people in the US ask what it means to be untouchable, ‘I explain that caste is like racism against Blacks here.’ The analogy, it seems, is inescapable. Perhaps a more systematic comparison of the two systems, unavoidably schematic, may help to illuminate the parallels and distinctions between them. What follows sketches their formation as persistent yet mutable structures of subordination, with the aim of contributing to their joint abolition.

5

Against pop-history accounts like ‘1619’, pet project of the *New York Times*, any serious attempt to understand the construction of the American racial order, as of the Hindu caste system, must start with periodization. The unreflective presentism that retrospectively casts the tiny seventeenth-century English colonies—pinpricks in the vastness of the North American continent—as a proto-white republic is no less misguided than the attempt to retroject a coherent Hinduism, a unified India or a generalized caste system onto the varied linguistic, ethnic, religious and ecological landscapes of the Subcontinent, with its diverse states and political systems.

In the American case, it was under the protective military-mercantile shell of British colonial power that the early colonies survived and flourished, making their first territorial conquests and establishing the rudiments of a political economy based initially on the use of indentured labour, English and Irish, and trading with ‘friendly tribes’. As Blackburn argues in *The American Crucible*, the British-colonial slave enclaves are best grasped as a variant of the early-modern European colonial slave system—brutally exploitative, but relatively small scale. By 1700 there were barely 35,000 Africans in North America; the total population of the thirteen colonies was scarcely 250,000. The model of the slave-labour plantation pioneered in the Caribbean colonies, keenly watched by investors in London or Paris, was adopted in piecemeal fashion in Virginia, and imported more systematically in South Carolina. Yet by the eve of the War of Independence the thirteen colonies held fewer slaves than Brazil: some 450,000, out of a total population of 2 million.

The Indian caste system was made, of course, from much ‘older clay’.¹⁵ Yet according to a careful overview of modern historical scholarship on the question, as late as the 1600s, while in most areas a minority followed recognizably caste-like practices—and, in courts or temples, ritual recitation of the *Vedas* chanted the story of the four *varnas* emerging from the Creator’s mouth, arm, loin and foot—many were untouched by formal caste distinctions; not just the hill and tribal peoples, but wide swathes of the population in Bengal, the Punjab, the central Deccan plateau and southern India. Even in the long-settled agricultural zones, multiple forms of lordly authority, coerced labour and surplus extraction co-existed, along with competing traditions of devotional practice and, in the Mughal realms, the overarching canopy of Islam.¹⁶

On this account, the generalization of a ‘national’ brahminical caste system took place in several overlapping phases, unfolding from the early 1700s as disparate caste practices—nourished by the temple culture of the Hindu heartlands in the Gangetic valley (roughly speaking, today’s Uttar Pradesh), the Rajput lords of the arid western hill country (Maharashtra), or the semi-slavery of the South’s rice-growing river deltas—were forged anew. First, as the Mughal Empire fragmented amid protracted warfare, upstart kings and warlords promoted brahmin priests to legitimize their rule—and with it, their land-granting and revenue-extracting powers—recharging the ritual symbolism of the *varnas* in the process.¹⁷ A concomitant of this was the rising wealth and salience of a brahmin ‘service gentry’, providing the new dynasts’ courts—Hindu, Sikh or Muslim—with the record-keeping, banking and intelligence skills they needed in dealing with rival kingdoms and with the clamorous European merchant companies, warring with each other as they expanded their trading networks from their offices along the coast. The companies reciprocated, seeking out ‘literate’ brahmins as native informants. The Battle of Plassey (1757) marked a watershed, as the troops of the British East India Company defeated the

¹⁵ Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge 1998, p. 2.

¹⁶ This is the argument of Susan Bayly’s *Caste, Society and Politics in India: From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge 1999, Part IV of the *New Cambridge History of India*: pp. 26, 2, 4.

¹⁷ The precursor and model was the Deccan leader Shivaji, who got himself ‘reborn’ as a high-caste *kshatriya* wearer of the sacred thread after beating back the Mughal Army: Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, pp. 74, 56–60.

Nawab of Bengal and his French allies—an eastern theatre of the Seven Year War (1756–63) which, on its western flank, better known as the French and Indian War, saw fighting from Montreal and Ohio down to the Caribbean, followed by the British tax rises that helped to trigger the American Revolution.

6

From 1776 to the 1820s, as Blackburn recounts in *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, the Atlantic world was convulsed by a great revolutionary wave, with anti-colonial, anti-monarchist and anti-slavery revolts ricocheting from Massachusetts via Paris to Saint-Domingue, from Cádiz to Caracas, Río de la Plata to Guayaquil: the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the slave uprisings of the Caribbean and the Latin American wars of independence. These upheavals gave birth to half a dozen new republics and, in Haiti, freed half a million slaves. The Spanish American Revolutions banned the slave trade and enacted ‘free womb’ laws, Mexico and Chile ending slavery outright. Yet the double revolution, as Hobsbawm called it—bourgeois-political and industrial-capitalist—also produced new forms of exploitation.

