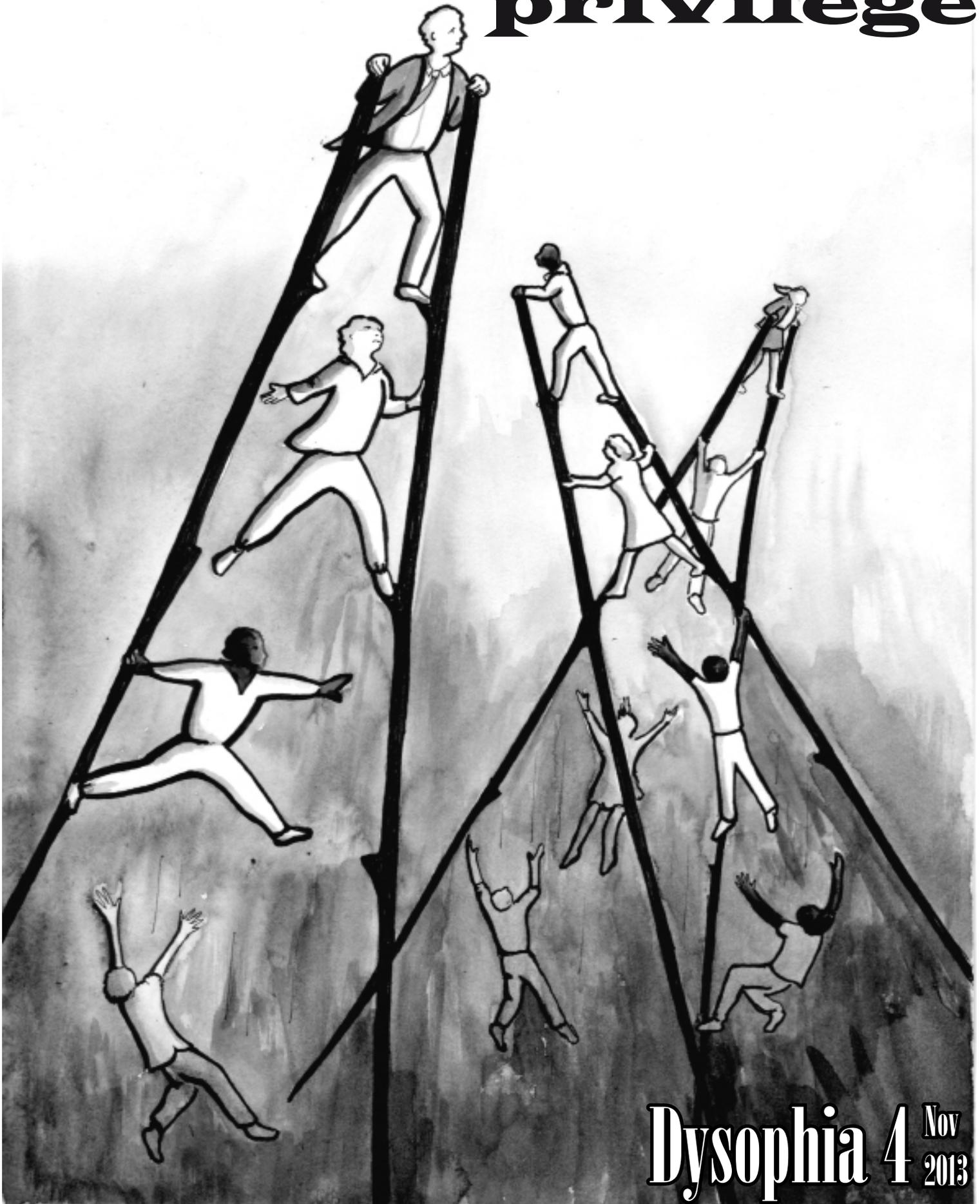


anarchist debates on privilege



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Table of Contents

1. A Question of Privilege	Wolfi Landstreicher.....	2
2. Refusing to Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality	Deric Shannon & J. Rogue.....	3
3. Insurrections at the intersections: feminism, intersectionality and anarchism	Abbey Volcano & J. Rogue.....	8
4. A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory	The Women’s Caucus of the Anarchist Federation.....	12
5. Privilege Theory. The Politics of Defeat	Sabcat.....	18
6. The Poverty of Privilege Politics	Tabitha Bast & Hannah McClure.....	21
7. Privilege Politics is Reformism	Will.....	23
8. Be Careful With Each Other, So We Can Be Dangerous Together	Invisible Man.....	30
9. Response to Privilege Politics is Reformism	Suzy X.....	37
10. The Hidden Struggle	Daniel Townhead.....	39
11. The Politics of Voices: Notes on Gender, Race & Class	Aiden Rowe.....	49
12. Creating an Anarchist Theory of Privilege	Dónal O’Driscoll.....	53

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Introduction

While putting this collection together a number of authors¹ pointed out that there is no single thing that is privilege theory, no definitive text we can refer back to. If privilege theory is anything, it is a collection of ideas around identity politics that have coalesced in the current moment. It is the principles of the liberation politics of gender, race and sexuality moving into all spheres of life, taking on a momentum of its own.

Yet, the former radicals have become today's academics, and the politics of liberation co-opted to middle-class interests. The powerful politics of the Black Panthers with their class analysis has become instead the Stephen Lawrence Trust calling for a stronger Black middle class. The class struggle of many suffragettes is replaced by dubious credentials of the Femen movement playing to the mainstream media. The commercialization of gay pride marches speaks for itself. Class struggle itself is sucked in with class is reduced to another identity and the goal of liberation corrupted to one of seeking to be being treated with kindness and 'respect' by the middle-classes.

This issue of Dysophia is a collection of writings that debate this co-option. Some reject privilege theory outright as too flawed a concept and that what is needed is a return to class struggle itself. Particularly as so much of how privilege manifests itself is underpinned by economic status and power. Others take the opposite approach, arguing that class and privilege politics need to be merged so that liberation and solidarity for all becomes achievable – as anarchism requires. In a number of cases the articles are direct responses to others in this collection.

In putting this collection together, we see a movement in the middle of a moment. Discussions and challenges of privilege are everywhere. Yet there is unease. There is too much politics of guilt. Challenges are done in aggressive tones that seem to be more about asserting power than building solidarity. The attitude in many places of defending one's own particular space is at the expense of everyone else; it seems it is better to damn than to help succeed. The power of the collective, built on a trust creating dialogue is being lost.

