



Race and caste in the making of US sociology

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Abstract

In this article, we take a look at the influence of 20th-century provenance of caste as a category of academic importance meriting a debate in American sociology and beyond. Two actors participated in the animating discourse of caste and race in the annals of American sociology. Oliver Cromwell Cox took a class position to define caste, unmaking the hierarchies set in social structures. Instead, he advocated for a racialized system to understand the post-slavery capitalist America. Gerald Berreman represented a different camp that found social hierarchies to be co-determinant of relations and division arranged into a caste society. The debate over caste, nevertheless, admitted to the plausibility of castes contrasted with India's caste system. However, caste categorization was found to be an appropriate application to the conditions of social inequalities. Gunnar Myrdal and other scholars of repute contributed to the debate. What remained limited in their theoretical contributions to the discussion was an inadequate focus on the lived reality and politics of the caste formulations in the postcolonial, socialist mode of production. A serious examination of untouchability, sub-castes and sub-sub-castes that regulate the kernel of the caste system as well as the racialized castes in India were not studied or referenced in detail. This article adds to that void a theoretical understanding of the discussion on caste, race and colour in sociological and anthropological disciplines.

Keywords

American sociology, caste in America, Gerald Berreman, Gunnar Myrdal, Oliver C Cox, racial castes

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The story of modern caste

The era of studying caste as an academic topic had long preceded the mid-20th-century enquiry. Colonial interests in the topic paved a path for the study of modern caste. The Iberian experience in South Asia, particularly South India created interest among the Western Europeans who approached caste through two institutions – colonial administration and religion. They explored caste as a cultural form that had organized society in interesting ways. The colonial-era writing had already available glossaries of other worlds and race and ethnicity were among the easy classifiers to identify the divisions in society.

The experiences of caste and race can be traced back to the same genealogical roots. The former stems from epochal phasic shifts. Over the years, dominating classes organized into a confined, solid social structure, enabling caste and race to receive religious/philosophical approval. The Hindu Brahminic system, as it is known today, offered various justifications for the existence of caste groups. In the racial colour context, one explanation was founded in theology. Theologians claimed that Africans were a curse descended from Ham, a son of Noah's. I will explore this proposition later in the article. The emphasis on Christian values was derived from the idea that Christ was a light skin blue-eyed, blond person befitting the typical Enlightenment-era European characteristics. Religion aided with empires in the Iberian belt also found resonances to the phenotype that was vested in social status and hierarchy. Thus, like caste, religious scriptures aided the notion of race, colour and difference as understood then. This became a guiding rule for other institutions to build upon.

In this article, we will look at various instances of how castes were racialized in the United States as well as in India. Cross-cultural comparisons took a leap with scholars debating the usage of both terms. However, none disapproved of the importance of the social categories – race and caste – and their centrality to social and political relations in their particular histories. American and Indian scholars tried to find common as well as uncommon grounds to think about the complexities of their societies. India differed from the United States and other caste societies due to the apparent importance of sub-caste and sub-subcastes to the practice of Brahminism. Furthermore, untouchability as a permanent religious resource worked as a distinct marker which couldn't be washed away even after the performance of sacred rites. This is because there were two kinds of untouchables: the accidental, temporary 'positive' untouchables who were invited back into society, and the permanent outcastes who were condemned and debarred from accessing mainstream society. The earlier category was individuals, while the latter was a social group.

In the United States, like in India, various institutions provided justification for treating coloured races as inferior. From the mid-19th century, for example, the criminalization of lower groups became a reason for the expansion of the carceral system (Muhammad, 2010). The genetic make-up of groups was often cited as grounds to justify such discrimination. In addition to this, religious, philosophical and psychological reasons were also used. The inferiority of blacks (Dollard, 1957 [1937]) continues to be reinforced by social elites, who demand reverence for their superior position in the caste hierarchy and at the same time, grant a lower status to 'permanently scapegoat' the untouchable (Berreman,

1960: 123). American anthropologist Gerald Berreman found similarities in the lived experience of black groups in America and untouchables in India. So much so that he declared it would just require substituting 'negro' and 'white' with 'low caste' and 'high caste' to arrive at the same result. Berreman had lived and experienced Jim Crow Alabama in the early to mid-1950s, while also working in North India. He was a rare contributor to the global caste debate and one of the first Americans to prove the claim of caste in a comparative context. We shall revisit his core arguments shortly.

Race, which we understand and discuss today by way of English-language scholarship from around the world, is overwhelmingly interpreted through the US experience of the past 350 years. The US-dominated understanding of race differs from the experience of race and race relations in other societies. The French, for example, disagree with the US interpretation of race relations and the sensitivities it may carry.¹ The US experience of race, although different and geographically distinct, has established the reference-point for global race relations by boxing people into clearly marked white, black, coloured, Hispanic, Asian, Arab and Native American categories. Similar ethnic differences in other societies do not register as systematically as they do in the United States. However, in recent years, due to the dominating influence of the United States, we have come to see clear demarcations between race identity debates elsewhere. Brazil, for example, with its enormous racial and sub-racial ethnic divisions, produces a lengthy glossary of the many groups and their sub-racial categories (Prabhala, 2014). The caste system in Brazil is observed colloquially as a system of racialized violence (Diamba, 2022). One can then look at the historical journey of settler societies.

The influence of the Iberian, in particular, the Portuguese empire is apparent in defining the contours of castes as it did in Asia.² Sumit Guha states since both the empires of Iberia (Spanish and Portuguese) were held under one monarch between 1580 and 1640, this expansion was governed with the local dimensions of statecraft in the faraway colonies (Guha, 2013: 21). The segmentation of racial and cultural politics that we see today in the United States has centred the dominating discourse of body-politic colour-coded perception. This has provided an uneven and thinly scattered analysis of caste epistemology. Thus, it can be beneficial to interrogate the histories of caste in the United States, going back to the famous contests of black American sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox, who advocated for a racial class analysis as opposed to the racial caste, or 'the caste school of race relations' with others, like Gerald Berreman, to fathom the limitations of racial discourses as contrasted with caste.

