PILLAR NUMBER FIVE

Occupational Hierarchy:
The Jatis and the Mudsill

When a house is being built, the single most important piece of the framework is the first wood beam hammered into place to anchor the foundation. That piece is called the mudsill, the sill plate that runs along the base of a house and bears the weight of the entire structure above it. The studs and subfloors, the ceilings and windows, the doors and roofing, all the components that make it a house, are built on top of the mudsill. In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.

A southern politician declared this central doctrine from the floor of the U.S. Senate in March 1858. “In all social systems, there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life,” Sen. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina told his fellow senators. “That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have. . . . It constitutes the very mud-sill of society.”

He exulted in the cunning of the South, which, he said, had “found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand. . . . Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slaves.”

Hammond owned several plantations and more than three
hundred souls, having acquired this fortune by marrying the plain and callow young daughter of a wealthy landowner in South Carolina. He rose to become governor of the state and a leading figure in the antebellum South. Well before making this speech, he had established himself as one of the more repugnant of men ever to rise to the Senate, one scholar calling him “nothing less than a monster.” He is known to have repeatedly raped at least two of the women he enslaved, one of them believed to have been his daughter by another enslaved woman.

His political career was nearly derailed when it became public that he had sexually abused his four young nieces, their lives so ruined that none of them ever married after reaching adulthood. In his diary, he spoke blithely of the nieces, blaming them for the “intimacies.” For these and other things, his wife left him, taking their children with her, only to later return. He rebounded from these malefactions to be elected to the U.S. Senate.

But he is best known for the speech that distilled the hierarchy of the South, which spread in spirit to the rest of the country, into a structure built on a mudsill. In so doing, he defined the fifth pillar of caste, the division of labor based on one’s place in the hierarchy. Therein, he identified the economic purpose of a hierarchy to begin with, that is, to ensure that the tasks necessary for a society to function get handled whether or not people wish to do them, in this case, by being born to the disfavored sill plate.

In the Indian caste system, an infinitely more elaborate hierarchy, the subcaste, or jati, to which a person was born established the occupation their family fulfilled, from cleaners of latrines to priests in the temples. Those born to families who collected refuse or tanned the hides of animals or handled the dead were seen as the most polluted and lowest in the hierarchy, untouchable due to the dreaded and thankless though necessary task they were presumably born to fulfill.

Similarly, African-Americans, throughout most of their time in this land, were relegated to the dirtiest, most demeaning and least desirable jobs by definition. After enslavement and well into the
twentieth century, they were primarily restricted to the role of sharecroppers and servants—domestics, lawn boys, chauffeurs, and janitors. The most that those who managed to get an education could hope for was to teach, minister to, attend to the health needs of, or bury other subordinate-caste people.

"There is severe occupational deprivation in each country," wrote the scholars Sidney Verba, Bashiruddin Ahmed, and Anil Bhatt in a 1971 comparative study of India and the United States. "A deprivation—at least in terms of level—of roughly similar magnitude."

The state of South Carolina, right after the Civil War, explicitly prohibited black people from performing any labor other than farm or domestic work, setting their place in the caste system. The legislature decreed that "no person of color shall pursue or practice the art, trade or business of an artisan, mechanic or shopkeeper, or any other trade, employment or business (besides that of husbandry, or that of a servant under contract for labor) on his own account and for his own benefit until he shall have obtained a license from the judge of the district court, which license shall be good for one year only." The license was set at an intentionally prohibitive cost of $100 a year, the equivalent of $1,500 in 2018. This was a fee not required of the dominant caste, whose members, having not been enslaved for a quarter millennium, would have been in better position to afford.

The law went nominally out of effect during the decade known as Reconstruction, when the North took control of the former Confederacy, but it returned in spirit and custom after the North retreated and the former enslavers took power again, ready to avenge their defeat in the Civil War. In North Carolina, during slavery and into the era of sharecropping, people in the lowest caste were forbidden to sell or trade goods of any kind or be subject to thirty-nine lashes. This blocked the main route to earning money from their own farm labors and forced them into economic dependence on the dominant caste.

"The caste order that followed slavery defined the Negroes as
workers and servants of the whites," wrote the scholar Edward Reuter. "The range of occupations was narrow, and many of those outside the orbit of common labor were closed to the Negroes."

The South foreclosed on them any route to a station higher than that assigned them. "Anything that causes the negro to aspire above the plow handle, the cook pot, in a word the functions of a servant," Gov. James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said, "will be the worst thing on earth for the negro. God Almighty designed him for a menial. He is fit for nothing else."