The question is, whether the next generation of liberation / identity politics can rise to this challenge: embrace the liberatory power of anarchism and class struggle or fall victim to liberal-capitalism as so many movements have already done. Central to this, I believe is recognizing that privilege theory is a misnomer and what is really at issue is intersectionality. Intersectionality is not just about where lack of privilege overlap, but requires everyone to take on board many viewpoints, opening ourselves to others needs and perspectives, and adjusting our behaviours as the context requires. It is not how we as individuals intersect with the rest of the world and have to fight against, but a community level discussion – how all our needs overlap as a groups and where can solidarity with each other grows internally. When we are strong internally, we can extend that struggle to the rest of the world.

I started this project to deal with things troubling me with in radical anti-discrimination movements around the anarchist scene but for which I did not have the language to challenge. If I have learned anything, it is the need to put class struggle back at the heart of my solidarity, to ensure that how and where solidarity is expressed that it remains firmly embedded in an anarchist perspective. Though we are against all oppression, not all forms in which identity and anti-discrimination politics manifest are necessarily compatible with ours. It is very easy to get sucked into issues and forget this, to put one issue above all others. Maintaining a class perspective of power is a way of ensuring solidarity remains open to all, but owned by no one group.

Without doubt people will disagree with various parts of what is included here, so I am are encouraging responses. This collection is to bring together in one place a number of articles that have gained some kind of prominence in anarchist circles. From the perspective of Dysophia, this is about creating discussion and dialogue, of openly addressing issues rather than sweeping them under the carpet. Nothing here is in any way definitive and if there is sufficient material it is our intention to do a follow-up publication. If you do want to write a response to anything in here, or would like to suggest an article that addresses issues that might have been missed, please get in contact.

D.

Cover Art: Carrie MacKinnon

¹ Thanks to Abbey Volcano & Deric Shannon for raising points in this introduction.

A Question of Privilege

Wolfi Landstreicher

One hears a lot of talk about privilege in anarchist circles these days. “Male privilege”, “white-skin privilege”, “first-world privilege and similar phrases come up regularly in discussion, but with no real analysis to back them up, as if everyone should understand exactly what is meant. And, indeed, it is not so difficult to figure out what is meant by these phrases. Their clear implication is that if the oppression and exploitation one suffers in this society is not as intense as that which another suffers, then one is privileged relative to that other person. But such a conception of privilege is useless from an anarchist and revolutionary perspective. It only has meaning in relation to the reformist concept of equality before the law, which is always equality of exploitation and oppression. For those of us who have no interest in rights, but rather want the freedom to determine our own lives and so find the only equality worth pursuing to be equality of access to all that is necessary for determining the conditions of our existence—that is, for those of us for whom the destruction of the social order and the revolutionary transformation of reality are the essential first steps toward making our lives our own—a very different concept of privilege must be developed.

We live in a class society. This has been true since the accumulation of wealth and power into a few hands gave rise to the state and capital. The few who rule determine the conditions under which everyone exists, institutionalizing social relations that maintain and expand their control over wealth and power. The ruling class structures these relations in such a way that the survival of the exploited classes depends upon their continued participation in the reproduction of these relationships, thus guaranteeing the continuation of class society. Thus, it can be said that the ruling class structures social relationships in such a way that the continued reproduction of society will always privilege the ruling class and its needs. In any class society—thus, in any society in which the state and the economy exist—only the ruling class can be truly said to have privilege.

But the ruling class does not impose itself upon a passive populace. The history of class society is always the history of class struggle, the history of the exploited trying to take their lives and the social conditions under which they exist back in order to determine them for themselves. Thus, it is in the interest of the ruling class to structure social relations in such a way as to create divisions within the exploited classes that cloud their understanding of the nature of their struggle and of their enemy. The ruling class accomplishes this through various institutions, identities and ideologies such as nation, race, gender, occupation, sexual preference and so on. It is not hard to see how the ruling class uses these structures for its ends. It grants people in specific social categories particular “privileges” defined in terms of that category. But being granted a privilege by those who define your life on their terms is not the same thing as having privilege. This becomes especially clear when anyone who is not of the ruling class steps out of line. Their so-called privileges can quickly disappear.

Furthermore, these “privileges” granted by the ruling order to people in certain social categories among the exploited actually do amount to nothing more than a lessening of the intensity of exploitation and oppression experienced by these people relative to others. Thus, men are less likely to be sexually harassed and assaulted than women and tend to receive greater compensation for the same level of exploitation at the job. White people are less likely to be harassed by cops or to be charged with felonies for victimless crimes and sentenced to years in prison than non-white people and find it easier to get a job. Heterosexuals generally do not have to worry about being beaten or ostracized because of their sexual preference. The list could go on, but I think the point is clear. All of these so-called privileges are nothing more than a minimal easing of the conditions of exploitation experienced by people in these specific social categories. They are intended to convince these people that they have more in common with their exploiters than with those not granted the same “privileges” and to convince the others that their real enemy is not the ruling class, but rather those granted a less intense level of exploitation.

In this light, moralistic calls to recognize one’s own privilege and give it up are meaningless. They serve no purpose in the creation of a revolutionary project aimed at the destruction of all rule. As we have seen, the so-called privileges enumerated in the mea culpas of guilt ridden radicals are really nothing more than means for constructing social identities that serve the ruling class by producing artificial divisions among those they exploit. So if we want to move the revolutionary project of destroying all rule and privilege forward, then our task is not to give up some phantom privilege that has never really been our own, but to expose and move beyond the artificial identities that smother our individuality and cripple us in our battle against the ruling order. Since only the ruling class truly has privilege, the destruction of privilege will only occur when we destroy all rule.

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Refusing to Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality

Deric Shannon & J. Rogue

"Without justice there can be no love." – bell hooks

Anarchism can learn a lot from the feminist movement. In many respects it already has. Anarcha-feminists have developed analyses of patriarchy that link it to the state form. We have learned from the slogan that "the personal is political" (e.g. men who espouse equality between all genders should treat the women in their lives with dignity and respect). We have learned that no revolutionary project can be complete while men systematically dominate and exploit women; that socialism is a rather empty goal--even if it is "stateless"--if men's domination of women is left intact.