Cox–Berreman: Position and debates

The debate between Cox and Berreman is emblematic of divergent viewpoints that took one section of the American sociology and history by storm. The first focussed on the region as the only authentic context of any category. The second was open to global comparisons and histories. The first school of thought developed its ideas around the institution of slavery and subsequent legal institutions that validated racial discrimination as an accepted part of American life. Its supporters wanted to deal with American society exclusively through the figure of race seen as an indigenous concept different from India's caste system. The second school of thought departed from the master-trope

of slavery and examined stratification from a comparative perspective, which meant thinking about race as a concept rooted in the larger structure of caste. Thus, the caste school of race relations was developed by ethnographers in the first half of the 20th century.³ The debate ensued for some time, eventually bringing victory to the racial school of thought, and the two scholars who dealt with the issues head-on were Oliver Cromwell Cox and Gerald Berreman.

Both Cox and Berreman wrote in particular contexts. As we shall see shortly, their approach to the scholarship of caste was manifested through various lenses. For Cox, the American system of empire and race made sense as it was strictly rooted in the exploitation of racialized bodies due to its colour codification. Berreman, like his predecessors in the anthropology discipline, was already finding the hardcore base of the American class as well as the colour system to be exemplary of caste devices (Davis et al., 1965 [1941]).

Cox's (1948) interest in caste took over the major part of his academic oeuvre. He studied caste as a point of intersection for studying race, capital and class relations (Hunter & Abraham, 1987). Cox refused to align caste with the now-established conception of race relations in America (Davis, 1945: 8),⁴ owing to the fact that race was theorized as having a 'scientific' (Cox, 1945: 368) basis as opposed to the unscientific doctrines espoused by the Brahminical rituals and Manu-ordained laws of India. Race had become a scientific subject due to the natural sciences taking an early interest in classifying human beings according to their various physical and descent-based traits – while such treatment wasn't afforded to caste. Race also corroborated capitalism primarily as a rationale for exploiting darker skinned people and their resources, giving way to the establishment of slavery, indenture and colonization. The conjoining of race with capitalism became a foundational trait of the American empire. Curiously, economic class does not find an explicit mention in the early Portuguese vocabulary of social hierarchy, be it race or caste. Class didn't play the role of a definite marker in the early modern age as much as it did in the 20th century, when a debate in capitalist societies divided people over class and colour traits.

Gerald Berreman, on the contrary, made a case for caste replication in the American context. A decade later, when the debate arose, he went to India to find out for himself. He visited North India to conduct a comparative structural analysis of race and caste in cross-cultural studies, a disciplinary investigation to study 'social process[es]' and comparisons between race and caste studies (Berreman, 1960: 120–127). Berreman found that 'despite the difference in content', race–caste comparisons invited more generalizations than the ones predicated on specific historical analysis. He found caste relations to be 'closely similar in operation' to racial equations in America, which offered further support to the theory of cultural relations between caste and race (Berreman, 1960: 120). His anthropological research takes us closer to the race–caste comparison than Cox's claims do, which were convincing but not adequately substantiated by empirical evidence. However, Berreman also did not delve deeper into the societal interactions of caste with regard to untouchability and graded hierarchies beyond the twin divisions of touchable and untouchables in India. He wanted to compare this non-nuanced dichotomy with that of white and black people in America.

Cox's analysis led to a bipolar segmentation of caste and race relations, in which he analysed 'negro'–white relations in the capitalist context and those of lower and upper

castes in the 'traditional' Brahminical fold. Berreman and Cox did not disagree on the two-level segmentation of caste. Both were comparing the same models looking at power and hierarchy – a classic concern of sociology, as interrelational to the functioning of society. However, one curious scholar who inherited the pangs of slavery went on to investigate the character of classes in castes. He was Allison Davis.

Davis aptly identified the range of 'social classes in each with each caste' (Davis, 1945: 7, original emphasis), or the sub-caste groups which are the primary classifiers of caste identities. As demonstrated earlier, the caste system, as we know today, has had far-reaching consequences and much larger implications which go beyond the binaries of lower and upper, or black and white. The peculiarity of the caste system is that it scatters its ontology. Because of this, one cannot hold onto one theory to define caste relations. Contrasting it with the 'bipartite' segmentation of race relations, Cox (1945) argues that caste is more 'ancient, provincial, culturally oriented, hierarchical in structure, status conscious, non-conflicted, nonpathological, occupationally limited, lacking in aspiration and progressiveness, hypergamous, endogamous, and static' (p. 360).

Cox rightly emphasizes the Brahminic model as a more developed form of the Indian caste system. Race, however, was related to colour-coded distinctions of black–white, or as he called it, 'Negro–white relations', which were more recent, dating back to the era of American slavery. Capitalism needed to exploit labour to generate profits in the classed society which American slavery had produced. In addition to this, there were social relations that required regulation – which meant that the newfound theories of race developed by 18th-century scientists came in handy (Sweet, 1997: 144).

Casteism, on the contrary, Cox (1945) argued, is a 'hereditary monopoly rather than competitive opportunism' that is fixated into caste vocations (p. 360). Thus, rather than being in permanent bondage to the production system, the black person in America was free to participate in the free market. Unlike, the Dalit, the black person could choose to sell his labour the way he wanted in the competitive market.

There was a common understanding among scholars that in the Western world, wealth-defined status was independent of one's birth. And due to this, its claims were open to be challenged. Because class distinctions, unlike caste, were 'alienable, acquirable, and transferable' without drawing 'permanent lines of cleavage as does birth' (Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 2). In the caste system, birth defined the status of the individual. How, then, do we move to liberalize our understanding of pre-capitalist society, that is, caste, with that of capitalism's adjustment with it, the modern caste? Race here offers a cue to answer the latter part of the question.

Capitalism amended the social relations in the Indian context. It offered a new meaning and parlance to the mediative factors of labour relations and exploitation. The nature of labour depended upon the inheritance. That is why capitalism's modernist avatar formulated the erstwhile caste-ized labour into modern labour whose identity and profession have not changed drastically, but the descent-based caste identity attached to the labour retained. A sweeper on the street is still a Dalit predominantly; now, she may wear a reflective vest, but her proficiency in relation to her trade and fair compensation is controlled by the neoliberal market rules undermining the control of the government. Capitalism did not intervene in the lives of marked bodies whose existence in the society

is internally cultural, where market forces have not yet created a significant impact. Nonetheless, the process has begun, and it may take another generation to see the results.

