CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dominant Group Status Threat
and the Precarity of the Highest Rung

In late 2015, two economists at Princeton University announced the startling revelation that the death rates of middle-aged white Americans, especially less-educated white Americans at midlife, had risen for the first time since 1950. The perplexing results of this study on mortality rates in the United States sounded alarms on the front pages of newspapers and at the top of news feeds across the nation.

The surge in early deaths among middle-aged white people went counter to the trends of every other ethnic group in America. Even historically marginalized black and Latino Americans had seen their mortality rates fall during the time period studied, from 1998 to 2013. The rise in the white death rate was at odds with prevailing trends in the rest of the Western world.

Americans had enjoyed increasing longevity the previous century, with each succeeding generation, due to healthier lifestyles and advancements in medicine. But starting just before the turn of the twenty-first century, the death rates among middle-aged white Americans, ages forty-five to fifty-four, began to rise, as the least educated, in particular, succumbed to suicide, drug overdoses, and liver disease from alcohol abuse, according to the authors of the seminal study, Anne Case and the Nobel laureate Angus Deaton. These “deaths of despair,” as the economists called them, accounted for the loss of some half a million white Americans during
that period, more than the number of American soldiers who died during World War II. These are people who might still be alive had this group kept to previous generational trends.

"These are deaths that do not have to happen," Case said at a conference on inequality. "These are people who are taking their lives, either slowly or quickly."

The worsening numbers were "persistent and large enough" to drive up white mortality rates overall and to outweigh the gains in longevity from advances in the treatment of cancer and heart disease. The turnabout reversed "decades of progress in mortality and was unique to the United States," Case and Deaton wrote. "No other rich country saw a similar turnaround."

For this group of Americans, mortality rates rose at a time when rates in other Western countries had not merely dipped but had plummeted. The rate for middle-aged white Americans rose from about 375 per 100,000 people in the late 1990s to about 415 per 100,000 in 2013, as against a fall in the United Kingdom, for example, from about 330 per 100,000 to 260 per 100,000 over the same period. A graphic of the mortality rates for leading Western nations shows an upward line for the death rates of middle-aged white Americans against the plunging lines for their counterparts in fellow Western countries.

What could account for the worsening prospects of this group of Americans, unique in the Western world and singular even in the United States?

The authors noted that, since the 1970s, real wages had stagnated for blue-collar workers, leading to economic insecurity and to a generation less well off than previous ones. But they acknowledged that similar stagnation had occurred in other Western countries. They noted that comparable Western countries had a more generous safety net that could offer protections not available in the United States. Yet white Americans would not be the only group affected by wage stagnation and a thin safety net. Blue-collar workers of other backgrounds would be equally at risk from the uncertainties of the economy, if not more so. Black death rates
have been historically higher than those of other groups, but even their mortality rates were falling, year by year. It was white Americans at midlife who were dying of despair in rising numbers.

In caste terms, these are the least well off, most precariously situated members of the dominant caste in America. For generations, they could take for granted their inherited rank in the hierarchy and the benefits that accrued from it.

We may underestimate, though, the aftershocks of a shift in demographics, the erosion of labor unions, the perceived loss of status, the fears about their place in the world, and resentment that the kind of security their fathers could rely upon might now be waning in what were supposed to be the best years of their lives. Rising immigration from across the Pacific and the Rio Grande and the ascendance of a black man as president made for an inversion of the world as many had known it, and some of them might have been more susceptible to the calls to “take our country back” after 2008 and to “make America great again” in 2016.

In America, political scientists have given this malaise of insecurities a name: dominant group status threat. This phenomenon “is not the usual form of prejudice or stereotyping that involves looking down on outgroups who are perceived to be inferior,” writes Diana Mutz, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania. “Instead, it is born of a sense that the outgroup is doing too well and thus, is a viable threat to one’s own dominant group status.”

The victims of these deaths of despair are in the same category of people whom, centuries ago, the colonial elites elevated as they created the caste system. The planters bestowed higher status on European yeomen and those of the lower classes to create a new American category known as white. In earlier times, even those who owned no slaves, wrote the white southern author W. J. Cash, clung to the “dear treasure of his superiority as a white man, which had been conferred on him by slavery; and so was determined to keep the black man in chains.”

By the middle of the twentieth century, the white working-class
American, wrote the white southern author Lillian Smith, "has not only been neglected and exploited, he has been fed little except the scraps of 'skin color' and 'white supremacy' as spiritual nourishment."

Working-class whites, the preeminent social economist Gunnar Myrdal wrote, "need the demarcations of caste more than upper class whites. They are the people likely to stress aggressively that no Negro can ever attain the status of even the lowest white."