This essay argues that anarchists can likewise learn from the theory of "intersectionality" that emerged from the feminist movement. Indeed, anarchist conceptions of class struggle have widened as a result of the rise of feminist movements, civil rights movements, gay and lesbian liberation movements (and, perhaps more contemporarily, the queer movements), disability rights movements, etc. But how do we position ourselves regarding those struggles? What is their relationship to the class struggle that undergirds the fight for socialism? Do we dismiss them as "mere identity politics" that obscure rather than clarify the historic task of the working class? If not, how might anarchists include their concerns in our political theory and work?

Why Intersectionality? How We Got here

Many people locate the beginning of the feminist movement in the U.S. with the struggle of women to gain the vote. This focus on electoralism was criticized for its narrowness by many turn-of-the-century radical women. After all, what did the vote provide for working class women? How could voting for a new set of rulers put food in their mouths and the mouths of their families? In fact, many radical women of this time period refused to identify as "feminists", as they viewed feminism as a bourgeois women's movement unconcerned with the class struggle (for an interesting discussion of this in the context of early 1900s Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, see Ackelsberg 2005: 118-119 and 123-124). Indeed, many working class women saw their "feminist" contemporaries as being in alliance "with all the forces that have been the most determined enemies of the working people, of the poor and disinherited"--that is, they saw the early feminist movement as a purely *bourgeois* women's movement that had no solutions to the pervasive poverty and exploitation inherent in the working class experience in a classed society (Parker 2001: 125).

Anarchists of this time period, on the other hand, at times anticipated some of the arguments to come out of the feminist movement regarding intersectionality. We argued against the class reductionism that often occurred within the broader socialist milieu. Early anarchists were writing about issues such as prostitution and sex trafficking (Goldman 2001), forced sterilizations (Kropotkin 2001), and marriage (de Cleyre 2004 and 2001) to widen the anarchist critique of hierarchy to give critical concern to women's issues in their own right, while also articulating a socialist vision of a future cooperative and classless society. Much of this early work demonstrated connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the working class. The refusal of many working class women to join their "feminist" contemporaries likewise demonstrated some of the problems of a universalized identity-based feminism that saw women's oppression as a hierarchy that can be fought without also fighting capitalism.

This is not to suggest that anarchists weren't at times reductionist. Unfortunately, many anarchist men were dismissive of women's concerns. Part of the reason that the *Mujeres Libres* saw a need for a separate women's organization around the time of the Spanish Civil War was because "many anarchists treated the issue of women's subordination as, at best, secondary to the emancipation of workers, a problem that would be resolved 'on the morrow of the revolution'" (Ackelsberg 2005: 38). Unfortunately, in some contexts, this attitude isn't just a historical oddity, though it should be. And it was these kinds of assumptions that became an important theoretical backdrop for feminism's "Second Wave".

Competing Visions in the "Second Wave"

During the late 60s through the early 80s, new forms of feminism began to emerge. Many feminists seemed to gravitate to four competing theories with very different explanations for the oppression of women.

Like their historical bourgeois predecessors, *liberal feminists* saw no need for a revolutionary break with existing society. Rather, their focus was on breaking the "glass ceiling", getting more women into positions of political and economic power. Liberal feminists assumed that the existing institutional arrangements were fundamentally unproblematic. Their task was to see to women's equality accommodated under capitalism.

Another theory, sometimes referred to as *radical feminism*, argued for abandoning the "male Left", as it was seen as hopelessly reductionist. Indeed, many women coming out of the Civil Rights movement and anti-war movements complained of pervasive sexism within the movements, being relegated to secretarial tasks, philandering male leaders, and a generalized alienation from Left politics. According to many radical feminists of the time, this was due to the primacy of the system of patriarchy--or men's systematic and institutionalized domination of women. To these feminists, the battle against patriarchy was the primary struggle to create a free society, as gender was our most entrenched and oldest hierarchy (see especially Firestone 1970).

Marxist feminists, on the other hand, tended to locate women's oppression within the economic sphere. The fight against capitalism was seen as the "primary" battle, as "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles"--that is, human history could be reduced to class (Marx and Engels 1967). Further, Marxist feminists tended to believe that the economic "base" of society had a determining effect on its cultural "superstructures". Thus, the only way to achieve equality between women and men would be to smash capitalism--as new, egalitarian economic arrangements would give rise to new, egalitarian superstructures. Such was the determining nature of the economic base.

Out of the conversations between Marxist feminism and radical feminism another approach emerged called "dual systems theory" (see e.g. Hartmann 1981; Young 1981). A product of what came to be dubbed *socialist feminism*, dual systems theory argued that feminists needed to develop "a theoretical account which gives as much weight to the system of patriarchy as to the system of capitalism" (Young 1981: 44). While this approach did much to resolve some of the arguments about which fight should be "primary" (i.e. the struggle against capitalism or the struggle against patriarchy), it still left much to be desired. For example, black feminists argued that this perspective left out a structural analysis of race (Joseph 1981). Further, where was oppression based on sexuality, ability, age, etc. in this analysis? Were all of these things reducible to capitalist patriarchy?

It is within this theoretical backdrop that intersectionality emerged. But it wasn't just abstraction and theory that led to these insights. As mentioned before, part of the reason feminists saw a need for a separate analysis of patriarchy as a systemic form of oppression was due to their experiences with the broader Left. Without an analysis of patriarchy that put it on equal footing with capitalism as an organizing system in our lives, there was no adequate response to male leaders who suggested that we deal with women's oppression after we deal with the "primary" or "more important" class struggle.

But these tensions were not limited to the Left, they also existed *within* the feminist movement. Perhaps one of the best examples of this on the ground was in the pro-choice movement in the United States. Before *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, abortion law was considered an issue to be dealt with on a state-by-state basis. Feminists mobilized around *Roe Vs. Wade* to see that legal abortion would be guaranteed throughout the country. The ruling eventually did give legal guarantees to abortion through the second trimester, but the "choice" and "legalization" rhetoric left too much unaddressed for many feminists.