Those who managed to go north after the Civil War and in the bigger waves of the Great Migration, starting in World War I, found that they could escape the South but not their caste. They entered the North at the bottom, beneath southern and eastern Europeans who might not yet have learned English but who were permitted into unions and into better-served neighborhoods that barred black citizens whose labor had cleared the wilderness and built the country's wealth. While there was no federal law restricting people to certain occupations on the basis of race, statutes in the South and custom in the North kept lower-caste people in their place. Northern industries often hired African-Americans only as strikebreakers, and unions blocked them from entire trades reserved for whites, such as pipe fitters or plumbers. City inspectors would refuse to sign off on the work of black electricians. A factory in Milwaukee turned away black men seeking jobs as they walked toward the front gate. In New York and Philadelphia, black people were long denied licenses merely to drive carts.

"Every avenue for improvement was closed against him," wrote William A. Sinclair, author of a history of slavery and its aftermath, of the fate of the subordinate-caste man.

There were exceptions—those select enslaved people, often the children of slaveholders, who were permitted to serve as carpenters or blacks smiths or in other trades as would be required on large plantations like Thomas Jefferson's at Monticello.

Even in India, where there are thousands of castes within castes, within the four main varnas, "no one occupation has but one caste
assigned to it,” wrote the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis. “While in theory caste demands occupational specialization, in practice even the most ideally organized of the several castes, the Brahmans, have a great variety of occupations.” The French anthropologist and philosopher Célestin Bouglé wrote that, in the Indian caste system, “one can distinguish six merchant castes, three of scribes, forty of peasants, twenty-four of journeymen, nine of shepherds and hunters, fourteen of fishermen and sailors, twelve of various kinds of artisans, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths and potters, thirteen of weavers, thirteen of distillers, eleven of house servants.”

Thus, the caste lines in America may have at one time been even starker than those in India. In 1890, “85 percent of black men and 96 percent of black women were employed in just two occupational categories,” wrote the sociologist Stephen Steinberg, “agriculture and domestic or personal service.” Forty years later, as the Depression set in and as African-Americans moved to northern cities, the percentages of black people at the bottom of the labor hierarchy remained the same, though, by then, nearly half of black men were doing manual labor that called merely for a strong back. Only 5 percent were listed as white-collar workers—many of them ministers, teachers, and small business owners who catered to other black people.

North and south, the status of African-Americans was so well understood that people in the dominant caste were loath to perform duties they perceived as beneath their station. A British tourist in the 1810s noted that white Americans well knew which tasks were seen as befitting only black people. White paupers in Ohio, “refused to carry water for their own use,” wrote the historian David R. Roediger, “for fear of being considered ‘like slaves.’”

The historic association between menial labor and blackness served to further entrap black people in a circle of subservience in the American mind. They were punished for being in the condition that they were forced to endure. And the image of servitude shadowed them into freedom.
As the caste system shape-shifted in the twentieth century, the dominant caste found ever more elaborate ways to enforce occupational hierarchy. "If white and colored persons are employed together," wrote the historian Bertram Doyle in the 1930s, "they do not engage in the same tasks, generally, and certainly not as equals. . . . Negroes are seldom, if ever, put into authority over white persons. Moreover, the Negro expects to remain in the lower ranks; rising, if at all, only over other Negroes." No matter how well he does his job, Doyle wrote, "he cannot often hope for promotion."

Your place was preordained before you were born. "A Negro may become a locomotive fireman," Doyle wrote, "but never an engineer."

Thus, caste did not mean merely doing a certain kind of labor; it meant performing a dominant or subservient role. "There must be, then, a division of labor where the two races are employed, and menial labor is commonly supposed to be the division assigned to Negroes," Doyle wrote, "and he must look and act the part."

A black man in the 1930s was on his way to pay a visit to a young woman he fancied, which occasioned him to go into the town square. There, some white men approached him and "forced him to procure overalls, saying he was 'too dressed up for a week-day.'"

Slavery set the artificial parameters for the roles each caste was to perform, and the only job beyond the plow or the kitchen that the caste system openly encouraged of the lowest caste was that of entertainment, which was its own form of servitude in that world. It was in keeping with caste notions of their performing for the pleasure of the dominant caste. It affirmed the stereotypes of innate black physicality, of an earthiness based on animal instinct rather than human creativity and it presented no threat to dominant-caste supremacy in leadership and intellect.

Making enslaved people perform on command also reinforced their subjugation. They were made to sing despite their exhaus-
tion or the agonies from a recent flogging or risk further punishment. Forced good cheer became a weapon of submission to assuage the guilt of the dominant caste and further humiliate the enslaved. If they were in chains and happy, how could anyone say that they were being mistreated? Merriment, even if extracted from a whip, was seen as essential to confirm that the caste structure was sound, that all was well, that everyone accepted, even embraced their station in the hierarchy. They were thus forced to cosign on their own degradation, to sing and dance even as they were being separated from spouses or children or parents at auction. “This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy,” wrote William Wells Brown, a speculator’s assistant before the Civil War, whose job it was to get the human merchandise into sellable condition. “I have often set them to dancing,” he said, “when their cheeks were wet with tears.”

