

Privilege: A Radical Alternative

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Standard conservative approaches to the issue of privilege are typically based on the assumptions that hierarchical social structures which reward some people with greater privileges than others are perfectly fair and acceptable, and that our present society is meritocratic, meaning everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve privileged positions solely on the basis of individual skill and effort, apart from factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc.

Standard liberal approaches accept the legitimacy of social hierarchy but contend that since current social structures are not fully meritocratic unearned privileges are enjoyed by some people but not others solely on the basis of their race, gender, and/or other identities. The proposed remedy is for members of majority groups to become aware of their privilege and undergo “internal transformation” that translates into social action intended to advance the causes of specific minority groups (Makiko Deguchi, “Majority privilege and structural discrimination through the lens of positionality,” Sophia University, 2023, <https://www.sophia.ac.jp/eng/article/feature/the-knot/the-knot-0011/>).

Radical approaches to privilege contend that the views of both conservatives and liberals are sociologically flawed and politically naive. While being equally concerned with liberals about overcoming historic and contemporary forms of discrimination against minority identity groups, a radical political alternative eschews the identity politics of liberals in favor of undertaking the admittedly difficult task of building social movements aimed at dismantling the hierarchical social structures which allow unearned privilege to exist in the first place.

Equating privilege with certain racial, gender, or other identity groups ignores the empirical fact that privileged and not-privileged social positions may be occupied by anyone. No identity group is completely homogenous. While it may be statistically true that a high percentage of privileged positions in any society are occupied by people of numerically dominant identity groups, it is just as true that a significant percentage of people in these same groups occupy not-privileged positions.

An assertion such as “white males are privileged” (in a U.S. context) is based on the essentialist view that all white males share the attribute of being “privileged” simply due to their race and sex. Practitioners in the field of intercultural communication are trained to regard all such overgeneralizations as stereotypes. Social groups defined on the basis of race and gender cannot be conflated with groups defined on the basis of the privileges they do or do not enjoy in society.

A more nuanced and differentiated analysis reveals that while some white males are privileged, others are not; while some non-white females are privileged, others are not. Although there may be varying degrees of overlap, the set of people who are privileged never coincides completely with any set based on a particular identity.

The key dividing line for anyone sincerely concerned with the structural problem of privilege is not “white vs. non-white” or “male vs. female” but “privileged vs. not-privileged.” A genuinely structural critique of privilege reveals that while some people (of all races, genders, etc.) have access to positions of political and corporate power, to high levels of income and wealth, and to superior housing and education, others (of all races, genders, etc.) do not.

Liberals purport to examine the systemic factors which underlie privilege, but then immediately divert their attention to the question of which racial, gender, and other identity groups have access to privilege. The focus is not on the structure of a building

having separate rooms for the privileged and not-privileged but on who can and cannot pass through the “sliding doors” (Deguchi’s expression) between them.

A structural account recognizes that it is social positions that accord privilege, not the personal characteristics of the persons who occupy them. Anyone, regardless of race or gender, who occupies a privileged social position will be privileged. If that exact same person occupies a not-privileged social position, he/she/they is by definition no longer privileged. Since people in privileged positions are obliged to conform to the roles required by their positions, simply asking them to become aware of their privilege does absolutely nothing to address the structural division between those who are privileged and those who are not.

Instituting meritocratic measures to insure that everyone has equal opportunities to achieve positions of unearned privilege fails to get to the bottom of the problem. A society in which people of all races and genders have equal access to privileged positions would still be a society divided between a small minority that is privileged and a vast majority that is not. It doesn’t matter if a corporate CEO is white or non-white, male or female, that person will still occupy a privileged position in society vis-à-vis ordinary workers and citizens.

Liberal calls for systemic change ring hollow in the absence of concrete proposals for overturning the present hierarchical social system. By framing the problem in terms of racial and gender identities, the social structures that maintain privilege remain unchallenged. Instead of bringing people from different social groups together to oppose domination in all its forms, demarcations in identity are exacerbated, leading unwittingly to an intensification of racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice rather than to their elimination.

The reason for the backlash against liberal discourse about privilege is not because poor white men struggling to make ends meet in an increasingly cutthroat economy with a growing gap between rich and poor are worried about losing privileges they don't have to begin with. Rather, not-privileged white men see the liberal agenda as an unfair attempt on the part of some not-privileged groups to gain advantages without acknowledging that others outside those groups may also be disadvantaged. Non-whites and females accuse whites and males of being non-inclusive yet are just as exclusive (and potentially racist and sexist) when they seek to give preferential treatment to some racial and gender groups over others.

Pitting races and genders against each other simply supports a divide-and-conquer strategy that suits those who control the real levers of power in society just fine. Don't challenge the 1% who hold most of the unearned wealth, power, and privilege in society. Instead, get the other 99% to engage in acrimonious debates and fight among themselves.

Putting an end to gross inequalities necessitates solidarity across all not-privileged social classes, not accentuating differences based on identity. Consciousness-raising is fine, but finger-pointing and blame games do a much better job of alienating people and pushing them to the other side than of winning friends and building alliances across diverse social groups.

To overcome *all* forms of racism, sexism, and discrimination and promote impartial inclusivity, *all* people, regardless of how they construct their identity when they look into a mirror, should have access to equal political and economic power, to a living wage and adequate social services, and to decent housing and education (as well as to *all* the privileges listed in Peggy McIntosh's essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August, 1989, pp. 10–12).

We can allow hierarchical social structures to remain in place and then bicker over who has access to privileged positions within those structures or we can unite to eliminate the hierarchical social structures which allow some people of any race or gender to enjoy excessive levels of privilege while others struggle to obtain basic privileges that should be accorded to everyone. Abolishing the division between privileged and not-privileged positions in society will also go a long way toward abolishing divisions between people of all races, genders, and other identity groups.