Cox found one of the primary differences between race and caste to be the dependability of physical characteristics. He observed that one could identify as 'Chinese, Indians, Europeans, 'Negroes', or Filipinos, [and] expect responses indicating consciousness of ocular evidence of physical differentiation' (Cox, 1945: 362). However, with regard to the various castes in Hindu society, namely chamar, brahmin and baniyas, all appear to the outsider as one physical unit.

This argument needs validation. The physical markers of distinction are not universal in nature. The way Americans see other 'racial' groups is a historically deterministic localized definition of another person or race. Similarly, one has to work towards locating caste markers with the physical and social habits of various social groups. The lower castes are subject to caste rules. They cannot live in the main village. They have to perform certain jobs and remain available to serve as village servants, much like the black population of the American South, who worked as unskilled labourers, servants and workers (Fuller, 2011: 609).⁵ The outcastes in India do not own the land or resources to be independent. Due to this, social habits are designed to keep them subservient and loyal subjects. Their forced submission to the order of the village system is far more visible. In villages, where the caste system is the *modus operandi*, one knows the caste of the other. Therefore, there is a visible spatial marker unlike colour but still apparent enough for locals to distinguish the caste of the person (Hall, 2018: 2133–2145).

In addition to this, there are certain regulations in the Indian social system which the highest – the Brahmin – and the lowest – the outcaste untouchable – have to adhere to. One of these is the method of salutation (*johar*):

Some of the lower castes carry their reverence for the Brahmins, especially in Northern India, to such extremes that they will not cross the shadow of a Brahmin, and sometimes will not take their food without sipping water in which the big toe of a Brahmin is dipped. (Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 14)

Such physical attributes characterized the identity of lower castes in society. In terms of culinary practices, pure, cooked food and impure, uncooked food have to adhere to certain regulations applicable to each caste. The deities of worship for all are markedly different. So, too, do the worshipping practices of castes vary. In marriages, one can maintain the lines of purity by monitoring the blood circulating within the kin or the sub-caste fold. Similarly, but in a different context – the racial context – the emphasis on physicality and appearance determines the plausibility of intimate relations. This allows for the black and white to develop relations – be they sexual or servile. However, in the caste context, the preoccupation is with avoidance and distance. The sight of the untouchable itself is considered defiling, thereby, diminishing opportunities to cross over into relations of any other kind. Unlike the racial paradigm, wherein the appearance of a person can lead to further differentiations, caste is a predetermined system wherein physicality is not the underlying principle. And yet, physicality does play a pivotal role in maintaining caste. The practice of distance and segregation is not an unconscious bias but a confirmed, educated choice made by various castes, who cognize and reaffirm the

person's stature in the caste system. It is localized information enforced strongly by the protocols of dominant castes.

Therefore, the undisputed 'high' position of the dominant castes offers them an easy means to force their will upon others. Cox and Berreman agree that the privileges even of an impoverished high-caste person are far greater and more rewarding than those of a lower-caste one however well-off. So, if there is a rivalry among various castes, it is not guaranteed that such a quarrel will produce the equivalent of a revolution which can promise to break through the caste system. On the contrary, Cox (1945) argues that 'the greater the rivalry between the caste and caste; the more stable the caste system' (p. 264). If the same occurs in racial society, however, it is possible to settle the differences.

The enormity of castes, sub-castes and their interrelation in the village economy and now urban political economy creates an awkward, inconsistent social order. The rivalry between the castes is primarily emanating from jealousy. The insulated nature of India's caste system prevents any form of overt solidarity and concern for other caste groups. The petty jealousies turn the possibility of forming an alliance into a mortal conflict. Often, caste formations take the shape of macro religious forms. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, tribal and native religions then designate the roles of each according to simplified separations identified via clan gods/goddesses. The absence of trustworthiness is the hallmark of India's caste system. The nature of the relationship is often compounded by a lack of access to adequate resources and unequal distribution of power. Due to this, various castes try to eliminate each other from the competition. Castes are sustained by remarkably sophisticated units of sub-castes that primarily regulate the caste system, where micro-hierarchies are enforced at a social and personal level. Cox was not entirely aware of the above-mentioned complexities, but he did talk about the feature of the caste system in Hindu India as being sub-caste-oriented. The 'invidious rivalries' which were 'incidental', existed among all the castes (Cox, 1961: 511). Thus, this peculiarity confirmed caste behaviour – rivalry confirmed caste rather than threatening it. Berreman had refuted Cox's argument at first by reporting that in Sirkanda, his field site in India, the lower castes could not initiate aggression against the high castes, though they did express their discontent in private.

Cox misreported the absence of social aspirations among the 'lower castes' in India in comparison to the 'Negroes'. The latter, Cox (1945) observed, 'have been seeking to increase their participation and integration in the dominant culture' (pp. 365–366). Cox argued that the 'scheme of race relations in America centres around attempts of the "Negro" to reach new levels of participation and opposition to these attempts by whites'. Quoting a black congressman, George H. White, who had impressed upon the House in his farewell address the suffering of the black population of America, Cox stated, once again without evidence, that such an incident is difficult to spot in the Indian caste context.

Cox was unconvinced about the commonalities of sociologies between racial America and caste India. He quipped if at all these systems are 'sociologically identical', as Berreman has proposed, then it is wiser to look at the Indian system through the American racial structure in India. He even went further to call the fieldnotes from Sirkanda as 'race relations'—which, one supposes, would astonish most Hindus (Cox, 1961: 511). He was not wrong that it astonished Hindus but also examined the non-applicability of

non-convertible social institutions that he assumed were frozen in their respective time zones and spatial zones. Like Cox, many American scholars who theorized caste and its experience primarily relied on colonial reports and documents of governmentality, thereby impeding the possibility of a non-generalized state narrative.

As a consequence, both Berreman and Cox were uninformed, or rather unaware, of the remarkable anti-caste movements in India that threw a challenge to settled theories of caste. At the height of their debate, towering figures from the untouchable castes were contesting the modernity of traditional caste norms through popular social movements across India. In North India, the Punjabi movement led by Mangoo Ram Mugowalia; in Uttar Pradesh, Swami Achutanand; the pan-Indian heavyweight presence of America-educated Dr. Ambedkar, in South India EVR Periyar went by unnoticed.