In Britain, the counter-revolutionary state that emerged as the victor of these great upheavals, a new liberal-imperialist outlook took form, influenced by evangelical anti-slavery views—a displaced critique of the heavy-handedness of George III in losing the American colonies, Blackburn suggests—fronted by such influential figures as Pitt and Wilberforce, and soon powered up by industrial-capitalist production. Wilberforce’s parliamentary campaign succeeded in outlawing the slave trade in 1807 and popular pressure helped end slavery in the British Empire in the 1830s, freeing about 700,000 slaves and handsomely compensating Caribbean slaveholders. In a classic example of British hypocrisy, indentured low-caste Indian labour was imported to make up the shortfall.

Had the new American republic also abolished slavery at this point, the subsequent racial order in the US would almost certainly have taken different form, perhaps closer to the loosely hierarchized and much-intermarried patterns of Latin America. But the balance of forces favoured the slave-owning gentry and wealthy lawyers, quickened by

fear at the radical emancipatory forces sweeping the region.¹⁸ Under the republic, what has been dubbed the ‘second slavery’ (1820–65) emerged on a far larger scale, having survived this first great wave of abolitionism. While there were many continuities—Douglass: ‘the chain, the gag, the bloody whip’—in many respects this represented a new period of racialized exploitation. It was only now that the plantations acquired their quasi-industrial character, driven by the demands of steam-powered manufacturing (even if a ‘natural economy’ of subsistence horticulture still prevailed for slave households themselves). Vast tracts of land acquired with the Louisiana Purchase were colonized, often by small-scale white slavers who could borrow the price of a ‘packet’ of slaves, using the labourers themselves as collateral—suggesting that it was not just a tiny white elite that benefited from the system.

From the start, slavery was an ideological anomaly within the Enlightenment republic. But as its new mode got underway and the number of enslaved African-Americans swelled to four million, the cost of slave-owner compensation, the ‘moderate’ abolitionism favoured by Jefferson and others, became exorbitant. In the new international climate, Southern defiance of the international anti-slavery consensus required not only a hardening of racialized ideology and legal reinforcements—proscriptions against free Blacks proliferating from the 1820s, along with the criminalization of literacy and manumission—but also, powerful Northern allies. The planters were protected by their position within the Federal constitutional order and their grip on Congress, through the three-fifths rule. Their position was also buttressed by the Northern financial sector’s involvement—bankers, factors, merchants—in what remained a credit-fuelled mode of slave production.

7

If America’s ‘second slavery’ arose after the overthrow of British colonial rule, the institutionalization of the Indian caste system took place under its aegis; deprived of its western colonies, London turned its attentions to the east. As it extended its grip across the Subcontinent after 1757, the British East India Company aimed to govern in alliance with India’s ‘natural aristocracy’, which it understood largely in caste terms.

¹⁸ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, pp. 267–87.

Company officials sought out brahmin diplomats, scribes and bankers as their native informants, creating an English-speaking class who, as Macaulay put it, would be 'interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern'. Brahminization was encouraged—the Company's officers applauding the ideology of purity, pacifism and renunciation—along with a culture of pilgrimage, temple donations and religious spectacle. From its three great bases—Bengal in the northeast, Bombay in the west, Madras in the south—the Company recruited *kshatriya*-led forces to subdue the remaining kingdoms. The *Laws of Manu* was taken as the basis for the civil code and caste 'headmen' were promoted and duly rewarded by the Company for collecting land-revenue and commodity taxes.

At the same time, the expansion of (taxable) cash-crop farming and hand-manufacturing, initially promoted under the Mughals, was exposing wider layers of farmers and artisans to the booms and slumps of the world market and to the flood of mass-produced British goods. Growing *jati* consciousness arguably provided a guild-like defence against economic unpredictability. Yet deference to brahminic norms of purity entailed a commensurate revulsion against 'the unclean'. The proto-Gandhian ideology of the pious *shudra* smallholder as moral linchpin of the Hindu order—frugal and industrious, insisting on 'purity' in food, water and marriage, policing the lower boundaries of the 'clean-caste' system against the untouchables below—arguably gained traction around this time, among the 'sturdy' *jats* and *ahirs* of colonial legend.

Meanwhile—the final piece in the modern caste puzzle—the 'untouchable' category was expanded in the later 1800s from the small groups traditionally fated to 'unclean' occupations to cover much wider strata of landless labour. In part this took place through forest clearance, the 'peasantification' of armed hunter-gatherers and herders, reduced to the status of tied labourers, and so dubbed 'unclean'—the story Gidla tells of her forebears in *Ants Among Elephants*. On a larger scale, it involved the assertion of caste privilege by the impoverished landed gentry—themselves squeezed by the global agricultural slump, India's declining terms of trade and British-colonial land-revenue extraction—as a means to coerce unpaid labour from sharecroppers and landless dependents. In this one-sided encounter with the world market, mediated through the rule of the most advanced form of industrial-capitalist imperialism, threadbare petty landlords mobilized the only capital they possessed, their *varna* birthright, to compound the modern cruelties of rural

proletarianization with the humiliations of ritual hierarchy. Ground under the landlord's heel, these populations were designated 'untouchable' in the process of their exploitative subordination.¹⁹