In a psychic way, the people dying of despair could be said to be dying of the end of an illusion, an awakening to the holes in an article of faith that an inherited, unspoken superiority, a natural deservedness over subordinated castes, would assure their place in the hierarchy. They had relied on this illusion, perhaps beyond the realm of consciousness and perhaps needed it more than any other group in a forbiddingly competitive society "in which downward social mobility was a constant fear," the historian David Roediger wrote. "One might lose everything, but not whiteness."

In the midst of the Great Depression, the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois observed that working-class white Americans had bought into the compensation of a "public and psychological wage," as he put it. "They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white." They had accepted the rough uncertainties of laboring class life in exchange for the caste system's guarantee that, no matter what befell them, they would never be on the very bottom.

The American caste system, which co-opted this class of white workers nearly from the start, "drove such a wedge between black and white workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests" who are "kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interests," Du Bois wrote.

These insecurities extend back for centuries. A Virginia slaveholder remarked in 1832 that poor whites had "little but their complexion to console them for being born into a higher caste." When a hierarchy is built around the needs of the group to which
one happens to have been born, it can distort the perceptions of one’s place in the world. It can create an illusion that one is innately superior to others if only because it has been reinforced so often that it becomes accepted as subconscious truth.

"Nobody could take away from you this whiteness that made you and your way of life ‘superior,’” Lillian Smith wrote. “They could take your house, your job, your fun; they could steal your wages, keep you from acquiring knowledge; they could tax your vote or cheat you out of it: they could by arousing your anxieties make you impotent, but they could not strip your white skin off of you. It became the poor white’s most precious possession, a ‘charm’ staving off utter dissolution.”

Given that the hierarchy was designed for the benefit of the caste that created it, “the basic restrictions upon marriage, occupation and public gatherings separate the two groups into two self-perpetuating castes, in such a way that the white group is assured the higher privileges and fuller opportunities,” wrote the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis of the bipolar caste system exemplified by the Jim Crow South. This affords the dominant caste “a tremendous gain in psychological security . . . as a result of their categorically defined superiority of status.”

Things began to change in the 1960s when civil rights legislation opened labor markets to women of all races, to immigrants from beyond Europe, and to African-Americans whose life-and-death protests helped unlock doors for all of these groups. New people flooded the labor pool at the precise moment that manufacturing was on the decline, and every worker now faced greater competition.

“In the span of a few cruel years,” wrote the New York Times columnist Russell Baker in the 1960s, of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, “he has seen his comfortable position as the ‘in’ man of American society become a social liability as the outcasts and the exploited have presented their due bills on their conscience.”

Some people from the groups that were said to be inherently inferior managed to make it into the mainstream, a few rising to
the level of people in the dominant caste, one of them, in 2008, rising to the highest station in the land. This left some white working-class Americans in particular, those with the least education and the material security that it can confer, to face the question of whether the commodity that they could take for granted—their skin and ascribed race—might be losing value.

There had always been a subordinate caste, and everyone knew who the subordinate caste was and had positioned themselves accordingly. “Always [the Negro] was something you had to prove you were better than,” Lillian Smith wrote of the white working-class dilemma, “and you couldn’t prove it, no, you couldn’t prove it.” The beliefs and assumptions had all contributed to a “collective madness—and it is that—which feeds on half-lies and quarter-truths and dread.”

Those in the dominant caste who found themselves lagging behind those seen as inherently inferior potentially faced an epic existential crisis. To stand on the same rung as those perceived to be of a lower caste is seen as lowering one’s status. In the zero-sum stakes of a caste system upheld by perceived scarcity, if a lower-caste person goes up a rung, an upper-caste person comes down. The elevation of others amounts to a demotion of oneself, thus equality feels like a demotion.

If the lower-caste person manages actually to rise above an upper-caste person, the natural human response from someone weaned on their caste’s inherent superiority is to perceive a threat to their existence, a heightened sense of unease, of displacement, of fear for their very survival. “If the things that I have believed are not true, then might I not be who I thought I was?” The disaffection is more than economic. The malaise is spiritual, psychological, emotional. Who are you if there is no one to be better than?

“It’s a great lie on which their identity has been built,” said Dr. Sushrut Jadhav, a prominent Indian psychiatrist, based in London, who specializes in the effects of caste on mental health.

Thus, a caste system makes a captive of everyone within it. Just as the assumptions of inferiority weigh on those assigned to the
bottom of the caste system, the assumptions of superiority can burden those at the top with unsustainable expectations of needing to be several rungs above, in charge at all times, at the center of things, to police those who might cut ahead of them, to resent the idea of undeserving lower castes jumping the line and getting in front of those born to lead.