The Cox–Berreman debate exemplifies two Americans plotting their defence from an awkward Orientalist position. In this, one can study the biographies of Berreman and Cox to know how they perceived their debate from the point of view of a white American and Trinidadian, respectively. Granted, however, that Cox’s experiential fieldnotes were drawn from his own country, where he observed the Indian community in Trinidad, which was a sizable proportion of the island nation. He had spent ‘some months observing the partial operation of caste among the thousands of East Indians in Trinidad, British West Indies’, but he grasped this concept from the exegetical reading of texts published in the English language in the West. He states in a preface written in 1947 that the data that were reported ‘have been taken almost entirely from published materials on the Hindus in India’. (Cox, 1959 [1948]: ix). Cox admits to observing castes among Indians in Trinidad Hindus, and also his insights were gained from discussions and interviews with East Indians in Trinidad. They were his primary, lived interlocutors in the study of castes (Cox, 1959 [1948]: xvii).

He observed those Indians who had dislocated their caste affiliation and caused caste to fail in the new land.⁶ This was particularly in light of the post-indentured racial order of the hierarchy presented in the colonial governmentality. After this, in 1929, due to polio, he was attached to a wheelchair, which prohibited his easy mobility.⁷ Perhaps, if he could travel easily, his fieldnotes would have given a newer perspective than what he had seen in Trinidad. In my recent fieldwork in May 2022, I observed that caste works more as a factor in nomenclature and ritual position, than in regular social life. Trinidadian Indians are aware of their caste roots and status, but most of them claim a generic ‘Maharaj’ title, indicative of Brahmin roots. Many contest such an interpretation of history.

This brings us to the question of knowledge detection and production. Who are the perceived informants and scholars upon whom Cox and Berreman have relied on to make their points? Cox relied heavily on colonial works by George W Briggs, Herbert Risley, Denzil Ibbetson, John Nesfield, S V Ketkar and G S Ghurye, among others, and data from the Census of India, along with the translation of the Laws of Manu by Max Müller. Berreman primarily relied on his doctoral fieldwork in North India, and drew from the studies by Allison Davis, S.C. Dube, McKim Marriott, John Dollard, M.N. Srinivas, B. Gallagher and Pauline Mahar, among other noted ethnographers who elaborated the study of caste. While Cox was correct to find the Hindu logic of caste and its intrinsic intimacy with ritual, he could not loosen the analysis to define caste as an inflexible structure that was detrimental to progress when thought of in the evolutionary side

of debate. Caste, according to him, had to exist within the cultural framework of Hinduism and rightfully so, if taken from a hermeneutic point of view.

Cox and Berreman were interested in caste for similar reasons, but their objectives differed. Race was put in comparison with caste because there was a surge in the scholarship on caste, and American sociology was gearing up to incorporate it as a category of importance within a domestic context. Historiography contested with sociology, especially in view of the popularity that caste was gaining in discussions pertaining to the incidents of racial prejudice. Cox was comfortable with race because it corresponded with the Marxian idea of class (and class struggle) operating as the interpreter of slavery and racism.⁸ However, caste put the focus squarely on cultural systems that were not only the output of slavery, but persisted in social relations beyond economism and class divides (Flynn, 1983). It was a 'racial caste system' that was based on inheritance, inflexibility and literal moral authority (Flynn, 1983). Researchers who studied the 19th-century American South, found that class structures among the white population were also an outcome of the caste system, alongside the wealth, power and prestige of the planters. Flynn Jr. is among the notable historians of the American South who took the position that neither racial nor class exploitation can define our understanding of post-war America. Instead, he thinks of the interplay between both the 'South's culturally defined caste and economically defined class system' that were at times in harmony and often opposed to each other (Flynn, 1983: 2–3).⁹

Biological or sociological? Race and the triumph of caste

The fundamental difference between race and caste lies in their interaction with modern capitalist forces, whereas the commonality between race and caste stems from their genealogical similarities. Race became race (which eventually became black and white) when it was faced with the early modern material world. It developed from a concrete difference to an abstract one. In the era of the Greek and Roman Empire, darker people were not enslaved for being black or looked down upon. In fact, records show that black people were kings and generals in the Graeco-Roman world. That didn't stop the devaluation of black skin in the Greek world, although for different reasons. It was not an outright racist colourism as we understand it today. This vision influenced Arabic slavery which carried on into the Enlightenment.¹⁰ The Enlightenment brought with it modern innovations and tools, leading to exploration, colonization and the slave trade for which race became the crucial category.¹¹

Race provided a defence against accountability for state violence. Extracting uncompensated labour from enslaved bodies was the most efficient form of guilt-free material exploitation. Race thus became biological, with heaps of anthropometric research and social Darwinist methodology paving a path for rationalizing the inferiority of coloured castes. In his 1909 address to the National Negro Conference, Du Bois observed how the works of Charles Darwin, August Wiessman and Francis Galton were being misinterpreted by racialists who resorted to establishing the supremacy of European races. They argued that the inferiority and incapacity of the yellow, 'swarthy', black and brown races would eventually cause them to succumb to extinction (Du Bois, 1909: 150). That is why colour discrimination was justified as a reaction to keep 'black people in their places',

and ‘not attempt to treat a Negro simply as a white man with a black face’. If the latter was done, it would ‘mean moral deterioration of the race and nation’ (Du Bois, 1909).

As opposed to this, caste was not understood as a biological category. Void of modern capitalistic sensibilities, it exercised a spiritual sanction that concentrated on extracting human labour in accordance with the divine–monarchical command. There were no strict markers or biological traits that differentiated caste subjects. Although *Varna*, meaning colour or character as a species, was central to hyperbolic claims made for caste stratification, it did not necessarily involve the colour-coding of groups as in the case of racial segmentation in the United States.

