School of Physical Sciences Journal Club on Anti-racism and Inclusion: *America’s Enduring Caste System* by I.Wilkerson

September 4, 2020

**Talking points for the breakout sessions:**
1. Please introduce yourself and say where you are coming from (~1 minute per person)

2. I. Wilkerson defines “caste” as “an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste, whose forebears designed it.” and gives three examples: the US race-based social order, the traditional caste system of India, and Nazi Germany. Is the implied comparison justified? If so, in what ways are these three systems similar? How are they different? What can be learned from commonalities and differences? To what degree could the comparison be problematic? (~10 minutes)

3. The article distinguishes “caste” from “race” and claims that the concept of race often changes while the caste system remains. How can this distinction help understand racism and guide the search for solutions to overcome it? How has the definition of race changed over the last 400 years? Did the caste system really remain unchanged? Is it then even possible to address the injustices of the caste system itself? If so, how? (~10 minutes)

4. The end of the article discusses the costs of the caste system to the lower caste(s) as well as society as a whole using covid-19 as an example. I. Wilkerson shows how the caste system increases the damage the disease inflicts, and how covid-19 disproportionately affecting blacks exposes the disadvantages blacks continue to face. While it is obviously neither a complete analysis of covid-19 nor of racism or casteism in the U.S, is this an accurate illustration of the price the U.S. pays for its caste system? What other examples of societal costs, material or intellectual or moral are there? (~10 minutes)