And this experience set the stage for re-thinking the idea of a universalized, monolithic experience of "womanhood" as it is often expressed in traditional identity politics. Black feminists and womanists, for example, argued that focusing solely on legalized abortion obscured the ways that black women in the United States underwent forced sterilizations and were often denied the right to have children (see Roberts 1997). Further, working class women argued that legalized "choice" is pretty meaningless without socialism, as having abortion legal, but unaffordable, didn't exactly constitute a "choice". True reproductive freedom meant something more than just legal abortion for

working class women. Many wanted to have kids but simply couldn't afford raising them; some wanted a change in the cultural norms and mores of a society that judged the decisions women made about their bodies; others wanted proximity to clinics for reproductive health--in short, a "reproductive freedom" framework would take into account the interests of all women, not just be structured around white, heterosexual, middle-class women's concerns (the seeming default position of the "pro-choice" movement).

Intersections

These experiences within the feminist movement and the broader Left raised many questions for feminists. How do we create a movement that isn't focused around the interests of its most privileged elements? How do we retain our commitment to socialism without being subsumed into a politic that sees women's issues as "secondary"? What might political organization look like based on a common commitment to ending domination rather than an assumed common experience based on some single identity? These questions began to be answered largely by feminists of color, queers, and sex radicals with the theory of intersectionality--a theory that was critical of traditional class and identity politics (see especially e.g. hooks 2000; Collins 2000).

Intersectionality posits that our social locations in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation of origin, ability, age, etc. are not easily parsed out one from the other. To speak of a universal experience as a "woman", for example, is problematic because "womanhood" is experienced quite differently based on race, class, sexuality-- any number of factors. As such, a non-reflective feminist movement centered ostensibly on the concerns of "women" tended to reflect the interests of the most privileged members of that social category.

As well, our various social locations and the hierarchies they inform intersect in complex ways and are not easily separable. People don't exist as "women", "men", "white", "working class", etc. in a vacuum devoid of other patterned social relationships. Further, these systems of exploitation and oppression function in unique ways. To name two rather obvious examples, class is a social relationship based on the exploitation of one's labor. As socialists, we seek the abolition of classes, not the end of class elitism under capitalism. This makes class unique. Similarly, the idea of "sexual orientation" developed in the 1800s with the invention of "the homosexual" as a species of a person. This effectively created an identity out of preferred gender choices in sexual partners, more or less ignoring the myriad other ways that people organize their sexuality (i.e. number of partners, preferred sexual acts, etc.). It also effectively limited sexual identity to three categories: hetero, homo, and bi--as if there could not be a large range of attractions and variety within humanity. Part of liberation based on sexuality is troubling these categories to provide a viable sexual/social existence for everyone. This makes sexuality, likewise, unique.

These structured inequalities and hierarchies inform and support one another. For example, the labor of women in child-bearing and rearing provides new bodies for the larger social factory to allow capitalism to continue. White supremacy and racism allow capitalists control over a segment of the labor market that can serve as stocks of cheap labor. Compulsory heterosexuality allows the policing of the patriarchal family form, strengthening patriarchy and male dominance. And all structured forms of inequality add to the nihilistic belief that institutionalized hierarchy is inevitable and that liberatory movements are based on utopian dreams.

Proponents of intersectionality, then, argue that all struggles against domination are necessary components for the creation of a liberatory society. It is unnecessary to create a totem pole of importance out of social struggles and suggest that some are "primary" while others are "secondary" or "peripheral" because of the complete ways that they intersect and inform one another. Further, history has shown us that this method of ranking oppressions is divisive and unnecessary--and worse, it undermines solidarity. As well, when organizing and developing political practice, we can self-reflexively move the margins to the center of our analyses to avoid the biases of privilege that has historically led to so many divisions in feminism and the Left.

A good contemporary example of intersectionality in the context of social movement practice is Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. Incite! "is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and our communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing" (Incite! 2009). One reason Incite! stands out against other anti-violence organizations is their systemic

analysis. They see women of color who have experienced violence as living in the “dangerous intersections” of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and other oppressive structures and institutions. Rather than simply reducing the experiences to the individual, they recognize the systems that oppress and exploit people and have structured their approach in such a way that calls for the “recentering” of marginalized folks, as opposed to a method of “inclusiveness” based on one single identity or social location. Incite! argues that “inclusiveness” simply adds a multicultural component to individualistic white-dominated organizing so common in the United States. Instead, they call for recentering the framework around the most marginalized peoples. This push is to ensure that their organizing addresses the needs of those historically overlooked by feminism, with the understanding that all people benefit from the liberation of their more marginalized peers--while focusing on the more privileged elements within a given social category leaves others behind (as in the examples we gave in the struggle for the vote and the legalization of abortion). Incite! makes a point to focus on the needs of the working class who have generally been neglected (i.e. sex workers, the incarcerated, trans folks and injection drug users). By centering these people in their organizing, they are focusing on the people standing at more dangerous intersections of oppression and exploitation, therefore tackling the entirety of the system and not just the more visible or advantaged aspects. Additionally, Incite! views the state as a major perpetrator of violence against women of color and seeks to build grassroots organizations independent of and against it. Anarchists could learn a lot from Incite! about the importance of addressing the needs of ALL sections of the working class and their attempt to check the tendency of the Left to ignore or dismiss the concerns, needs, ideas and leadership of people living in the dangerous intersections of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc.

And What Can Anarchism Provide the Theory of Intersectionality?

We firmly believe that this learning process is a two-way street. That is, when synthesizing our practice to include these concerns raised by feminists, feminism could stand to benefit from learning from anarchism as well. We see the contributions of anarchists to intersectionality in two major areas. First, anarchism can provide a *radical* base from which to critique liberal interpretations of intersectionality. Secondly, anarchists can offer a critical analysis of the state.

Too often people using an intersectional analysis ignore the uniqueness of various systems of domination. One way this is done is by articulating a general opposition to *classism*. While we believe that class elitism exists, often this opposition to “classism” does not recognize the unique qualities of capitalism and can lead to a position that essentially argues for an end to class elitism *under capitalism*. As anarchists, we do not just oppose class elitism, we oppose class society itself. We do not want the ruling class to treat us nicer under a system based on inequality and exploitation (i.e. capitalism). We want to smash capitalism to pieces and build a new society in which classes no longer exist--that is, we fight for socialism. Anarchists, as part of the socialist movement, are well-placed to critique this liberal interpretation of intersectionality (see especially Schmidt and van der Walt 2009).