The colour component attached to biologism established the foundation for the grand claims made by the race system, that is, colour castes or racialized castes. Du Bois (1909) had refuted biological determinism as a factor defining racial order. In his monumental sociological work, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois (1899) makes a claim for class and social structure being responsible for the poor condition of ‘Negroes’ and not an inherent, inferior biological aptitude attributed to the black residents of Philadelphia ghettos – who were labelled lazy, uncivilized, aggressive and uncivil due to their racial background. This study proved to be a seminal work influencing those researching the topic.

This study proved to be a seminal work influencing those researching the topic. Gunnar Myrdal also laid emphasis on the non-biological and non-genetic connotations of American social relations. In his magisterial study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Myrdal endorsed the work of Du Bois, in particular, his *Black Reconstruction* (1935), which pushed against the view that biological determinism was a factor in ‘Negro’ inferiority (Myrdal, 1944: 96). Myrdal also cited *The Philadelphia Negro* as an example to support the thesis of non-biologism of race factor (Myrdal, 1944: 1132).

Myrdal represents an interesting episode in the world of American social science. A Swede, he was commissioned to undertake the behemoth task of investigating the race problem by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. He compiled data using ethnographic and archival material and travelled by road to capture the essence of America’s colour problem. As a result, his study found race to be an ‘inappropriate’ category for a scientific investigation, and class as insufficient and ‘impractical’, since it was birthed by the groups in which fluidity was possible, so that it was only in caste that rigid structures could be appropriately analysed.¹² Caste, in many senses, was an ‘extreme case of absolutely rigid class’, according to Myrdal’s analysis (Myrdal, 1944: 675).

Thus, the category of caste was used to denote the ‘social status difference’ between white and black Americans wherein ‘the boundary is fixed [. . .] it is a bar erected with the intention of permanency’ (Myrdal, 1944: 58). The fixed and rigid differences between white and black groups varied across different regions and social classes. They were also ‘changing in time’. Caste was used over the biologically loaded concept of race, which Myrdal argued was not only ‘static’ but carried ‘much more erroneous connotations’ (Myrdal, 1944: fn. a: 54). He clearly stated the reasoning for his use of caste, writing that, ‘[T]he sole criterion in defining scientific terms is practicality. Concepts are our created instruments and have no other form of reality than in our own usage. Their purpose is to help make our thinking clear and our observations accurate’ (Myrdal, 1944: 667).

Myrdal tried to clear up the controversy surrounding the use of caste terminology to understand America's problem of race. He held the view that it arose owing to two distinct yet related concepts: caste relations and caste line. The changes observed in American society had to do with American caste relations; whereas the divides between caste lines were unalterable as they were fixed, rigid and unblurred (Myrdal, 1944: 668). Myrdal relied on sociological as well as economic studies on caste and American society to make sense of the topic at hand. The Carnegie Corporation gave him a free hand to choose his staff and research direction, and he picked expert scholars and leaders from across the board in the southern states. His acknowledgments are telling of the complicated debates he must have been part of during this study. He solicited feedback from a wide range of scholars who were leaders in the field, including Franz Boas, Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Allison Davis and John Dollard.

Myrdal relied, in particular, on Charles S. Johnson's advice. For each segment of his study, Myrdal drew upon existing works and also commissioned new research from scholars. The list indicates that critical studies of the 'Negro' question in America were examined in detail and supplemented with convincing ethnography and sociology. Those who were commissioned by Myrdal to produce research but remained unpublished were independently stored at the Schomburg Library in New York (Schomburg, 1943).¹³ Some of the manuscripts that engaged with caste in the United States included Allison Davis's 'Negro Churches and Associations in the Lower South'; Ashley-Montagu's 'Origin, Composition and Physical Characteristics of the American Negro Population'; T.C. McCormick's 'The Negro in Agriculture'; and Sterling Brown's 'The Negro in American Culture'. These works offered guidance to Myrdal in his own investigation, who credited them for their contribution in the preface of the book.

Du Bois had argued for the significance of the caste system in the South. He had observed that caste was a racial and colour system that existed both during and after slavery. His definition of caste was fluid. Sometimes it referred to the black condition in the American South. At other times, it was an academic, social research category (Visweswaran, 2010: 114, fn. 57, 253). But more importantly, his identification of race becomes an important lens to examine caste. Du Bois (2007) claimed race to be a 'heritage of slavery' inherited from his ancestors, who gave him the 'colour and hair' which became the reason for the 'discrimination and insult' he faced. These were 'obvious things, but of little meaning in themselves' (p. 59). Thus, Du Bois (2007) was very clear that '[R]ace is a cultural, sometimes an ahistorical fact' (p. 77). Educated in the liberal North, Du Bois had closely experienced the caste system of the South which was hierarchical and segmented and assimilated into the order of the state between whites and blacks. Coming from an elite, Harvard educational background, Du Bois was unprepared for the predominantly religious heavy educational curriculum at Wilberforce (Du Bois, 2007: 29), where he as a professor, was surprised to see the American caste system so deeply rooted in religious patterns that governed the life of black folks.

Not only black groups but also other minorities identified with the caste system to better relate their experiences. The Native American experience, in contrast to the Black African experience in America, was identified through the prism of caste (Forbes, 1988). The tracts of colour – black, white, Native American – are all modern identifiers developed during the phase of colonization, as were the classification of race and caste.

However, pre-modern classifications, argued Native American scholar Jack D. Forbes (1990) were defined by caste which went on to have an influence on the understanding of Europe and Africa.

On the contrary, the Latino population of America found itself entangled between the legal whiteness of the American Caucasian regime as Spaniards, while remaining coloured in the 'Mexican racial caste system' as people with mestizo (mixed) ancestry (Menchaca, 1993). Jorge Esguerra argues that the advent of biological determinism in colonial empires began with the Spanish Inquisition in South America (Esguerra, 1999). But this also gave rise to caste-centric metaphors which started being used in public vocabulary. Mestizos, Mestizaje and Mulattos were some of the categories that were invented to contain the racial idea of colonial difference. Over time, such differences became the foundation for rules to confine 'transgressions' among various caste groups (Vinson, 2018). The racial classification is not a complete lens to admire the Mexican classification of descent groups. However, it does offer us the route to examine various descent-based caste groups that were assimilated into the modern apparatus of state order.