8

Linking the two worlds of slavery and untouchability were the evangelical efforts of Anglo-American missionaries. They saw the British conquest of India as an act of Providence, opening a vast new field for conversion to Christianity. With imperial interests dependent upon the compliance of India's upper-caste princes and landowners, UK governments had initially banned them from the Subcontinent. The breakthrough came in 1812 when Wilberforce swung the House of Commons behind support for missionaries—an early form of liberal-imperial 'uplift'—amending the East India Company's charter to permit this. By the 1830s, international evangelical networks were publicizing often highly exoticized missionary accounts of widow burning, child marriage and the treatment of untouchables, making Indian caste practices an international *cause célèbre*. This was the literature on which Sumner, Garrison and Douglass would draw.²⁰

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of evangelical churches in nurturing African-Americans' struggle for freedom: shelter and community, biblical lessons of a people sold into slavery, finding their way to the promised land, a training ground for generations of Baptist ministers as organic popular intellectuals. The Bible was crucial in the African-American battle for literacy, outlawed in many slave states. Missionary schools in India could teach only a tiny minority

¹⁹ These layers suffered most from the famines that beset Victorian India. In the 1870s, while new-built railways shipped grain to the ports, a fifth of the Deccan population, overwhelmingly lower-caste and untouchable, perished from starvation; fully half the *madigas* were wiped out in the southern city of Kurnool: Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, London and New York, p. 112.

²⁰ Repurposed in the 1920s by the white-supremacist journalist Katherine Mayo in her lurid *Mother India* (1927), a stirring defence of British imperialism, it would also form part of the broader cultural backdrop to the 1940s 'caste school' in the US social sciences, lending rhetorical shock value to the use of the term in an American context. See Daniel Immerwahr, 'Caste or Colony?: Indianizing Race in the United States', *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2007.

of untouchable children. But the evangelical project of ‘uplift for the depressed classes’ through meekness, cleanliness, abstinence and self-improvement had a profound impact on the future nationalist project, meshing as it did with brahminical modes of behaviour. In both cases, evangelicalism would leave a deep imprint on the political movements, visible today in the reprise of MLK’s taking the knee to pray as the riot cops move in, or what Teltumbde calls the ‘plaintive mode’ of so many Dalit protests.²¹

9

The ferocious clashes of the 1857–58 Uprising and the 1860–65 Civil War, each leaving hundreds of thousands dead, were of a very different character. The Indian Uprising developed into a landlord-led, proto-national revolt, no doubt inspired by the resistance to the British in Afghanistan in the 1840s.²² But it lacked a political programme beyond the chimera of a Mughal restoration. The American Civil War involved the clash of two expansionary, proto-imperialist nationalisms—the one clamouring for the conquest of Native American territory on the basis of ‘free soil, free labour’, the other demanding the defence of ‘private property in men’ and eyeing the incorporation of Cuba—both locked within a single polity, in which the South held the constitutional advantage over the faster-growing North. The North’s victory would bring about the end of the ‘second slavery’, but the defeated nationalism vented its pain and fury on the African-American population, through and beyond the great struggles around Reconstruction and land reform. Armed white vigilantism, Black Codes, ultra-racism and lynch mobs enforced the economic dead-end of the debt-peonage sharecropping system which punished productivity and innovation, condemning poor whites as well as Blacks to poverty and stagnation. The closest analogy here might be the punitive policies inflicted on Black South Africans after the white Afrikaners’ defeat by the British in the Boer War.

If the White House had agreed in 1860 to ‘let the erring sisters go in peace’, as Horace Greeley put it, might the South have arrived at a more

²¹ Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, p. 39.

²² Tariq Ali, *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan: A Chronicle Foretold*, London and New York 2021, p. xix.

peaceful, if slow and grudging emancipation along Brazilian lines in the late nineteenth century? In Brazil, as in Cuba, there was no violent backlash against emancipation by the former slave owners of the sort that convulsed the South. The question remains moot. Such a path would have avoided the horrors of Jim Crow, a regime of racial oppression so ferocious that some thought it worse than slavery. African-Americans would have made up 40 per cent of the population in the breakaway republic, a bloc with real weight. As it was, the flood of European immigration after 1870 reduced them to a permanent 12 per cent within the Union. The post-1870s immigrants largely accepted the anomalous position of African-Americans as a given and were themselves soon subsumed into a fast-growing 'white race'.