African-Americans would later convert the performance role that they were forced to occupy—and the talent they built from it—into prominence in entertainment and in American culture disproportionate to their numbers. Since the early twentieth century, the wealthiest African-Americans—from Louis Armstrong to Muhammad Ali—have traditionally been entertainers and athletes. Even now, in a 2020 ranking of the richest African-Americans, seventeen of the top twenty—from Oprah Winfrey to Jay-Z to Michael Jordan—made their wealth as innovators, and then moguls, in the entertainment industry or in sports.

Historically, this group would come to dominate the realm carved out for them, often celebrated unless they went head to head against an upper-caste person, as did the black boxer Jack Johnson when he unexpectedly knocked out James Jeffries in 1910. The writer Jack London had coaxed Jeffries out of retirement to fight Johnson in an era of virulent race hatred, and the press stoked passions by calling Jeffries “the Great White Hope.” Jeffries’s loss on that Fourth of July was an affront to white supremacy, and triggered riots across the country, north and south, including eleven separate ones in New York City, where whites set fire to black
neighborhoods and tried to lynch two black men over the defeat. The message was that, even in an arena into which the lowest caste had been permitted, they were to know and remain in their place.

For centuries, enslaved people had been ordered to perform at the whim of the master, either to be mocked in the master’s parlor games or to play music for their balls, in addition to their hard labors in the field. “Menial and comic roles were the chief ones allotted to Negroes in their relationships with white people,” wrote the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis of slavery-based caste relations that worked their way into American culture.

The caste system took comfort in black caricature as it upheld the mythology of a simple, court jester race whose jolly natures shielded them from any true suffering. The images soothed the conscience and justified atrocities. And thus minstrelsy, in which white actors put burnt cork on their faces and mocked the subordinate caste, became a popular entertainment as the Jim Crow regime hardened after slavery ended. Whites continued the practice at fraternity parties and talent shows and Halloween festivities well into the twenty-first century.

At the same time, black entertainers have long been rewarded and often restricted to roles that adhere to caste stereotype. The first African-American to win an Academy Award, Hattie McDaniel, was commended for her role as Mammy, a solicitous and obscenely desexed counterpoint to Scarlett O’Hara, the feminine ideal, in the 1939 film Gone with the Wind. The Mammy character was more devoted to her white family than to her own, willing to fight black soldiers to protect her white enslaver.

That trope became a comforting staple in film portrayals of slavery, but it was an ahistorical figment of caste imagination. Under slavery, most black women were thin, gaunt even, due to the meager rations provided them, and few worked inside a house, as they were considered more valuable in the field. Yet the rotund and cheerful slave or maidservant was what the dominant
caste preferred to see, and McDaniels and other black actresses of the era found that those were the only roles they could get. Because many of these women had been raised in the North or the West, they knew little of the southern Negro vernacular that scripts called for and had to learn how to speak in the exaggerated, at times farcical, way that Hollywood directors imagined that black people talked.

This mainstream derision belies the serious history of arbitrary abuse of African-Americans under slavery when their degradation was entertainment for the dominant caste. In one case, two planters in South Carolina were dining together at one of their plantations. The two were passing the time, discussing their slaves and debating whether the slaves had the capacity for genuine religious faith. The visiting planter said he didn't much believe they did.

The planter who was hosting begged to differ.

"I have a slave who I believe would rather die than deny his Saviour," he said.

The guest ridiculed the host and challenged him to prove it. So the host summoned an enslaved man of his and ordered him to deny his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The enslaved man affirmed his faith in Jesus and pleaded to be excused. The master, seeking to drive home his point to the fellow slaveowner, kept asking the man to deny Jesus, and the man, as expected, kept declaring his faith. The host then whipped the enslaved man, now for disobedience, and continued to whip him, the whipcord cutting to bone. The enslaved man of faith "died in consequence of this severe infliction."

Similarly, soldiers of the Third Reich used weakened and malnourished Jewish prisoners for entertainment. An SS squad leader, who oversaw the construction of the firing range at Sachsenhausen, forced prisoners to jump and turn like dancing bears around a shovel for his amusement. One of them refused to dance and, for this, the SS squad leader took the shovel and beat him to death with it.
Every act, every gesture, was calculated for the purpose of reminding the subordinate caste, in these otherwise unrelated caste systems, of the dominant caste's total reign over their very being. The upper caste, wrote the nineteenth-century author William Goodell, made "the claim of absolute proprietorship in the human soul itself."
Dehumanization and Stigma

Dehumanization is a standard component in the manufacture of an out-group against which to pit an in-group, and it is a monumental task. It is a war against truth, against what the eye can see and what the heart could feel if allowed to do so on its own.