The inconsistencies of the race paradigm across settler societies, particularly since the 16th-century Iberian expansion of race, is well-explored in James Belich's work. After surveying the cartography of settler colonial society with its expansionist logic rooted in racism, Belich concludes that racism or white superiority was shaped as and when required, without paying particular attention to a definition of 'white'. In his article, Belich (2014) points out that the Incas and Aztecs were given white status and the theory behind this was drawn out of thin air (p. 271). Similarly, Japanese colonialism was seen in the light of European values, thus some commentators identified them as 'Aryan': 'White men, belonging to the great Aryan family [. . .] were the first Japanese' (quoted in Belich, 2014: 273).

The marking of racial categories in relation to 'occupation, status, cultural cohesion' is a hallmark of a caste society. The theories of race science and social science around colour difference were still evolving at the time. They were trying to appropriate the latest understandings of societies that relied on markers of colonization and extractive capitalism. There wasn't any concrete thesis to rely on. Various disciplines and intellectual enquiries were publicly made to make sense of the 'Negro' or to understand why some people had darker skin. Such investigations in the 18th century, in France and other parts of Europe, tried to settle the controversy over the physical and anatomical differences between the darker skinned peoples and Europeans (Gates and Curran, 2022).

Race became fashionable in the 16th century due to Iberian coastal expeditions. Its origin, some scholars held, may be traced back partly to the Western framing of difference in the Book of Genesis, which tells of Shem, Ham and Japhet – Noah's sons. However, since the advent of the Enlightenment, 'difference' was validated as a legitimate form of inquiry which made it easy to develop a hierarchy of races. To support slavery 'science' as knowledge, such inquiry had to rationalize the inferiority of dark-skinned people. Thus, 18th-century Europe invested heavily in deciphering and eventually justifying the inferiority of dark skin (Gates and Curran, 2022).

Sub-sub-castes

A prominent feature of the caste system is the solidification of multiple sub-castes. In the South and Central American context, the seven prominent castes had further divisions which varied according to geographical location. There existed 'divisions and sub-divisions' among these castes along the lines of tribe, colour, common origin and language (Ward, 1829: 23–24). In the Indian context, these are known as *jatis* that exist within each of the four or five major castes. In addition to the sub-castes, there are further divisions, giving rise to sub-sub-caste lineages (gotra) (Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 184; Ketkar, 1909: 17). E A Blunt, who worked on census in 1911 conducted investigation on 'certain specific aspects of castes' (Blunt, 1931: v). His detailed enquiry in northern India gave him insights into the function of castes. He found the subdivisions of castes fragment further into 'smaller groups of the same nature' as 'sub-subcastes' (Blunt, 1931: 49). The untouchable caste group Mahar (which is a sub-caste), for example, has 12.5 sub-sub-caste groups like Laadvan, Aandvan, Somosh, Tilvanshi, Bawane and so on. The Brahmins are divided into two larger 'fraternities—Dravida and Gaudas' (Ambedkar, 2014b [1989]: 211). Among them there are nearly 1620 castes. The sub-castes further trickle down to the sub-sub-castes. Take the Maharashtra Brahmins, who have two prominent divisions: Konkanstha and Deshastha (a rival faction of Brahmins), the Saraswat Brahmins are further divided into many seven divisions as reported by their organization Saraswat Vidyarthi Sahayak Mandal (Ambedkar, 2014a [1936]; Ambedkar 1987: 45; Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 194–5).¹⁴ The same hierarchical ranking of various sub-sub-castes are maintained in practice and exchange among Brahmins and other castes.

The caste system is a generic totem. However, in actuality, it is the sub-sub group that maintains the functionality of the system. Sub-sub-castes have independent religious beliefs about the deity. Some of them have different Hindu sects or orientations such as Vedanta, Vaishnavites, Shaivites. Sub-sub-castes in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra are expressed as *pahuné*, *soyrey* (relatives) to connote an indirect reference to the bond between the sub-sub-caste groups that have different last names. The existence of sub-sub-castes is knowledge for intra-caste relationships and have little to do with outside the caste groups (Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 195–196). However, in recent political battles, candidates from specific sub-castes and sub-sub-castes are preferred over the demography, despite them belonging to the same castes.

Edward Gait, one of the colonial officials and co-authors of the Census report of 1901 and 1911 argues that the 'chief characteristic of a caste is to treat all so-called sub-castes as the real castes' (Ghurye, 1969 [1932]: 19; Ketkar, 1909: 15; Srinivas, 1962: 65). The sub-caste identification is paramount for the outside world to establish the location of a particular caste. However, sub-sub-caste distinctions are crucial for the internal caste groups to find their absolute totemic fixation in the caste ladder. This identifier is very important, for it indicates the 'purity' of the blood line, which in turn helps in finding the right partner in intra-caste endogamous marriages.¹⁵

Keeping a close watch on interpersonal relations governs the state of caste life in the overly romanticized term 'village republic', first mentioned by Sir Charles Metcalfe in his East India Company report and later refashioned by Gandhi.¹⁶ Endogamy serves as the primary purpose for the retention of the caste system. Ambedkar (1917) argued that

endogamy 'is the only one that can be called the essence of Caste when rightly understood' (p. 8).

In the US context, endogamy remained a reality within broader colour-coded groups but did not extend further as in the case of sub-sub-caste classifications. Although linguistic and regional dynamics did constitute a factor in endogamous practices among African Americans and in the immense diversity of European Americans, the broader objective of maintaining endogamy was to confine the debate within coloured groups. Race pride did not mean being confined to 'intra societal groups' as in the caste system, but rather, reaching out to an entire people who had been coded by a singular 'commanding loyalty in a body' (Cox, 1945: 363). The body here describes black and white corporeality.

In the case of the American caste, white superiority was protected in what were called 'sexual gains' ¹⁷ for the white man, because he had free access to both black and white women without any necessary repercussions (Dollard, 1957 [1937]). However, the black man–white woman relationship was liable to suffer a fatal outcome. This scenario was described early on by the framer of caste codes, Manu, in his lawbook *Manusmriti*. The idea of *anuloma* refers to the sexual gain of an upper caste man over a lower caste woman. The 'punishment' for this act is negligible, compared with *pratiloma*, which is the equivalent for a lower caste man and upper caste woman. The woman of higher caste status, if married to or cohabiting with a lower caste man, was condemned to severe punishment. Inter-caste relationships and love affairs are among the most regulated relations of caste society.