Likewise, as anarchists, we are well-placed to put forward our critiques of the state. The state, in addition to being a set of specific institutions (such as the courts, police, political bodies like senates, presidents, etc.), is a *social relationship*. And the state has an influence over our lives in myriad ways. For example, former prisoners are often unemployable, particularly if they have committed felonies. One only needs to take a cursory glance at the racial and class make-up of US prisons to see how intersectionality can be put to use here. Former prisoners, workers who are targeted for striking or engaging in direct actions and/or civil disobedience, etc. all have specific needs as subjects in a society that assumes political rulers and passive, ruled subjects. And the state tends to target specific sets of workers based on their existence within the *dangerous intersections* we mentioned above. Anarchists can offer to the theory of intersectionality an analysis of the ways that the state has come to rule our lives just as much as any other institutionalized system of domination. And we can, of course, argue for smashing such a social arrangement and replacing it with non-hierarchical social forms.

Refusing to Wait

In many ways, anarchists have historically anticipated some of the ideas in intersectionality. Further, anarchism as a political philosophy--and as a movement against all forms of structured domination, coercion, and control--seems well-suited for an intersectional practice. Unfortunately, we still have debilitating arguments about what hierarchy is "primary" and should be prioritized above others. Like in times past, this leads to easy division and a lack of solidarity (imagine being told to give up some struggle that directly involves YOU for the "correct" or "primary" fight!). Further, the smashing of any structured hierarchy can have a destabilizing effect on the rest, as the simple existence of any of these social divisions serves to naturalize the existence of all other hierarchies.

We've tried here to explain the rise of the theory of intersectionality within feminism and describe its contours. Perhaps more importantly, we've attempted to relate it throughout this piece to political practice and social movement struggles so as to avoid complete abstraction and theorization apart from practice. We hope that more anarchists become acquainted with intersectionality and put it to positive use in our political work. Finally, it is our hope that more people from marginalized groups refuse to wait, that we recognize the value of all fights against injustice and hierarchy in the here and now--and that we build a reflexive practice based on solidarity and mutual aid instead of divisive prescriptions about what struggles are "primary" and which ones, by extension, are "secondary" or "peripheral". Rather, they are all linked and we have good reason to refuse to wait until after "the revolution" to address them!

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Insurrections at the Intersections: Feminism, Intersectionality and Anarchism

Abbey Volcano and J Rogue

A critique of liberal conceptions of 'intersectionality' and an outline of an anarchist, class struggle approach.

We need to understand the body not as bound to the private or to the self—the western idea of the autonomous individual—but as being linked integrally to material expressions of community and public space. In this sense there is no neat divide between the corporeal and the social; there is instead what has been called a “social flesh.”

Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar [1]

The birth of intersectionality

In response to various U.S. feminisms and feminist organizing efforts the Combahee River Collective[2], an organization of black lesbian socialist-feminists[3], wrote a statement that became the midwife of intersectionality. Intersectionality sprang from black feminist politics near the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s and is often understood as a response to mainstream feminism's construction around the erroneous idea of a “universal woman” or “sisterhood.”[4] At the heart of intersectionality lies the desire to highlight the myriad ways that categories and social locations such as race, gender, and class intersect, interact, and overlap to produce systemic social inequalities; given this reality, talk of a universal women's experience was obviously based on false premises (and typically mirrored the most privileged categories of women— i.e. white, non-disabled, “middle class,” heterosexual, and so on).

Initially conceived around the triad of “race/class/gender,” intersectionality was later expanded by Patricia Hill Collins to include social locations such as nation, ability, sexuality, age, and ethnicity[5]. Rather than being conceptualized as an additive model, intersectionality offers us a lens through which to view race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. as mutually-constituting processes (that is, these categories do not exist independently from one another; rather, they mutually reinforce one another) and social relations that materially play out in people's everyday lives in complex ways. Rather than distinct categories, intersectionality theorizes social positions as overlapping, complex, interacting, intersecting, and often contradictory configurations.

Toward an anarchist critique of liberal intersectionality

Intersectionality has been, and often still is, centered on identity. Although the theory suggests that hierarchies and systems of oppression are interlocking, mutually constituting, and sometimes even contradictory, intersectionality has often been used in a way that levels structural hierarchies and oppressions. For instance, “race, class, and gender” are often viewed as oppressions that are experienced in a variety of ways/degrees by everyone—that is, no one is free of the forced assignations of identity. This concept can be useful, especially when it comes to struggle, but the three “categories” are often treated solely as identities, and as though they are similar because they are “oppressions.” For instance, it is put forward that we all have a race, a gender, and a class. Since everyone experiences these identities differently, many theorists writing on intersectionality have referred to something called “classism” to complement racism and sexism.

This can lead to the gravely confused notion that class oppression needs to be rectified by rich people treating poor people “nicer” while still maintaining class society. This analysis treats class differences as though they are simply cultural differences. In turn, this leads toward the limited strategy of “respecting diversity” rather than addressing the root of the problem. This argument precludes a class struggle analysis which views capitalism and class society as institutions and enemies of freedom. We don't wish to “get along” under capitalism by abolishing snobbery and class elitism. Rather, we wish to overthrow capitalism and end class society all together. We do recognize that there are some relevant points raised by the folks who are talking about classism—we do not mean to gloss over the stratification of income within the working class.

Organizing within the extremely diverse working class of the United States requires that we acknowledge and have consciousness of that diversity. However, we feel it is inaccurate to conflate this with holding systemic power over others – much of the so-called middle class may have relative financial advantage over their more poorly-waged peers,

but that is not the same as exploiting or being in a position of power over them. This sociologically-based class analysis further confuses people by mistakenly leading them to believe their “identity” as a member of the “middle class” (a term which has so many definitions as to make it irrelevant) puts them in league with the ruling class/oppressors, contributing to the lack of class consciousness in the United States. Capitalism is a system of exploitation where the vast majority work for a living while very few own (i.e.: rob) for a living. The term classism does not explain exploitation, which makes it a flawed concept. We want an end to class society, not a society where classes “respect” each other. It is impossible to eradicate exploitation while class society still exists. To end exploitation we must also end class society (and all other institutionalized hierarchies).