To dehumanize another human being is not merely to declare that someone is not human, and it does not happen by accident. It is a process, a programming. It takes energy and reinforcement to deny what is self-evident in another member of one’s own species.

It is harder to dehumanize a single person standing in front of you, wiping away tears at the loss of a loved one, just as you would, or wincing in pain from a fall as you would, laughing at an unexpected double entendre as you might. It is harder to dehumanize a single individual that you have gotten the chance to know. Which is why people and groups who seek power and division do not bother with dehumanizing an individual. Better to attach a stigma, a taint of pollution to an entire group.

Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. Dehumanize the group, and you have quarantined them from the masses you choose to elevate and have programmed everyone, even some of the targets of dehumanization, to no longer believe what their eyes can see, to no longer trust their own thoughts. Dehumanization distances not
only the out-group from the in-group, but those in the in-group from their own humanity. It makes slaves to groupthink of everyone in the hierarchy. A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.

Both Nazi Germany and the United States reduced their out-groups, Jews and African-Americans, respectively, to an undifferentiated mass of nameless, faceless scapegoats, the shock absorbers of the collective fears and setbacks of each nation. Germany blamed Jews for the loss of World War I, for the shame and economic straits that befell the country after its defeat, and the United States blamed African-Americans for many of its social ills. In both cases, individuals were lumped together for sharing a single, stigmatizing trait, made indistinct and indistinguishable in preparation for the exploitation and atrocities that would be inflicted upon them. Individuals were no longer individuals. Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded the dominant caste. Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatized.

We are sorrowfully aware of the monstrously swift murder of 6 million Jews and 5 million others during the Holocaust. What we may not be as familiar with are the circumstances leading up to that horror and the millions who suffered in the labor camps of the Third Reich, the process of dehumanization before any of those atrocities could be conducted and the interconnectedness not just of humanity but of evil within it.

Held hostage in labor camps in different centuries and an ocean apart, both Jews and African-Americans were subjected to a program of purposeful dehumanization. Upon their arrival at the concentration camps, Jews were stripped of the clothing and accoutrements of their former lives, of everything they had owned. Their heads were shaved, their distinguishing features of sideburns or mustaches or the crowns of lush hair, were deleted from them. They were no longer individuals, they were no longer personalities to consider, to engage with, to take into account.
During the morning and evening roll calls, they were forced to stand sometimes for hours into the night as the SS officers counted the thousands of them to check for any escapees. They stood in the freezing cold or summer heat in the same striped uniforms, with the same shorn heads, same sunken cheeks. They became a single mass of self-same bodies, purposely easier for SS officers to distance themselves from, to feel no human connection with. Loving fathers, headstrong nephews, beloved physicians, dedicated watchmakers, rabbis, and piano tuners, all merged into a single mass of undifferentiated bodies that were no longer seen as humans deserving of empathy but as objects over whom they could exert total control and do whatever they wanted to. They were no longer people, they were numbers, a means to an end.

Upon their arrival at the auction blocks and labor camps of the American South, Africans were stripped of their given names and forced to respond to new ones, as would a dog to a new owner, often mocking names like Caesar or Samson or Dred. They were stripped of their past lives and identities as Yoruba or Asante or Igbo, as the son of a fisherman, nephew of the village priest, or daughter of a midwife. Decades afterward, Jews were stripped of their given and surnames and forced to memorize the prison numbers assigned them in the concentration camps. Millennia ago, the Untouchables of India were assigned surnames that identified them by the lowly work they performed, forcing them to announce their degradation every time they introduced themselves, while the Brahmins, many quite literally, carried the names of the gods.

In the two more modern caste systems, at labor camps in central and eastern Europe and in the American South, well-fed captors forced their hostages to do the heaviest work of inhuman exertion, while withholding food from those whose labors enriched the captors, providing barely enough to sustain the human metabolism, the bare minimum for human subsistence. The Nazis approached human deprivation as a science. They calculated the
number of calories required for a certain task, say, chopping down trees and digging up stumps, and fed those laborers one or two hundred calories fewer as a cost savings and to keep them too weak to fight back as they slowly starved to death.

Southern planters provided their African captives, who were doing the hardest labor in the hierarchy, the least nutrients of anyone on the plantation. Both groups were rarely allowed protein, restricted to feed rather than food, some taunted with the extravagance of their captors’ multi-course feasts.

They were under the complete control and at the whim of their captors who took every chance to reassert their debasement. Jews were given prison uniforms of coarse fabric in sizes that were purposely too big or too small. Enslaved African-Americans were allotted garments of coarse gray cloth, a cross between an “undergarment and an ordinary potato bag,” that was made “without regard to the size of the particular individual to whom it was allotted, like penitentiary uniforms.”