Bererman (1960) described caste, for the sake of generalization, as a concept of 'endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent' (p. 120). Miscegenation was illegal in the United States, and sanctioned by the courts. However, it was not until 1967 and the famous case of *Loving v. Virginia* that such anti-miscegenation laws were declared unconstitutional. Today, in the post-anti-miscegenation era, the acceptance of interracial marriage is encouraged and appreciated. Pew research observed that 'One in six U.S. newlyweds (17%) were married to a person of a different race or ethnicity in 2015, a more than fivefold increase from 3% in 1967' (Bialik, 2017).

However, the same cannot be said of the Indian caste scenario, wherein love marriages continue to invite the suspicion and wrath of society and family, many times ending in a bloodbath. In a survey of about 43,000 households, it was discovered that 89.04% of women marry within the same caste. The percentage of women marrying below their caste was 5.38% and above their caste was 5.08% (Das, 2010).

Ambedkar goes a step further to present the ontology of caste and its role in controlling the sexuality of gendered bodies. His thesis on the caste system centralized women as the primary carrier of caste. However, this argument was not taken further by deploying sociological tools to extract empirical data on the part of sociologists and anthropologists.

One of the reasons Ambedkar's theses remained unknown outside academic circles can be attributed to his departure from the traditional scholarship on caste in the social sciences. He did not publish in sociology journals and bemoaned the fact that class, communalism and nationalism received extraordinary attention in comparison to caste. Ambedkar's first-hand knowledge of the caste system was not reported either in the

works of Berreman, Cox, Myrdal or other scholars of the time, who were making definitive claims about the caste system even if these were sometimes erroneous and without adequate evidence. Similarly, Dumont, Dollard, Davis and W. Lloyd Warner, among others who studied caste, had an intended objective to theorize caste in the framework of nation and culture. The geographical angle of spatiality and culture was the focus of these debates and took place within this framework.

The American theorization of caste was allegorical and placed in 'cross-cultural studies'. Among the two camps, there was one agreement: to interpret America in its uniqueness – as American essentialization of caste. The naysayers like Cox wanted to analyse American social categories through class and racial dynamics. At the same time, the other camp was redefining caste as an American creation of purity for the New World. The second agreement in this debate was the modern and ancient paradigm applied to America and India, where America was a modern nation with Enlightenment-modern values, and India was an ancient republic with traditional Hindu values.

Thus, the correct question is not what caste did to America but what America did to caste. In the latter, we notice that American experiments with democracy and capitalism were largely unchallenged by the original creed of the American empire. With caste coming into the picture, the American historical order was put to a critical lens that exposed the vulnerabilities within the cracks.

Conclusion

Caste or no caste has been a debate not only in US sociology but also in India. Many in the Indian context argue for a *jati*-based *varna* model, which deems to sanctify the caste division. The debate among American sociologists did have an impact on the policy and civil rights movement. Caste was not just an exterior experience of the foreigners. It was the original creed of forming the new vantages of social and spirituals relations in colonial experimentation.

The debate of whether to analyse the United States as a caste society or a racialized society was rooted in the conditions of various approaches to capitalism and slavery. The US sociology was concerned with socio-economic, and political studies of societies. The ones who deployed caste idioms did not launch as strong a pushback on the advances of capitalism as opposed to those espousing a racial meaning of US origins. Both sides did agree on the subordination and hereditary prowess of the US colour caste regime. An absence of colour uniformity has not impeded the development of sub-racial castes. A hierarchy exists in the colour regime. There is also a national, ethnic and religious segment that could fit the classification of sub-castes among the American racialized groups. The feature of the *Varna* caste system was untouchability, which centralized its functioning around it. Identically, no designated rule or ideal exercised untouchability in the racial colour order.

This article studied various academic debates and research projects that had closely observed societal shifts during the mid-20th century. Be it economic or social, the changes meant that society was not bending to the rule of the powerful, but the weak, too, had an important role in positing their space. These debates of the past century were eventually absolved. Their references were largely resigned to archives.

However, in the present era, the typology of caste has received a renewed focus, because the problems of the past century remained undiagnosed. The issue of hierarchal ranking and the accepted authority of those on the top has produced mass violence of one group against the other. This cannot be explained by merely singular strands of capitalism or racialism. One group acting against the other despite identical economic status and unclear dogma of racism has made broad, awkward categories of colour-oriented society. Caste enters the private and macro-level understandings of our societies. This conceptual framing has to be studied with localized specifications that may not be identical to groups in similar situations elsewhere. This aspect was ignored by those studying caste on either side of the debate. The study of caste did offer a comparative framework, but it cannot be sapped over the other. Castes are unique formations of societies that rationalize colour, tribal, nationality, linguistic and ethnic differentiations based on the indigenously developed modes of control and flow of power dynamics.

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Notes

1. The race identifier in the United States is an important reflection of its capitalist and colonial history. The French society, for example, has a normalizing utopian vision that refuses to acknowledge or call out fellow French as black but instead suggests including their racial identity under the umbrella of the common political identity – being French. The motto of *liberte, equalite, fraternite* disciplines the conduct of French nationals discussing race. This was evident from the exchanges between a television host and comedian, Trevor Noah, of *The Daily Show* and the French Ambassador to the US. *The Daily Show* (2019).
2. Several works bear testimony to this. One particularly hypothetical and provocative work was by Klass (1980), where he argues for a non-Indian origin of the word castes. For a survey of the Portuguese archive see Guha (2013).

