

We saw a man face down on the pavement, pinned beneath a car, and above him another man, a man in uniform, his skin lighter than the man on the ground, and the lighter man was bearing down on the darker man, his knee boring into the neck of the darker man, the lighter man's hands at his sides, in his pockets — could it be that his hands were so nonchalantly in his pockets? — such was the ease and casual calm, the confidence of embedded entitlement with which he was able to lord over the darker man.

We heard the man on the ground pleading with the man above him, saw the terror in his face, heard his gasps for air, heard the anguished cries of an unseen chorus, begging the lighter man to stop. But the lighter man, the dominant man, looked straight at the bystanders, into the camera, and thus at all of us around the world who would later bear witness and, instead of heeding the cries of the chorus, pressed his knee deeper into the darker man's neck as was the perceived right granted him in the hierarchy. The man on the ground went silent, drained of breath. A clear liquid crept down the pavement. We saw a man die before our very eyes.

What we did not see, not immediately anyway, was the invisible scaffolding, a caste system with ancient rules and assumptions that made such a horror possible, that held each actor in that scene in its grip. Off camera, two other men in uniform, who looked like the lighter man, were holding down the darker man from the other side of the police car as dusk approached in Minneapolis. Yet another man in uniform, of Asian descent and thus not in the dominant caste, stood near, watching, immobilized, it seemed, at a remove from his own humanity and potential common cause, as the darker man slipped out of consciousness. We soon learned that the man on the ground, George Floyd, had been accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill, and, like uncountable Black men over the centuries, lost his life over what might have been a mere citation for people in the dominant caste.

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. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranks apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.

Throughout human history, three caste systems have stood out. The lingering, millenniums-long caste system of India. The tragically accelerated, chilling and officially vanquished caste system of Nazi Germany. And the shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the United States. Each version relied on stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the generations.

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power — which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources — which groups are seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and

control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority and assumptions of competence — who is accorded these and who is not.

And yet, in recent decades, we have learned from the human genome that all human beings are 99.9 percent the same. “Race is a social concept, not a scientific one,” said J. Craig Venter, the genomics expert who ran Celera Genomics when the initial sequencing was completed in 2000. “We all evolved in the last 100,000 years from the small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa and colonized the world.” Which means that an entire racial caste system, the catalyst of hatreds and civil war, was built on what the anthropologist Ashley Montagu called “an arbitrary and superficial selection of traits,” derived from a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of genes that make up a human being. “The idea of race,” Montagu wrote, “was, in fact, the deliberate creation of an exploiting class seeking to maintain and defend its privileges against what was profitably regarded as an inferior social caste.”

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.

The recent protests — and the anger that fuels them — did not spring up out of nowhere. They are a cry of pain from a raw nerve that has always afflicted the United States, one that was all too often ignored.

That nerve had a number of causes, and a number of things exacerbating it: biased and violent policing, of course, but also lingering effects of segregation affecting education, job opportunities, and health; a multi-tiered wage system that gives white men greater financial rewards than others, most of all black women; a criminal justice system that is punitive if you are black but able to find forgiveness, mercy, and understanding if you are white; the sense that not just one’s labor but one’s life is less valuable than those of other citizens only because of the color of their skin.