This critical issue is frequently overlooked by theorists who use intersectionality to call for an end to “classism.” Rather, as anarchists, we call for an end to all exploitation and oppression and this includes an end to class society. Liberal interpretations of intersectionality miss the uniqueness of class by viewing it as an identity and treating it as though it is the same as racism or sexism by tacking an “ism” onto the end. Eradicating capitalism means an end to class society; it means class war. Likewise, race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, age—the gamut of hierarchically-arranged social relations—are in their own ways unique. As anarchists, we might point those unique qualities out rather than leveling all of these social relations into a single framework.

By viewing class as “just another identity” that should be considered in the attempt to understand others’ (and one’s own) “identities,” traditional conceptions of intersectionality do a dis-service to liberatory processes and struggle. While intersectionality illustrates the ways in which relations of domination interact with and prop up each other, this does not mean that these systems are identical or can be conflated. They are unique and function differently. These systems also reproduce one another. White supremacy is sexualized and gendered, heteronormativity is racialized and classed. Oppressive and exploitative institutions and structures are tightly woven together and hold one another up. Highlighting their intersections—their seams—gives us useful angles from which to tear them down and construct more liberatory, more desirable, and more sustainable relations with which to begin fashioning our futures.

An anarchist intersectionality of our own

Despite having noted this particularly common mistake by theorists and activists writing under the label of intersectionality, the theory does have a lot to offer that shouldn’t be ignored. For instance, intersectionality rejects the idea of a central or primary oppression. Rather, as previously noted, all oppressions overlap and often mutually constitute each other. Interpreted on the structural and institutional levels, this means that the struggle against capitalism must also be the struggle against heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, etc. Too often intersectionality is used solely as a tool to understand how these oppressions overlap in the everyday lives of people to produce an identity that is unique to them in degree and composition.

What is more useful to us as anarchists is using intersectionality to understand how the daily lives of people can be used to talk about the ways in which structures and institutions intersect and interact. This project can inform our analyses, strategies, and struggles against all forms of domination. That is, anarchists might use lived reality to draw connections to institutional processes that create, reproduce, and maintain social relations of domination. Unfortunately, a liberal interpretation of intersectionality precludes this kind of institutional analysis, so while we might borrow from intersectionality, we also need to critique it from a distinctly anarchist perspective.

It is worth noting that there really is no universally-accepted interpretation of intersectionality. Like feminism, it requires a modifier in order to be truly descriptive, which is why we’ll use the term “anarchist intersectionality” to describe our perspective in this essay. We believe that an anti-state and anti-capitalist perspective (as well as a revolutionary stance regarding white supremacy and heteropatriarchy) is the logical conclusion of intersectionality. However, there are many who draw from intersectionality, yet take a more liberal approach. Again, this can be seen in the criticisms of “classism” rather than capitalism and class society, and the frequent absence of an analysis of the state[6]. Additionally, there is also at times a tendency to focus almost solely on individual experiences rather than systems and institutions.

While all these points of struggle are relevant, it is also true that people raised in the United States, socialized in a deeply self-centered culture, have a tendency to focus on the oppression and repression of individuals, oftentimes to the detriment of a broader, more systemic perspective. Our interest lies with how institutions function and how institutions are reproduced through our daily lives and patterns of social relations. How can we trace our “individual experiences” back to the systems that (re)produce them (and vice versa)? How can we trace the ways that these systems (re)produce one another? How can we smash them and create new social relations that foster freedom?

With an institutional and systemic analysis of intersectionality, anarchists are afforded the possibility of highlighting the social flesh mentioned in the opening quote. And if we are to give a full account of this social flesh—the ways that

hierarchies and inequalities are woven into our social fabric—we'd be remiss if we failed to highlight a glaring omission in nearly everything ever written in intersectional theories: the state. We don't exist in a society of political equals, but in a complex system of domination where some are governed and controlled and ruled in institutional processes that anarchists describe as the state. Gustav Landauer, who discussed this hierarchical arrangement of humanity where some rule over others in a political body above and beyond the control of the people, saw the state as a social relationship.[7]

We are not just bodies that exist in assigned identities such as race, class, gender, ability, and the rest of the usual laundry list. We are also political subjects in a society ruled by politicians, judges, police, and bureaucrats of all manner. An intersectional analysis that accounts for the social flesh might be extended by anarchists, then, for insurrectionary ends, as our misery is embedded within institutions like capitalism and the state that produce, and are (re)produced, by the web of identities used to arrange humanity into neat groupings of oppressors and oppressed.

As anarchists, we have found that intersectionality is useful to the degree that it can inform our struggles. Intersectionality has been helpful for understanding the ways that oppressions overlap and play out in people's everyday lives. However, when interpreted through liberal frameworks, typical intersectional analyses often assume myriad oppressions to function identically, which can preclude a class analysis, an analysis of the state, and analyses of our ruling institutions. Our assessment is that everyday experiences of oppressions and exploitation are important and useful for struggle if we utilize intersectionality in a way that can encompass the different methods through which white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, class society, etc. function in people's lives, rather than simply listing them as though they all operate in similar fashions.

Truth is, the histories of heteronormativity, of white supremacy, of class society need to be understood for their similarities and differences. Moreover, they need to be understood for how they've each functioned to (re)shape one another, and vice versa. This level of analysis lends itself to a more holistic view of how our ruling institutions function and how that informs the everyday lives of people. It would be an oversight to not utilize intersectionality in this way.

From abstraction to organizing: reproductive freedom and anarchist intersectionality

The ways in which capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy—and disciplinary society more generally—have required control over bodies has been greatly detailed elsewhere[8], but we would like to offer a bit of that history in order to help build an argument that organizing for reproductive freedom would benefit from an anarchist intersectional analysis. Reproductive freedom, which we use as an explicitly anti-state, anti-capitalist interpretation of reproductive justice, argues that a simple “pro-choice” position is not sufficient for a revolutionary approach to reproductive “rights.” Tracing how race, class, sexuality, nationality, and ability intersect and shape a woman's access to reproductive health requires a deeper understanding of systems of oppression, which Andrea Smith outlines in her book *Conquest*. [9] Looking at the history of colonialism in the Americas helps us understand the complexities of reproductive freedom in the current context. The state as an institution has always had a vested interest in maintaining control over social reproduction and in particular, the ways in which colonized peoples did and did not reproduce. Given the history of forced sterilization of Native Americans, as well as African- Americans, Latinos, and even poor white women [10], we can see that simple access to abortion does not address the complete issue of reproductive freedom. [11] In order to have a comprehensive, revolutionary movement, we need to address all aspects of the issue: being able to have and support children, access to health care, housing, education, and transportation, adoption, non-traditional families, and so on. In order for a movement to be truly revolutionary it must be inclusive; the pro-choice movement has frequently neglected to address the needs of those at the margins. Does *Roe v. Wade* cover the complexities of the lives of women and mothers in prison?