"His whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste," wrote the Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar of the dominant caste. "Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost."

When people have lived with assumptions long enough, passed down through the generations as incontrovertible fact, they are accepted as the truths of physics, no longer needing even to be spoken. They are as true and as unremarkable as water flowing through rivers or the air that we breathe. In the original caste system of India, the abiding faith in the entitlement of birth became enmeshed in the mind of the upper caste and "hangs there to this day without any support," Ambedkar wrote, "for now it needs no prop but belief—like a weed on the surface of a pond."

The anxieties of the least secure in the dominant caste are not unlike those of a firstborn child expected to take over the family business. He may have neither the interest nor the specialized aptitude for it but feels duty-bound, pressured to take the reins, even though a younger sibling, say, a sister, is the one who was always good with numbers and has the temperament to run things but is not considered because of the family hierarchy of who goes first and who inherits what. This creates unsustainable expectations in a culture that proclaims to be egalitarian but was set up for certain people to dominate by birth.

Custom and law segregated the white working and middle classes for so long that most would not have been in a position to see firsthand the headwinds confronting disfavored Americans. The hand of government in the lives of white citizens has often been made invisible and has left distortions as to how each group got to where they are, allowing resentments and rivalries to fester. Many may not have realized that the New Deal reforms of the
1930s, like the Social Security Act of 1935 (providing old age insurance) and the Wagner Act (protecting workers from labor abuse), excluded the vast majority of black workers—farm laborers and domestics—at the urging of southern white politicians.

Further tipping the scales, the Federal Housing Administration was created to make homeownership easier for white families by guaranteeing mortgages in white neighborhoods while specifically excluding African-Americans who wished to buy homes. It did so by refusing to back mortgages in any neighborhood where black people lived, a practice known as redlining, and by encouraging or even requiring restrictive covenants that barred black citizens from buying homes in white neighborhoods.

Together, these and other government programs extended a safety net and a leg-up to the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of white Americans of today, while shutting out the foreparents of African-Americans from those same job protections and those same chances to earn or build wealth.

These government programs for the dominant caste were in force during the lifetimes of many current-day Americans. These programs did not open to African-Americans until the late 1960s, and then only after the protests for civil rights. The more recent forms of state-sanctioned discrimination, along with denying pay to enslaved people over the course of generations, has led to a wealth gap in which white families currently have ten times the wealth of their black counterparts. If you are not black and "if you or your parents were alive in the 1960s and got a mortgage," wrote Ben Mathis-Lilley in Slate, "you benefited directly and materially from discrimination."

The very machinery upon which many white Americans had the chance to build their lives and assets was forbidden to African-Americans who were still just a generation or two out of enslavement and the apartheid of Jim Crow, burdens so heavy and borne for so long that if they were to rise, they would have to work and save that much harder than their fellow Americans.

Rather than encouraging a greater understanding of how these
disparities came to be or a framework for compassion for fellow Americans, political discourse has usually reinforced prevailing stereotypes of a lazy, inferior group getting undeserved handouts, a scapegoating that makes the formal barriers all the more unjust and the resentments of white working-class citizens all the more tragic. The subordinate caste was shut out of “the trillions of dollars of wealth accumulated through the appreciation of housing assets secured by federally insured loans between 1932 and 1962,” a major source of current-day wealth, wrote the sociologist George Lipsitz. “Yet they find themselves portrayed as privileged beneficiaries of special preferences by the very people who profit from their exploitation and oppression.”

Once labor, housing, and schools finally began to open up to the subordinate caste, many working- and middle-class whites began to perceive themselves to be worse off, by comparison, and to report that they experienced more racism than African-Americans, unable to see the inequities that persist, often in their favor.

Unconscious Bias: A Mutation in the Software

Toward the end of the twentieth century, social scientists found new ways to measure what had transformed from overt racism to a slow boil of unspoken antagonisms that social scientists called unconscious bias. This was not the cross-burning, epithet-spewing biological racism of the pre-civil-rights era, but rather discriminatory behaviors based on subconscious prejudgments by people who professed and believed in equality.

By adulthood, researchers have found, most Americans have been exposed to a culture with enough negative messages about African-Americans and other marginalized groups that as much as 80 percent of white Americans hold unconscious bias against black Americans, bias so automatic that it kicks in before a person can process it, according to the Harvard sociologist David R. Wil-
liams. The messaging is so pervasive in American society that a third of black Americans hold anti-black bias against themselves.