IO

The upshot of the 1857 Indian Uprising had far-reaching effects in reshaping the institutional parameters of the caste system. Having eventually stamped out the rebellion, the shaken British authorities wound up the East India Company and transferred the country to direct rule. They overhauled the Indian Army, rewarded the large landowners who had remained loyal and began cautious steps towards elected local government under the overall command of the British Raj. From 1871, decennial censuses set out to classify all the communal, ethnic, linguistic and caste groups in the country, revealing the tiny proportions of the upper strata: taken together, *brahmins*, *kshatriyas* and *rajputs* comprised barely 6 per cent of the population, overwhelmingly composed of cultivators, pastoralists and artisans, themselves divided into occupational castes or *jatis* which could run into the thousands in each province. The need for India's rulers to cement relations with broader layers was obvious.

From the 1880s, 'caste associations' began to form, with British encouragement, to promote their members' interests; they were portrayed as modernizing public-citizenship bodies, intent on self-improvement and the 'uplift' of their community, in the fast-growing English-language press.²³ The idea of a *jati* as a civic unit developed in tandem with the beginnings of upper-class electoral representation, informing—and informed by—the outlook of the predominantly brahmin nationalist intelligentsia that was emerging in the same period: English-trained lawyers, civil

²³ Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 237.

servants, journalists. To broaden the base of the 'interpreter' class, a quota of civil-service positions reserved for non-brahmins was pioneered with British approval as early as the 1890s by modernizing princely rulers in Mysore and Kolhapur, the latter the patron of India's principal anti-caste intellectuals, Phule and Ambedkar. From 1919, Raj officials reserved a handful of parliamentary seats for nominated representatives of the lower castes and untouchables in India's toothless Central Legislative Assembly and its province-level avatars, elected on a 6 per cent franchise.²⁴ Thus it was that the world's first affirmative-action measures emerged under liberal-imperial guidance.

The mainly upper-caste Congress leaders deplored the prejudice of 'untouchability' but for the most part lauded the *varna* system as a unique achievement of (Hindu) civilization, a source of strength and stability—and, as Gandhi explained, essentially egalitarian, since reincarnation would ensure that if untouchables behaved with due meekness and humility, they would be rewarded with higher status in a future life. Congress was also alert to what Gandhi called the political arithmetic of caste. Against the backdrop of rising popular agitation for independence in the 1930s, the Raj summoned Indian leaders to a London round-table conference to discuss expanding India's electoral machinery. The Muslim minority was awarded the right to a separate electoral roll as a protection against Hindu majoritarianism. Ambedkar, representing the untouchables, won the same right for them. In the crucial provinces of the Punjab and Bengal, this risked depriving Congress of its majority. Gandhi famously went on a hunger strike 'to the death' to force Ambedkar to back down—as Ambedkar did, to his later regret, sealing his capitulation with the 1932 Poona Pact. Instead of Dalits voting for their own representatives, they would be allocated a certain number of reserved seats within the Hindu electorate, which Congress party leaders could fill with their own nominees. In 1936 British officials duly set about identifying castes and tribes in each province to 'schedule' for reserved seats.

II

By the time of Independence in 1947, Congress itself had thus helped to embed caste identities within the Indian political system, with untouchables and tribal peoples 'scheduled' for individual affirmative-action

²⁴ Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, pp. 242, 255.

programmes, while *jati* communities were mobilized as vote banks in parliamentary contests.²⁵ Ambedkar, the first national leader to target the system of caste as a whole, as opposed to uplifting the most downtrodden within it, remained trapped in the contradiction between the revolutionary nature of his goal—‘the annihilation of caste’—and the liberal-pragmatist character of his politics, which led him, like Phule, to reliance on the goodwill of India’s imperial masters.²⁶ Against the apologetics of the Congress leadership, Ambedkar condemned the caste hierarchy wholesale: ‘There cannot be a more degrading system—it degrades, cripples, paralyses the people.’ His writings provided the most blistering account of why caste in India had proved so hard to overcome. First, religious consecration. ‘Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed but because they are deeply religious’, Ambedkar wrote. ‘You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has been invested. In the last analysis, you must destroy the authenticity of the *shastras* and the *vedas*’, the Hindu holy writings—‘you must not only discard the *shastras*, you must destroy their authenticity.’²⁷

The second obstacle, Ambedkar argued, was the brahmin composition of India’s intellectual class—‘the class which can advise and give the lead’ in any great national undertaking—and the reverence in which they were held by other Hindus, who were taught that only brahmins could be their teachers. ‘The Brahmins form the vanguard of the movement for political reform, and in some cases also for economic reform. But they are not to be found even as camp followers in the army raised to break down the barricades of caste’. Was it reasonable to expect the secular brahmins to lead a movement directed against the priestly brahmins, when both were kith and kin, and with the ultimate goal of destroying the power and prestige of their caste? The annihilation of caste in India would be ‘a stupendous task’, Ambedkar concluded—‘Herculean’.²⁸

Though canonized as ‘Architect of the Indian Constitution’, Ambedkar had few illusions about its drafting. Three-quarters of its articles were

²⁵ Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 263.

²⁶ In *Slavery*, Phule placed his hopes for the abolition of castes in the modernizing effects of the British Raj: ‘Happily, our enlightened British rulers have not recognized these preposterous, inhuman and unjust penal enactments of the Brahmin legislators.’

²⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand, London and New York 2014, pp. 288–9.

²⁸ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp. 292–3, 289–90.

simply carried over from the Westminster Parliament's 1935 Government of India Act. The indirectly elected Constituent Assembly was overwhelmingly dominated by the Congress Party, its key committees run by Nehru and his henchman, Vallabhbhai Patel. The Constitution bequeathed a poisoned chalice: the first-past-the-post electoral system enthrone one-party dominance, first by Congress, then by the BJP; perpetuation of colonial-era emergency powers for the central government; and the reservation system. A radical land reform, coupled with national education and healthcare programmes, would have benefited much broader layers and helped to equalize all as citizens of the new India. Instead, a barebones affirmative-action programme has triggered endless inter-caste battles about its extension to other groups, notably the *shudra* layers, or 'other backward castes', on occasion met by violent retribution from the twice-born.²⁹

12

While Dalits were being stacked up as electoral assets for the Congress Party, African-Americans were voting with their feet. The Great Migration was a vast urbanization, half the Black population, some six million people, moving out of Southern agricultural labour and into the Northern cities. The war-time boom strengthened the hand of Black labour. Growing anger and popular confidence helped a new generation of Baptist leaders to galvanize the Civil Rights movement in the South. In the post-war period, the American domestic order was put under a harsh new spotlight as the US emerged as a Cold War superpower, self-declared leader of the Free World. International attention gave high visibility to TV images of the Civil Rights struggle, now supported by important sections of the ruling class, as successive Supreme Court rulings showed. By contrast, Nehru's butchery of the 1940s Telangana uprising was shrouded from scrutiny; his jailing of communists was no bar to his being fêted as the most progressive and enlightened of democrats at the jamborees of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Yet in some respects, the transformation of the US racial order that emerged from the great Black struggles of the 1960s and 70s followed the Indian model. The legalistic anti-discrimination paradigm enshrined in the 1964–65 Civil Rights Acts—met by ghetto risings, the birth of the

²⁹ Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, pp. 46–90.

Black Power movement and the popular revolt against the Vietnam War—was swiftly followed by the Nixon Administration’s affirmative-action measures, very much on British-imperial lines. Though fighting shy of quotas, the White House ruled that firms must supply hiring goals and timetables for minority recruitment as a condition for receiving Federal funds. As in India, the policy of affirmative action for the deserving few went hand-in-hand with armed repression of those who would not or could not make the grade; integration for an expanding Black upper-middle class was complemented by criminalization and deteriorating job prospects for Black workers. Nixon’s ‘wars’ on crime and drugs instituted racially targeted police crackdowns and rising African-American incarceration rates. At the same time, from the 1980s through the 90s and 2000s, the social fabric of the Black population was stretched across the uneven geography of American financialized capitalism: rising asset prices in Harlem and Oakland, mounting household debt, towns across the interior abandoned by capital, as it fled to the Sunbelt or overseas, and left to the mercy of underfunded police departments.

13

In India’s weakly industrialized economy, the Great Migration of the Dalits took a different form: the endless circulation of what Jan Breman has called ‘footloose labour’, rotating between the urban peripheries and the caste-ridden villages, where smallholder farmers were taking over from absentee upper-caste landowners, now ensconced in the cities or overseas.³⁰ Industrialization proved as permeable by caste as was electoralization, and as hospitable to its reproduction. The workforces in mills, docks, construction sites and brickworks, often recruited by *jati*, were striated by *varna*, with ‘untouchables’ condemned to the dirtiest, worst-paid jobs, perpetuating their ‘backward’ status.

Yet here, too, neoliberalization has stretched the social fabric of caste into new shapes, elongating the distance between the Dalit middle

³⁰ In a series of studies Breman, the outstanding ethnographer of Gujarat’s landless workers, has documented the plight of those circulating between the village and the city outskirts, with little hope of earning more than their bare subsistence in either. See for example, Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour*, Cambridge 1996; *At Work in the Informal Economy of India*, Cambridge 2013; *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India*, Cambridge 2019.

classes, often public-sector employees, on the one hand, and the mass of landless labourers on the other. Affirmative-action measures have worked with the grain of rising economic inequality. The quotas intended for the uplift of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Tribes (STs)—a sprinkling of university places and civil-service jobs, reserved on the basis of slightly lower exam results—are only attainable by a tiny percentage of mainly urban Dalits. And while the reserved job benefits an individual, it is awarded in the name of a particular scheduled caste; so the whole community, especially in rural areas, becomes the target of those in fractionally ‘higher’ strata not eligible for such preference. Caste revenge over reservations is one motive for the serial atrocities against Dalits in recent decades—episodes of collective brutality to match the worst barbarities of Jim Crow; the determination of rural elites to crush any sign of workers’ resistance is another.³¹