3. This was a newer formulation, different from the previous century's epithet of 'coloured races'.
4. Allison Davis (1945) had observed that using 'race relations' was a 'protective euphemism' for black people, as opposed to 'caste'.
5. C.J. Fuller reviews the literature on caste and race in the American South, wherein he observes the status of labourers as found in the work of Davis, Gardner and Gardner's *Deep South*.
6. An excellent archival and ethnographic fieldwork by Barton M. Schwartz (1969) does a good job of reporting on the caste system in Trinidad. My forthcoming book, *Caste A Global Story* (2025), explores caste in the indentured and contemporary Trinidadian society.
7. I thank, Rhoda Reddock of the University of West Indies, St Augustine for emphasizing this point about Cox.
8. He saw this as 'racial antagonism' developed after the 'commercialization of labor in the West Indies, the East Indies, and in America', where the businessmen of different European centre 'cities' competed for profit (Cox, 1948).
9. Interestingly, Cox (1945) is willing to agree that caste is an extremely 'powerful' form of cultural organization existing since antiquity (p. 368).
10. To understand racism and how it has shaped European philosophy, please refer to Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the excellent collection of essays compiled by Ward and Lott (2002).
11. The experience of caste is interpreted in terms of society and its myths. The colonial inventories of India were the first of their kind, along with English- and German-language interpretations. The obsession with Vedic knowledge production was one of the early interventions of Europeans. Caste is also seen in three broader generalizations about Indian society, known as 'tripartite foundation of hereditary: occupational specialization, ritualized/sacralized hierarchy, and mutual repulsion or separation' Natrajan (2012: 54).
12. See Myrdal, chapter 31, 'Caste and Class' and chapter 32 'The Negro Class Structure' in *An American Dilemma*.
13. A catalogue of that is available on the Schomburg Library website, 'Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America research memoranda collection', Sc Micro F-13242, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. <https://archives.nypl.org/scm/20555>
14. Ambedkar collates another data that gives him 1866 total Brahmin sub-castes, while the Saraswat alone in Punjab were nearly 490. He prefaced by saying that nobody had made an 'exact computation' of the sub-caste numbers.
15. In the classical social anthropological model, there is an inclination to adhere to this phenomenon of kinship, which appears similar to the familial intra-blood bonds – maternal and paternal ancestry. Irawati Karvé (1940), in her two-part article, reported the use of different terminologies concerning kinship in Maharashtra that are blood-related kin within the consanguineal family. Sub-sub-castes are not blood-related in the sense of direct descendants, but they pretend to have a common lineage that is not tied to one gotra, giving permission to marry within the specific sub-sub-castes as exogamous sections (Blunt, 1931: 49). Here the principle of endogamy betrays for the simple reason that the familiarity of marriages within the closed group is nurtured at the intimate sub-sub-caste level. All the above caste and sub-caste formations are generally endogamous outside gotras. The nature of gotras is exogamous. I have noticed that among Mahars of Maharashtra, sub-sub-castes play a role in marriage, while the same was reported in Mangs, the Deccan Brahmins and coastal Brahmins. Although a common religious identity does skirt the sub-sub-caste importance such as Buddhists or Hindu. In regular life in rural and urban areas, these issues do crop up.
16. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the affairs of the East India Company, Vol. ii (Revenue), Appendix 84, 1832, 331–332.

17. In his 5 months of ethnographic work, Dollard worked with the models proposed by W. Lloyd Warner that of caste–class analysis of two racial castes – white and black.

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Résumé

Dans cet article, nous analysons l'influence de l'introduction au XX^e siècle de la caste en tant que catégorie d'importance au plan théorique méritant d'être débattue au sein de la sociologie américaine et ailleurs. Deux figures principales ont contribué à animer le débat sur la caste et la race dans les annales de la sociologie américaine. Oliver Cromwell Cox a adopté une position de classe pour définir la caste, déconstruisant les hiérarchies établies dans les structures sociales et proposant un système racialisé pour mieux comprendre l'Amérique capitaliste post-esclavagiste. Représentant une autre position, Gerald Berreman estimait que les hiérarchies sociales sont co-déterminantes des relations et des divisions organisées dans une société de castes. Le débat sur les castes a néanmoins admis la plausibilité des castes par rapport au système de castes de l'Inde. Cependant, la catégorisation des castes s'est avérée être une application appropriée aux conditions des inégalités sociales. Gunnar Myrdal et d'autres chercheurs de renom ont contribué au débat. Une limitation dans leurs contributions théoriques sur le sujet a été de centrer le débat de manière inadéquate sur la réalité vécue et sur les aspects politiques des formulations de caste dans le mode de production socialiste postcolonial. La condition des intouchables, les sous-castes et les sous-sous-castes qui régissent le noyau du système de castes ainsi que les castes racialisées en Inde n'ont pas fait l'objet d'un examen sérieux ni n'ont été référencées en détail. Cet article cherche à combler ce manque en apportant une compréhension théorique du débat sur la caste, la race et la couleur dans les disciplines sociologiques et anthropologiques.

Mots-clés

caste en Amérique, castes raciales, Gerald Berreman, Gunnar Myrdal, Oliver C. Cox, sociologie américaine

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la influencia de la introducción en el siglo XX de las castas como una categoría de importancia académica que merece un debate en la sociología

estadounidense y más allá. Dos actores participaron en el discurso animado de la casta y la raza en los anales de la sociología estadounidense. Oliver Cromwell Cox adoptó una posición de clase para definir la casta, deshaciendo las jerarquías establecidas en las estructuras sociales. En cambio, abogó por un sistema racializado para comprender la América capitalista posterior a la esclavitud. Gerald Berreman representó un punto de vista diferente que defendía que las jerarquías sociales eran co-determinantes de las relaciones y divisiones organizadas en una sociedad de castas. El debate sobre las castas admitía la verosimilitud de las castas, pero contrastaba con el sistema de castas de la India. Sin embargo, se halló que la categorización de castas era una aplicación apropiada a las condiciones de las desigualdades sociales. Gunnar Myrdal y otros estudiosos de renombre contribuyeron al debate. La limitación que permaneció en sus contribuciones teóricas a la discusión fue un enfoque inadecuado sobre la realidad vivida y la política de las formulaciones de casta en el modo de producción socialista poscolonial. La intocabilidad, las subcastas y subsubcastas que regulan el núcleo del sistema de castas, así como las castas racializadas de la India no fueron objeto de un examen serio ni fueron referenciadas en detalle. Este artículo se dirige a tapar ese vacío proporcionando una comprensión teórica de la discusión sobre casta, raza y color en las disciplinas sociológicas y antropológicas.

Palabras clave

castas en Estados Unidos, castas raciales, Gerald Berreman, Gunnar Myrdal, Oliver C Cox, sociología estadounidense