What about the experiences of people who are undocumented? Trans* folks have long been fighting for healthcare that is inclusive. [12] Simply defending the right to legal abortion does not bring together all those affected by heteropatriarchy. Similarly, legal “choice” where abortions are expensive procedures does nothing to help poor women and highlights the need to smash capitalism in order to access positive freedoms. Reproductive justice advocates have argued for an intersectional approach to these issues, and an anarchist feminist analysis of reproductive freedom could benefit by utilizing an anarchist intersectional analysis.

An anarchist intersectional analysis of reproductive freedom shows us that when a community begins to struggle together, they require an understanding of the ways that relations of ruling operate together in order to have a holistic sense of what they are fighting for. If we can figure out the ways that oppressive and exploitative social relations work together—and form the tapestry that is daily life—we are better equipped to tear them apart. For instance, to analyze the ways that women of color have been particularly and historically targeted for forced sterilizations requires an

understanding of how heteropatriarchy, capitalism, the state, and white supremacy have worked together to create a situation where women of color are targeted bodily through social programs such as welfare, medical experiments, and eugenics.

How has racism and white supremacy functioned to support heteropatriarchy? How has sexuality been racialized in ways that have facilitated colonizers to remain without guilt about rape, genocide, and slavery, both historically and contemporarily? How has white supremacy been gendered with images such as the Mammy and the Jezebel?[13] How has the welfare state been racialized and gendered with an agenda for killing the black body?[14] Systemic oppressions such as white supremacy cannot be understood without an analysis of how those systems are gendered, sexualized, classed, etc. Similarly, this kind of analysis can be extended to understanding how heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, the state—all human relations of domination function. This is the weight behind an anarchist intersectional analysis.

An anarchist intersectional analysis, at least the way we are utilizing the standpoint, does not centralize any structure or institution over another, except by context. Rather, these structures and institutions operate to (re)produce one another. They are one another. Understood in this way, a central or primary oppressive or exploitative structure simply makes no sense. Rather, these social relations cannot be picked apart and one declared “central” and the others “peripheral.” And they are intersectional. After all, what good is an insurrection if some of us are left behind?

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Notes

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4. For example: Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6): 1241–1299.
5. See: Purkayastha, Bandana. 2012. “Intersectionality in a Transnational World.” *Gender & Society* 26: 55-66.
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10. For example: http://rockcenter.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/11/07/8640744-victims-speak-out-about-north-carolina-sterilization-program-which-targeted-women-young-girls-and-blacks?lite
11. For a good book that shows examples and the history of reproductive justice, see: Silliman, Jael M. 2004. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press.
12. Trans* is taken generally to mean: Transgender, Transsexual, genderqueer, Non-Binary, Genderfluid, Genderfuck, Intersex, Third gender, Transvestite, Cross-dresser, Bi-gender, Trans man, Trans woman, Agender.
13. Hill Collins, Patricia. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
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A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory

The Women's Caucus of the Anarchist Federation

Aims and definitions

The purpose of this paper is to outline a class struggle anarchist analysis of Privilege Theory. Many of us feel “privilege” is a useful term for discussing oppressions that go beyond economic class. It can help us to understand how these oppressions affect our social relations and the intersections of our struggles within the economic working class. It is written by members of the women's caucus of the Anarchist Federation. It does not represent all our views and is part of an ongoing discussion within the federation.

What do we mean – and what do we *not* mean – by privilege? Privilege implies that wherever there is a system of oppression (such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity) there is an oppressed group and also a privileged group, who benefit from the oppressions that this system puts in place[1]. The privileged group do not have to be active supporters of the system of oppression, or even aware of it, in order to benefit from it. They benefit from being viewed as the norm, and providing for their needs being seen as what is naturally done, while the oppressed group is considered the “other”, and their needs are “special considerations”. Sometimes the privileged group benefits from the system in obvious, material ways, such as when women are expected to do most or all of the housework, and male partners benefit from their unpaid labour. At other times the benefits are more subtle and invisible, and involve certain pressures being taken off a privileged group and focused on others, for example black and Asian youths being 28% more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than white youths[2]. The point here is not that police harassment doesn't happen to white youths, or that being working class or a white European immigrant doesn't also mean you're more likely to face harassment; the point is that a disproportionate number of black and Asian people are targeted in comparison to white people, and the result of this is that, if you are carrying drugs, and you are white, then *all other things being equal* you are much more likely to get away with it than if you were black. In the UK, white people are also less likely to be arrested or jailed, or to be the victim of a personal crime[3]. Black people currently face even greater unemployment in the UK than they do in the USA[4]. The point of quoting this is not to suggest we want a society in which people of all races and ethnicities face equal disadvantage – we want to create a society in which *nobody* faces these disadvantages. But part of getting there is acknowledging how systems of oppression work, which means recognising that, if black and ethnic minority groups are more likely to face these disadvantages, then by simple maths white people are *less* likely to face them, and that means they have an advantage, a privilege, including the privilege of not needing to be aware of the extent of the problem.

A privileged group may also, in some ways, be oppressed by the expectations of the system that privileges them, for example men under patriarchy are expected to not show weakness or emotion, and are mistrusted as carers. However, men are not oppressed by patriarchy *for being men*, they are oppressed in these ways because it is necessary in order to maintain women's oppression. For women to see themselves as weak, irrational and suited only to caring roles, they must believe that men are stronger, less emotional and incapable of caring for those who need it; for these reasons, men showing weakness, emotion and a capacity for caring labour are punished by patriarchy for letting the side down and giving women the opportunity to challenge their oppression.