14

Two further factors have shaped the reproduction of untouchability since the 1990s. First, direct political representation, with the rise of Ambedkarite Dalit parties chipping away at the Congress base, initially in the provincial assemblies of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, then at the centre. The Bahujan Samaj Party was founded in 1984 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, a laboratory official from a *ramdasia* Sikh family in Punjab. Building on an existing association for SCs, STs and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), the BSP’s political base lay among the small-town civil servants and better-off Dalits who had benefited from the reservation policy. The expansion of reservations as the key to social justice—more and better jobs for Dalits and backward castes—made up the main plank of the BSP’s programme, along with standard gestures towards rural development. Ram’s successor, Mayawati, the daughter of a *jatav* post-office official from New Delhi, rose to be Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh—‘the Obama of India’, *Newsweek* called her in 2009. In the name of Ambedkarite social justice, Mayawati took the logic of affirmative action to its limit, amassing a vast personal fortune, erecting huge golden statues to herself and her mentor, installing her son as her successor and attacking her critics as anti-Dalit. As Teltumbde points out, little could be more radically antithetical to Ambedkar’s great rallying cry than the neo-Ambedkarites’ policy of uplift for ‘our own

³¹ Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, p. 25.

people' and emulation of the ruling-class stratagem of electoral caste arithmetic; the assertion, not the annihilation of caste.³²

The second factor is the saffronization of Indian political culture—led by the RSS–BJP bloc, tail-ended by Congress—explicitly targeting Muslims, not Dalits, as the outsiders. Though the BJP was originally projected as an upper-caste project, identified with the likes of L. K. Advani, its leaders took a calculated turn towards 'uplifting' their own OBC cadres in the 1990s, a policy that benefited Modi himself in Gujarat. In the 2010s, Modi successfully targeted Mayawati's increasingly disaffected base, buttressing his electoral position, as Gandhi had done, by bringing Dalits and OBCs into the 'Hindu fold'. Footage of Modi ostentatiously washing the feet of five sanitation workers as 'an expression of his values' got ample screening, while BJP venues sprouted images of Ambedkar and other historic Dalit heroes, the latter shown as noble victims defending the homeland against Muslim invasion.³³ The effects have been contradictory. On the one hand, RSS thugs—backed by the state—have terrorized attempts at autonomous political organizing by Dalits, especially socialist ones; the attack on the Bhima Koregaon rally in Maharashtra in 2018 is one of many. On the other, Modi's electoral initiatives have paid off. The BJP won 24 per cent of the Dalit vote in 2014, rising to 34 per cent in 2019. In Uttar Pradesh, non-*jatav* Dalit voters who had had it with Mayawati were key to the triumph of BJP ally Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister, a young Hindutva firebrand who frequently attacks Modi from the right. In some instances, Dalits have allegedly joined in anti-Muslim atrocities.³⁴

I5

In the US, too, the emergence of a new African-American political class of elected officials, alongside a smaller Black economic elite, has been

³² Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, pp. 23–4.

³³ Avishek Jha, 'BJP's 2019 Victory: How Caste-Based Politics Has Been Redefined and Reinvented', ISE Blog, 26 June 2019; Sanjay Kumar, 'Where Did the BJP Get Its Votes from in 2019?', *Mint*, 3 June 2019.

³⁴ There has been no comparable chauvinist tendency among African-Americans, despite inklings of it after 9/11, when Black support for racial profiling of Arabs ran significantly higher than the national average: 60 per cent, compared to 40 per cent for the population at large. Cited in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago 2016, p. 188.

judged one of the most significant transformations of Black American life over the past fifty years.³⁵ In 1967, two years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, Cleveland became the first major city to elect a Black mayor. By 1970, when the 13-strong Congressional Black Caucus was formed, there were 1,400 Black elected officials; ten years later, they numbered nearly 5,000. By the mid-1980s, thirteen major cities had Black-led administrations—among them Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta and Detroit—and African-Americans were chairing twenty-odd committees on Capitol Hill.³⁶ During the same period, the tiny proportion of Black households earning over \$100,000 began to rise, growing from 1 to 9 per cent between 1970 and 2006, while those earning over \$75,000 rose from 3 to 16 per cent. Alongside growing numbers of Black graduate public employees, the small numbers in banking, law, medicine and higher education enjoyed income parity with their white peers. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor pointedly and perceptively remarks, the existence of this African-American economic elite, small as it was, served to give the growing Black political class an orientation: shared values, goals and role models; a sense of personal accomplishment as a proxy for community advance replaced Black Power notions of accountability.³⁷ That approach was bolstered by Equal Employment Opportunity Commission-based legal campaigns, affirmative-action measures and the expanding universe of corporate and educational diversity and inclusion.

What have been the outcomes of this half-century of electoral advance? In her comprehensive balance sheet, Taylor's judgement is clear-eyed. Blacks entered the Democratic Party believing it the most effective route forward after state repression and internal disintegration had crushed the Black Power movement. But while the Congressional Black Caucus had held innumerable hearings on the problems Black people faced, its efforts had had a negligible impact on poverty, unemployment, housing or food insecurity. Black mayors took over the cities in the teeth of the long downturn, with serial recessions of which African-Americans—on the trade-union principle of 'last in, first out'—bore the brunt.³⁸ As the crisis deepened, Carter refused to initiate any new social programmes,

³⁵ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 15.