Beyond all of this, the point of a dehumanization campaign was the forced surrender of the target’s own humanity, a karmic theft beyond accounting. Whatever was considered a natural human reaction was disallowed for the subordinate caste. During the era of enslavement, they were forbidden to cry as their children were carried off, forced to sing as a wife or husband was sold away, never again to look into their eyes or hear their voice for as long as the two might live.

They were punished for the very responses a human being would be expected to have in the circumstances forced upon them. Whatever humanity shone through them was an affront to what the dominant caste kept telling itself. They were punished for being the humans that they could not help but be.

In India, Dalits, suffering the deprivations of their lowly status, were nonetheless beaten to death if ever they stole food for the sustenance denied them. As with African-Americans during the time of enslavement, it was a crime for Dalits to learn to read and write, “punishable by cutting off their tongue or by pouring mol-
ten lead into the ear of the offender,” wrote V. T. Rajshekar, editor of Dalit Voice.

In the United States, African-Americans, denied pay for their labors during slavery and barely paid afterward in the twentieth century, were whipped or lynched for stealing food, for the accusation of stealing seventy-five cents, for trying to stand up for themselves or appearing to question a person in the dominant caste. In Nazi labor camps, one of the many cruel details a prisoner could be assigned was to work in the bakery. There, day in and day out, starving captives, forced to subsist on rations of watery nettle or beet soup, kneaded and baked the breads and pastries for their SS tormenters. They were surrounded by the scent of fresh-rising dough but risked a beating or worse if caught taking a crust of bread.

In America, slave auctions became public showcases for the dehumanization project of caste-making. As the most valuable liquid assets in the land, combined, worth more than land itself, enslaved people were ordered to put on a cheery face to bring a higher profit to the dominant-caste sellers who were breaking up their families. Women were forced to disrobe before the crowd, to submit to hours of physical probing by roughhousing men who examined their teeth, their hands, or whatever other parts of their bodies the potential bidders decided to inspect. Their bodies did not belong to them but to the dominant caste to do whatever it wished and however it wished to do it. At auction, they were to answer any question put to them with “a smiling, cheerful countenance” or be given thirty lashes for not selling themselves well enough to the seller’s satisfaction.

“When spoken to, they must reply quickly and with a smile on their lips,” recalled John Brown, a survivor of slavery, who was sold away from his own mother and subjected to these scenes many times thereafter. “Here may be seen husbands separated from their wives, only by the width of the room, and children from their parents, one or both, witnessing the driving of the bargain that is to tear them asunder for ever, yet not a word of lamentation
or anguish must escape from them; nor when the deed is consummated, dare they bid one another good-bye, or take one last embrace."

In the United States, there developed two parallel worlds existing on the same plane with flagrant double standards to emphasize the purposeful injustices built into the system. Presaging the disparities that led to mass incarceration in our era, the abolitionist minister William Goodell observed the quandary of black people in antebellum America. "He is accounted criminal for acts which are deemed innocent in others," Goodell wrote in 1853, "punished with a severity from which all others are exempted. He is under the control of the law, though unprotected by the law, and can know law only as an enemy."

In Virginia, there were seventy-one offenses that carried the death penalty for enslaved people but only imprisonment when committed by whites, such as stealing a horse or setting fire to bales of grain. Something as ordinary to most humans as a father helping a son with his lessons was prohibited. A black father in Georgia could "be flogged for teaching his own child" to read. Free black people were forbidden to carry firearms, testify against a white person, or raise a hand against one even in self-defense.

"Richmond required that Negroes and mulattoes must step aside when whites passed by, and barred them from riding in carriages except in the capacity of menials," the historian Kenneth Stampp wrote. "Charleston slaves could not swear, smoke, walk with a cane, assemble at military parades, or make joyful demonstrations."

Just as enslaved and malnourished Africans had to drain the swamps, chop down the trees, clear the land to build the plantations and infrastructure of the South, the starving captives of the Third Reich had to drain the swamps, chop down the trees, dig up
the tree roots, carry the logs to build the infrastructure of their torment. They worked the clay pits and quarries to make bricks for the Reich. Under both regimes, the hostages built the walls that would imprison them and often died as they did so.

Each day during the early years of Nazi expansion, some two thousand prisoners were marched through the village of Oranienburg, north of Berlin, over the canal bridge, from the concentration camp to the clay pits, and would often return that evening with a cart filled with the people who had died of exhaustion or had been killed that day.

At the depths of their dehumanization, both Jews and African-Americans were subjected to gruesome medical experimentation at the hands of dominant-caste physicians. In addition to the horrifying torture of twins, German scientists and SS doctors conducted more than two dozen types of experiments on Jews and others they held captive, such as infecting their victims with mustard gas and testing the outer limits of hypothermia.

In the United States, from slavery well into the twentieth century, doctors used African-Americans as a supply chain for experimentation, as subjects deprived of either consent or anesthesia. Scientists injected plutonium into them, purposely let diseases like syphilis go untreated to observe the effects, perfected the typhoid vaccine on their bodies, and subjected them to whatever agonizing experiments came to the doctors’ minds.