"All racial ethnic minority groups are stereotyped more negatively than whites," Williams said. "Blacks are viewed the worst, then Latinos, who are viewed twice as negatively as Asians. There is a hierarchy of rank."

What kind of person is likely to carry this kind of unconscious bias? "This is a wonderful person," Williams said, "who has sympathy for the bad things that have happened in the past. But that person is still an American and has been fed the larger stereotypes of blacks that are deeply embedded in the culture of this society. So, despite holding no explicit racial prejudices, they nonetheless hold implicit bias that's deep in their subconscious. They have all these negative images of African-Americans so that when they meet an African-American, although self-consciously they are not prejudiced, the implicit biases nonetheless operate to shape their behavior. This discriminatory behavior is activated more quickly and effortlessly than conscious discrimination, more quickly than saying, 'I've decided to discriminate against this person.'"

"This is the frightening point," he said. "Because it's an automatic process, and it's an unconscious process, people who engage in this unthinking discrimination are not aware of it. They are not lying to you when they say, 'I didn't treat this person differently, and I treat everyone the same.' They mean it because, consciously, that is the way they see themselves. These implicit biases shape their behavior in ways they are not even aware of. The research suggests that about 70 to 80 percent of whites fall into this category."

These autonomic responses contribute to disparities in hiring, in housing, in education, and in medical treatment for the lowest-caste people compared to their dominant-caste counterparts and, as with other aspects of the caste system, often go against logic. For example, a pioneering study by the sociologist Devah Pager found that white felons applying for a job were more likely to get hired than African-Americans with no criminal record.
In the life-and-death world of medicine, African-Americans and other marginalized people are granted fewer procedures and poorer-quality care than whites across every therapeutic intervention, said Williams, who specializes in biases in public health. Of the sixty most common procedures reimbursed by Medicare, he said, “African-Americans receive fewer procedures than white patients even though they have a higher rate of illness.” The only procedures that African-Americans receive at higher rates than whites, Williams said, are shunts for renal disease, the removal of stomach tissue for ulcers, leg amputation, and the removal of testicles.

Bias does not contain the damage it inflicts to one group, however. One tragic form of unconscious bias has had the unintended effect of unwittingly protecting the disfavored castes of African-Americans and Latinos from a scourge that has brought untold heartache to many white Americans. Empirical studies have found that physicians often disregard the reports of pain from black and Latino patients, wrongly believing that African-Americans in particular have higher pain thresholds. This has led physicians to under-treat or to deny pain medication to black patients—even those with metastatic cancer—while readily prescribing medication to white patients reporting equivalent levels of pain. The disparity is so severe that African-Americans as a group receive pain medication at levels beneath the thresholds established by the World Health Organization.

Just as pollutants don’t confine themselves to the air around a factory, this single caste inequity has spared no one. The under-treatment of the subordinate caste leaves them to suffer needlessly, and the overtreatment of the dominant caste may have contributed to the rising mortality rate for white Americans who become addicted to opioids.

Worse still, society was less prepared for the opioid crisis than it might have been had it not missed the chance to build a comprehensive framework for dealing with substance abuse in the 1990s, when it was the subordinate caste that was in need of help. The
crack cocaine epidemic of that era was dismissed as an urban crime problem rather than addressed as a social and health crisis, considered a black problem rather than a human one. The response was to criminalize addiction when the abusers were subordinate caste, which swelled the rate of mass incarceration, broke up families, and left the country ill-equipped for the incoming tragedy of opioid addiction. Caste assumptions created devastation on both sides of the caste divide and have made for a less generous society overall.

Exclusion costs lives, up and down the hierarchy. The physician Jonathan M. Metzl, who has conducted research into the health of disaffected whites in middle America, has measured the life-and-death consequences of state decisions to withhold benefits seen as helping presumably undeserving minority groups. In the state of Tennessee, for example, he found that restrictive health policies may have cost the lives of as many as 4,599 African-Americans between 2011 and 2015, but also cost the lives of as many as 12,013 white Tennesseans, more than double the loss sustained by black residents.

In his book *Dying of Whiteness*, Metzl told of the case of a forty-one-year-old white taxi driver who was suffering from an inflamed liver that threatened the man’s life. Because the Tennessee legislature had neither taken up the Affordable Care Act nor expanded Medicaid coverage, the man was not able to get the expensive, lifesaving treatment that would have been available to him had he lived just across the border in Kentucky. As he approached death, he stood by the conviction that he did not want the government involved.

“No way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens,” the man told Metzl. “Ain’t no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it. I would rather die.”

And sadly, so he would.