³⁶ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 96–8, 94, 100.

³⁷ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 80–2.

³⁸ During the deep 1973–74 recession, 60–70 per cent of those made redundant were Black, although they made up only 10–12 per cent of the workforce: Betsy Leondar-Wright 'Black Job Loss Déjà Vu', cited in Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 93.

spending on rearmament instead. Reagan then slashed existing support with sadistic severity, as Black unemployment rose to 21 per cent, and stepped up Nixon's 'wars' on crime and drugs. By now the Congressional Black Caucus was pirouetting to the right. Seventeen of its 21 members backed Reagan's notoriously harsh Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986, and a majority supported Clinton's Violent Crime Control Act of 1994, with its 'three strikes' clause and \$10 billion for prison building, a milestone on the road to the mass Black incarceration detailed in Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*.³⁹

As Taylor writes, the Congressional Black Caucus had by this stage been absorbed into the most corrupt practices of American political culture, 'lining up at the trough for corporate donations', Walmart and McDonalds heading the donor list, followed by Big Oil, Big Tobacco, General Motors, Ford, Heineken and Coca-Cola. Even the *New York Times* declared itself awed: the CBC 'stood alone' in its fundraising prowess.⁴⁰ From this context, Taylor argues, emerged the phenomenon of the 'post-black' politician of colour, equipped with 'multi-racial fundraising networks'. Obama's presidency was both the completion of this project and the gauge of its failure—'the end of an illusion'—for Black suffering worsened measurably under his watch. During the Great Recession, Black median income fell by nearly 11 per cent, to \$33,500, while whites' fell by 3.6 per cent, to \$58,000. Confining his attentions to Wall Street, Obama refused to contemplate mortgage bailouts as nearly a quarter-million African-Americans lost their homes. Black poverty rates rose to 27 per cent, with higher pockets in the Upper Midwest—34 per cent in Michigan, 46 per cent in Minnesota.⁴¹ He failed even to give an effective national lead against the widely publicized police killings of African Americans that galvanized the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings from the fall of 2014.

16

Taylor doesn't use the notion of caste but that of structural or institutional racism, coined by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in *Black Power* (1967). She defines structural racism in consequentialist terms: as the public or private—state or economic—processes that result

³⁹ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 100–1.

⁴⁰ Eric Lipton and Eric Lichtblau, 'In Black Caucus, a Fundraising Powerhouse', *NYT*, 14 Feb 2010, cited in Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 102.

⁴¹ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, pp. 219, 10–12.

in ‘greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization and mortality’ for African-Americans. The problem is therefore situated not at the level of intentions but at the level of the outcomes of the economic and social processes as a whole; Taylor quotes late-period King: ‘the economic system, the capitalistic economy, the whole society.’⁴² If this remains very general, it contains a truth occluded by the ‘post-racial’ ideology that is one of Taylor’s main targets, and which holds that ‘bad treatment on the basis of race’ is a matter of individual attitudes or a lapse in personal behaviour—to be dealt with, as Angela Davis puts it, by further doses of diversity and inclusion. Taylor writes: ‘The oppression of Black workers exposes the foundational lie of the US as a free and democratic society—their rebellion brings that lie to the surface for all to see, throwing into question the actual nature of US society.’⁴³

Powerful as it is, however, the notion of structural racism still leaves open the question of how African-Americans and other oppressed groups might be defined relative to each other, or to American society as a whole. It is at this point that many historically have reached for the idea of an oppressed ‘people’, or, like Carmichael and Hamilton, for the concept of an internal colony—or, as with Wacquant, Alexander and, in a more delimited sense, Gidla and Horn—a caste. Yet as Cox argued, the application of ‘caste’ or ‘racialized caste’ as an ideal-type to the situation of African-Americans would still need to elaborate how such a hierarchy would be articulated within the overall US social system.

17

Here, tentatively, it may be worth exploring the potential of Abram Leon’s term, the notion of a historic ‘people-class’, which Gidla and Horn retrieve from the recesses of the radical thinker’s conceptual toolbox, but reject on the grounds that African-Americans do not constitute a nation: ‘they have no territory or economic life of their own; Black culture is archetypically American.’⁴⁴ Yet this is to take a somewhat

⁴² Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 198. King might have added, ‘the whole society—and its culture’; that is, the sphere of meanings. For if meanings were central to the construction of modern racist ideologies, they will surely be no less important to their dismantling.

⁴³ Respectively: Angela Davis, Foreword to the 2021 Updated Edition of Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. xiii; and *ibid.*, p. 205.