These amounted to unchecked assaults on human beings. One plantation doctor, according to the medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington in her groundbreaking book *Medical Apartheid,* made incisions into a black baby’s head to test a theory for curing seizures. The doctor opened the baby’s skull with cobbler’s tools, puncturing the scalp, as he would later report, “with the point of a crooked awl.”

That doctor, James Marion Sims, would later be heralded as the
founder of gynecology. He came to his discoveries by acquiring enslaved women in Alabama and conducting savage surgeries that often ended in disfigurement or death. He refused to administer anesthesia, saying vaginal surgery on them was “not painful enough to justify the trouble.” Instead, he administered morphine only after surgery, noting that it “relieves the scalding of the urine,” and, as Washington writes, “weakened the will to resist repeated procedures.”

A Louisiana surgeon perfected the cesarean section by experimenting on the enslaved women he had access to in the 1830s. Others later learned how to remove ovaries and bladder stones. They performed these slave cabin experiments in search of breakthroughs for their white patients who would one day undergo surgery in hospitals and under the available anesthesia.

Their total control over black bodies gave them unfettered access to the anatomy of live subjects that would otherwise be closed to them. Sims, for example, would force a woman to disrobe and get on her knees on a table. He would then allow other doctors to take turns with the speculum to force her open, and invite leading men in town and apprentices in to see for themselves. He later wrote, “I saw everything as no man had seen before.”

We would all like to believe that we would resist the impulse to inflict such horror on fellow members of our own species, and some of us very likely would. But not as many as we might like to believe.

In a famous though controversial 1963 study of people’s threshold for violence when ordered to inflict it, college students were told to administer electric shocks to a person in an adjoining room. The people “receiving” the shocks were unharmed but yelled out and banged on the walls as the intensity of the shocks increased. The conductor of the study, the psychologist Stanley Milgram, found that a majority of participants, two out of three, “could be induced to deliver the maximal voltage to an innocent suffering
subject," wrote the scholar David Livingstone Smith, who specializes in the study of dehumanization.

In a similar experiment, conducted at Stanford University in 1975, the participants did not have to be ordered to deliver the shocks. They needed only to overhear a single negative comment about the students facing potential punishment. The participants were led to believe that students from another college were arriving for a joint project. Some participants overheard the experimenters, presumably by accident, make neutral or humanizing comments about the visiting students (that they seemed "nice"). Other participants heard dehumanizing comments (that they seemed like "animals"). Participants gave the dehumanized people twice the punishment of the humanized ones and significantly more than those they knew absolutely nothing about. The participants were willing to go to maximum intensity on the dehumanized group.

"Dehumanization is a joint creation of biology, culture and the architecture of the human mind," Smith wrote. "The human story is filled with pain and tragedy, but among the horrors that we have perpetrated on one another, the persecution and attempted extermination of the Jewish people, the brutal enslavement of Africans, and the destruction of Native American civilizations in many respects are unparalleled."

In America, a culture of cruelty crept into the minds, made violence and mockery seem mundane and amusing, built as it was into the games of chance at carnivals and county fairs well into the twentieth century. These things built up the immune system against empathy. There was an attraction called the "Coon Dip," in which fairgoers hurled "projectiles at live African Americans." There was the "Bean-em," in which children flung beanbags at grotesquely caricatured black faces, whose images alone taught the lesson of caste without a word needing to be spoken.

And enthusiasts lined up to try their luck at the "Son of Ham" shows at Coney Island or Kansas City or out in California, "in
which white men paid for the pleasure of hurling baseballs at the head of a black man,” Smith wrote.

A certain kind of violence was part of an unspoken curriculum for generations of children in the dominant caste. “White culture desensitized children to racial violence,” wrote the historian Kristina DuRocher, “so they could perpetuate it themselves one day.”
PILLAR NUMBER SEVEN

Terror as Enforcement,
Cruelty as a Means of Control

The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined. Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing. All that it needs from bystanders is their silent complicity in the evil committed on their behalf, though a caste system will protect, and perhaps even reward, those who deign to join in the terror.

Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe, African-Americans in the antebellum and Jim Crow South, and Dalits in India were all at the mercy of people who had been fed a diet of contempt and hate for them, and had incentive to try to prove their superiority by joining in or acquiescing to cruelties against their fellow humans.

Above all, the people in the subordinate caste were to be reminded of the absolute power the dominant caste held over them. In both America and in Germany, people in the dominant caste whipped and hanged their hostages for random and capricious breaches of caste, punished them for the natural human responses to the injustice they were being subjected to. In America, “the whip was the most common instrument of punishment,” the historian Kenneth Stampp wrote. “Nearly every slaveholder used it, and few grown slaves escaped it entirely.”
In Germany, the Nazis forced and strapped Jews and political prisoners onto a wooden board to be flogged for minor infractions like rolling cigarettes from leaves they gathered or killing rats to augment their bare rations. The captives were forced to count out each lash as it was inflicted upon them. The Nazis claimed a limit of twenty-five lashes, but would play mind games by claiming that the victim had not counted correctly, then extend the torture even longer. The Americans went to as many as four hundred lashes, torture that amounted to murder, with several men, growing exhausted from the physical exertion it required, taking turns with the whip.

In the New World, few living creatures were, as a class of beings, subjected to the level of brute physical assault as a feature of their daily lives for as many centuries as were the subjects of American slavery. It was so commonplace that some overseers, upon arriving at a new plantation, summarily chose “to whip every hand on the plantation to let them know who was in command,” Stampp wrote. “Some used it as incentive by flogging the last slave out of the cabin in the morning. Many used it to ‘break in’ a young slave and to ‘break the spirit’ of an insubordinate older one.”

A teenager endured a whipping that went on for so long, he passed out in the middle of it. “He woke up vomiting,” the historian Edward Baptist recounted. “They were still beating him. He slipped into darkness again.”

One enslaver remarked “that he was no better pleased than when he could hear . . . the sound of the driver’s lash among the toiling slaves,” for then, Baptist wrote, “he knew his system was working.”

Human history is rife with examples of inconceivable violence, and as Americans, we like to think of our country as being far beyond the guillotines of medieval Europe or the reign of the Huns. And yet it was here that “Native Americans were occasionally
skinned and made into bridle reins," wrote the scholar Charles Mills. Andrew Jackson, the U.S. president who oversaw the forced removal of indigenous people from their ancestral homelands during that Trail of Tears, used bridle reins of indigenous flesh when he went horseback riding. And it was here that, into the twentieth century, African-Americans were burned alive at the stake, as seventeen-year-old Jesse Washington was in Waco, Texas, in 1916 before a crowd of thousands.

The crimes of homicide, of rape, and of assault and battery were felonies in the slavery era as they are today in any civil society. They were seen then as wrong, immoral, reprehensible, and worthy of the severest punishment. But the country allowed most any atrocity to be inflicted on the black body. Thus twelve generations of African-Americans faced the ever-present danger of assault and battery or worse, every day of their lives during the quarter millennium of enslavement.

Advertisements for runaways record a catalog of assaults upon them. A North Carolina enslaver took out an ad for the return of Betty and reported having burnt her "with a hot iron on the left side of her face; I tried to make the letter M." A warden in Louisiana reported that he had just taken custody of a runaway and noted that "he has been lately gelded and is not yet well." Another Louisianan reported his disgust for a neighbor who had "castrated 3 men of his."

An order from the justices went out in New Hanover County, North Carolina, in the search of a runaway named London, granting that "any person may KILL and DESTROY the said slave by such means as he or they may think fit." This casual disregard for black life and the deputizing of any citizen to take that life would become a harbinger of the low value accorded African-Americans in the police and vigilante shootings of unarmed black citizens that continued into the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Some argue in hindsight that people who were enslaved were seen as too valuable to be hurt or killed. That argument disregards
the many instances of humans trashing their own property, of absentee slumlords who get by with the least maintenance of their buildings, for example, with often catastrophic consequences. But more important, it misinterprets violence as merely damage to one’s property, presumably rare and against the interest of the “owner,” when it was actually a terror mechanism that was part of the regular maintenance of an unnatural institution, part of the calculus of American slavery. A Louisiana planter once left his plantation in the care of an overseer and staff. Upon returning after a year’s absence, the planter discovered the overseer and his men had beaten and starved the enslaved people while the planter was away and that his inventory had shrunk. On that one family plantation, “at least twelve slaves had died at the overseer’s hands,” Stampp wrote. The planter would have to factor that “loss” into the cost of doing business.

Nazi Germany and the American South devised shockingly similar means of punishment to instill terror in the subordinate caste. Hostages in Nazi labor camps were subjected to public hangings in front of a full assemblage of camp prisoners, for any minor offense or merely to remind the survivors of the power of their captors. In the special prisons inside the concentration camps, there stood a lynching post designed to draw out the agony of the captive being killed. Across the ocean, in the same era, lynchings, preceded by mutilation, were a feature of the southern landscape.

Both the Germans in the Nazi era and the descendants of the Confederacy used ritualized torture for arbitrary infractions, some as minor as stealing shoes or pocket change or, in the case of the American South, for acting out of one’s place.