⁴⁴ Gidla and Horn, ‘Caste, Race—and Class’, p. 16.

static view of a nation, let alone a people. In Leon's hands, both terms in the 'people-class' formula were dynamic, relational and historical. It suggested a social group or ethnic community whose cultural bonds were tightened through a shared economic function, defined by its position within the social order as a whole. Against the prevailing view that Eastern European Jews' resistance to assimilation could be explained on idealist grounds—their devotion to their religion—Leon argued, as Gidla and Horn explain, that it was because the Eastern Jews had maintained their role as an intermediary social class between the absentee landed nobility and the rent-racked Christian peasantry—as bailiffs, traders, tavern-keepers and so forth—that they had retained their religious and ethnic traits. In Western Europe, this position had been eroded from the twelfth century, with the rise of a native merchant class under 'medieval capitalism', which served either to exclude Jewish merchants or, where they remained integrated, to assimilate them. But the advent of industrial capitalism in Eastern Europe had been overturning these economic functions, and the intermediary Jewish people-class was differentiating into a professional layer and a proletariat, which crisis-hit interwar capitalism was incapable of absorbing.⁴⁵

From this perspective, a people may be assimilated, as were many western Jews, or absorbed, like German and Italian immigrants to America, or divided—typically by religion—like the Irish, intermingled like the Brazilians, semi-forged from subordinate nations, like Spaniards or British, or newly minted, like Australians and Israelis. 'Classes', entailing a division of labour and of property, are shaped by the development of both. They may mutate, like the English landed gentry, or be expropriated, like the Prussian Junkers, rendered redundant, like the Rustbelt industrial proletariat, or brought into being, like China's Sunbelt working class. One great advantage of the 'people-class' concept over that of 'caste', then, is that its double lens can capture a historically developing social reality that is both dynamic and uneven; in which the making and unmaking of social identities and economic functions proceed at different speeds, varying within the turbulent, fast-changing political economy of the US as a whole.

African-Americans' economic function as a class of agricultural slaves preceded their self-formation as a community, their forging of the

⁴⁵ Gidla and Horn, 'Caste, Race—and Class', pp. 27–9, referencing Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*, New York 2020 [1950], pp. 57–8, 68–71.

cultural bonds that enabled them to survive both slavery and Jim Crow and to create the idea of themselves as a people, which played such a powerful role through to the Civil Rights movement. Yet if the ‘people-class’ formula may perhaps have been applicable during a certain historical period—say, the 1820s to the 1940s or 50s—both terms have since been subject to unmaking, though at different speeds. The Great Migration, along with the mechanization of farming and the slump, served to dismantle the ‘class’ of Black agricultural labour. As the American economy entered its long downturn from the 1960s and 70s, African-Americans found themselves in a situation analogous to that which Leon described for inter-war Eastern European Jews: of trying to find an economic foothold—as industrial workers, as public employees—in sectors that were entering into crisis. Latinos and Filipinos—nascent people-classes, perhaps, like Mexican-Americans in the rural Southwest—were also filling the economic function of informal manual labour. But the dissolution of the black ‘class’ may also be having a corrosive effect on its companion term, the ‘people’. Arguably the cultural identity of African-Americans strengthened through the 1940s, 50s and 60s, years when the position of the majority began to improve, even as its ‘class’ identity weakened. But the integration of professional-class Blacks by way of EEOC affirmative-action and ‘diversity and inclusion’, however welcome in itself, has done nothing to solve the economic crisis that confronts the majority. At the height of the financial bubble, nearly two-thirds of African-Americans thought that ‘middle-class’ and ‘poor’ Black people had diverging values. Some 40 per cent thought that due to the diversity within the community, Blacks could ‘no longer be thought of as a single race’. Against that, the political logic of the Movement for Black Lives looked towards reforging links between Black workers and a semi-precarious professional middle class: Eric Garner was a former gardener, Freddie Gray, an unemployed 25-year-old, George Floyd, a truck driver and security guard.⁴⁶

18

If caste or untouchability are not appropriate terms to describe the historical position of African-Americans, this is not to deny the many parallels that exist. In both countries, the limitations of a strategy of individual ‘uplift’, evangelical or Gandhian, have become bitterly apparent.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 7.

Taking the measure of the Civil Rights era reforms has been a key task for the new generation of African-American intellectuals, in tandem with the critique by Dalit thinkers of the reservations policy in India, where Teltumbde has argued that issues of democratic accountability might be better resolved through a proportional-representation system than the quota basis. The evidence, he writes, shows that reservations and ‘all the centrifugal caste turbulence they have created’ have not benefited the Dalits so much as the ruling classes—‘There cannot be a caste-based solution to the problem of inequality. If one wishes to find a practicable solution, it will have to be a non-caste one.’ When he writes of token Dalit political representatives serving as fronts for local big business, it is not hard to hear Adolph Reed speaking of Black mayors making local governments the handmaidens of private development interests.⁴⁷ Across the ocean, over the mountains, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s words may resonate in Anand Teltumbde’s prison cell, and his work may have something to say to people in New Jersey or Chicago. To the extent that the analogies of racialization and caste have long functioned as expressions of international solidarity, they are more welcome and more necessary than ever.

⁴⁷ Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, pp. 89–90; Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregationist Era*, Minneapolis 1999, p. 106, cited in Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, p. 97.