It was during the era of enslavement that Americans in the South devised a range of horrors to keep human beings in the unnatural state of perpetual, generational imprisonment. Fourteen-pound chains and metal horns radiating two or three feet from the
skull were locked onto the heads of people who tried to escape. Slave pens had flogging rooms in the attics where rows of wooden cleats for the reaving cords were screwed into the floor to tie people down for their floggings for “not speaking up and looking bright and smart” to their potential buyers. “Every day there was flogging going on,” wrote John Brown, a survivor of slavery.

The tortures were elaborate enough to be given names. One was called “bucking,” in which the person was stripped naked, hands and feet tied, forced into a sitting position around a stake and rotated for three hours of flogging with a cowhide, as other enslaved people were forced to watch. The person was then washed down with salt and red pepper. An enslaved man named John Glasgow was punished in this way for having slipped away to see his wife on another plantation. Then there was “the picket,” which involved iron cleats, pulleys, and cords that formed a gallows, along the crossbeam of a whipping post, and the sharp end of a stake. John Glasgow suffered this, too, after attempting to see his wife again. His fellow captives were made to take turns whipping him or face the same punishment themselves. “He was left to die or recover, as might be,” Brown said. “It was a month before he stirred from his plank, five months more elapsed ere he could walk. Ever after he had a limp in his gait.”

After slavery ended, the former Confederates took power again, but now without the least material investment in the lives of the people they once had owned. They pressed down even harder to keep the lowest caste in its place. African-Americans were mutilated and hanged from poplars and sycamores and burned at the courthouse square, a lynching every three or four days in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

A slaveholder in North Carolina seemed to speak for the enforcers of caste throughout the world. “Make them stand in fear,” she said.
The dominant caste demonstrated its power by forcing captives to perform some of the more loathsome duties connected to the violence against their fellow captives. People in the upper caste did not often trouble themselves with the dirty work, unless specifically hired for the job of enforcement, as were the plantation overseers in the American South. It was caste privilege to order the lowest caste to do their bidding and dirty work.

It was part of the psychological degradation that reinforced one's own stigma and utter subjugation, so dominated that they were left with little choice but to cooperate if they were to save themselves for one more day. The Nazis in Germany and the planters in the authoritarian South sowed dissension among the subordinate caste by creating a hierarchy among the captives, rewarding those who identified more with the oppressor rather than the oppressed and who would report back to them any plots of escape or uprising. They would select a captive they felt they could control and elevate that person above the others.

In Nazi labor camps, it was the kapo, the head Jew in each hut of captives, whose job it was to get everyone up by five in the morning and to exact discipline. In exchange, he would get a bunk of his own or other meager privileges. In the American South, it was the slave driver, the head Negro, who served this role, setting the pace for the work at hand and elevated with the task of watching over the others and disciplining them when called to do so.

The dominant caste often forced its captives to exact punishment on one another or to dispose of the victims as their tormenters watched. In Nazi Germany, the SS guards were not the ones who put the prisoners into the ovens. The captives were forced into that grim detail. It was not the SS who collected the bodies of the people who had died the night before. That was left to the captives. In the American South, black men were made to whip their fellow slaves or to hold down the legs and arms of the man, woman, or child being flogged. Later, when lynchings were the primary means of terror, it was the people who had done the lynching who told the family of the victim or the black undertaker
when they would be permitted to take down what was left of the body from the lynching tree.

One day in the mid-eighteenth century, an elder of the Presbyterian Church was passing through a piece of timbered land in a slaving province of the American South when he heard what he called "a sound as of murder." He rode in that direction and discovered "a naked black man, hung to the limb of a tree by his hands, his feet chained together and a pine rail laid with one end on the chain, between his legs, and the other upon the ground to steady him." The overseer had administered four hundred lashes on the man's body. "The miserably lacerated slave was then taken down and put to the care of a physician," the Presbyterian elder said.

The elder asked the overseer, one of the men who had inflicted this upon another human being, "the offence for which all this was done." He was told that the enslaved man had made a comment that was seen as beyond his station. It began when the owner said that the rows of corn the enslaved man had planted were uneven. The enslaved man offered his opinion. "Massa, much corn grow on a crooked row as a straight one," the enslaved man replied. For that, he was flogged to the brink of death.

"This was it, this was enough," the Presbyterian elder said. The overseer boasted of his skill in managing the master's property. The enslaved man "was submitted to him, and treated as above."

A century later, slavery was over, but the rules, and the consequences for breaking them, were little changed. A young white anthropologist from Yale University, John Dollard, went south to the Mississippi Delta in 1935 for his research into the Jim Crow caste system. He noticed how subservient the black people were, stepping aside for him, taking their hats off, and calling him "sir" even if they were decades older.

One day he was out riding with some other white men, southern white men, who were checking out some black sharecroppers.
The black people were reluctant to come out of their cabins when the car with the white men pulled up. The driver had some fun with it, told the sharecroppers he was not going to hang them. Later, Dollard mentioned to the man that "the Negroes seem to be very polite around here."

The man let out a laugh. "They have to be."