It makes sense that where there is an oppressed group, there is a privileged group, because systems of oppression wouldn't last long if nobody benefited from them. It is crucial to understand that members of the privileged group of any of these systems may also be oppressed by any of the others, and this is what allows struggles to be divided and revolutionary activity crushed. We are divided, socially and politically, by a lack of awareness of our privileges, and how they are used to set our interests against each other and break our solidarity.

The term “privilege” has a complex relationship with class struggle, and to understand why, we need to look at some of the differences and confusions between economic and social class. Social class describes the cultural identities of working class, middle class and upper class. These identities, much like those built on gender or race, are socially constructed, created by a society based on its prejudices and expectations of people in those categories. Economic class is different. It describes the economic working and ruling classes, as defined by Marx. It functions through capitalism, and is based on the ownership of material resources, regardless of your personal identity or social status. This is why a wealthy, knighted capitalist like Alan Sugar can describe himself as a “working class boy made good”. He is clearly not working class if we look at it economically, but he clings to that social identity in the belief that it in some way justifies or excuses the exploitation within his business empire. He confuses social and economic class in order to identify himself with an oppressed group (the social working class) and so deny his own significant privilege

(as part of the economic ruling class). Being part of the ruling class of capitalism makes it impossible to support struggles against that system. This is because, unlike any other privileged group, the ruling class are directly responsible for the very exploitation they would be claiming to oppose.

This doesn't make economic class a "primary" oppression, or the others "secondary", but it does mean that resistance in economic class struggle takes different forms and has slightly different aims to struggles based on cultural identities. For example, we aim to end capitalism through a revolution in which the working class seize the means of production from the ruling class, and create an anarchist communist society in which there is no ruling class. For the other struggles mentioned, this doesn't quite work the same way - we can't force men to give up their maleness, or white people to give up their whiteness, or send them all to the guillotine and reclaim their power and privilege as if it were a resource that they were hoarding. Instead we need to take apart and understand the systems that tend to concentrate power and resources in the hands of the culturally privileged and question the very concepts of gender, sexuality, race etc. that are used to build the identities that divide us.

A large part of the resentment of the term "privilege" within class struggle movements comes from trying to make a direct comparison with ruling class privilege, when this doesn't quite work. Somebody born into a family who owns a chain of supermarkets or factories can, when they inherit their fortune, forgo it. They can collectivise their empire and give it to the workers, go and work in it themselves for the same share of the profits as everybody else. Capitalists can, if they choose, give up their privilege. This makes it OK for us to think of them as bad people if they don't, and justified in taking it from them by force in a revolutionary situation. Men, white people, straight people, cisgendered people etc., can't give up their privilege - no matter how much they may want to. It is forced on them by a system they cannot opt out of, or choose to stop benefiting from. This comparison with ruling class privilege makes many feel as if they're being accused of hoarding something they're not entitled to, and that they're being blamed for this, or asked to feel guilty or undergo some kind of endless penance to be given absolution for their privilege. This is not the case. Guilt isn't useful; awareness and thoughtful action are. If you take nothing else away from this document, take this: **You are not responsible for the system that gives you your privilege, only for how you respond to it.** The privileged (apart from the ruling class) have a vital role to play in the struggle against the systems that privilege them - it's just not a leadership role.

Answering objections to privilege

So if they didn't choose it and there's nothing they can do about it, why describe people as "Privileged"? Isn't it enough to talk about racism, sexism, homophobia etc. without having to call white, male and straight people something that offends them? If it's just the terminology you object to, be aware that radical black activists, feminists, queer activists and disabled activists widely use the term privilege. Oppressed groups need to lead the struggles to end their oppressions, and that means these oppressed groups get to define the struggle and the terms we use to talk about it. It is, on one level, simply not up to class struggle groups made up of a majority of white males to tell people of colour and women what words are useful in the struggles against white supremacy and patriarchy. If you dislike the term but agree with the concept, then it would show practical solidarity to leave your personal discomfort out of the argument, accept that the terminology has been chosen, and start using the same term as those at the forefront of these struggles.

Another common objection to the concept of privilege is that it makes a cultural status out of the lack of an oppression. You could say that not facing systematic prejudice for your skin colour isn't a privilege, it's how things should be for everyone. To face racism is the aberration. To not face it should be the default experience. The problem is, if not experiencing oppression is the default experience, then experiencing the oppression puts you outside the default experience, in a special category, which in turn makes a lot of the oppression invisible. To talk about privilege reveals what is normal to those without the oppression, yet cannot be taken for granted by those with it. To talk about homophobia alone may reveal the existence of prejudices - stereotypes about how gay men and lesbian women behave, perhaps, or violence targeted against people for their sexuality. It's unusual to find an anarchist who won't condemn these things. To talk about straight privilege, however, shows the other side of the system, the invisible side: what behaviour is considered "typical" for straight people? There isn't one - straight isn't treated like a sexual category, it is treated like the absence of "gay". You don't have to worry about whether you come across as "too straight" when you're going to a job interview, or whether your straight friends will think you're denying your straightness if you don't dress or talk straight enough, or whether your gay friends will be uncomfortable if you take them to a straight club, or if they'll embarrass you by saying something ignorant about getting hit on by somebody of the opposite sex. This analysis goes beyond worries about discrimination or prejudice to the very heart of what we consider normal and neutral, what we consider different and other, what needs explaining, what's taken as read - the

prejudices in favour of being straight aren't recognisable as prejudices, because they're built into our very perceptions of what is the default way to be.

It's useful to see this, because when we look at oppressions in isolation, we tend to attribute them to personal or societal prejudice, a homophobic law that can be repealed, a racial discrimination that can be legislated against. Alone, terms like "racism", "sexism", "ablism" don't describe how oppression is woven into the fabric of a society and a normal part of life rather than an easily isolated stain on society that can be removed without trace, leaving the fabric intact.[5]

Privilege theory is systematic. It explains why removing prejudice and discrimination isn't enough to remove oppression. It shows how society itself needs to be ordered differently. When people talk about being "colour-blind" in relation to race, they think it means they're not racist, but it usually means that they think they can safely ignore differences of background and life experience due to race, and expect that the priorities and world views of everybody should be the same as those of white people, which they consider to be "normal". It means they think they don't have to listen to people who are trying to explain why a situation is different for them. They want difference to go away, so that everybody can be equal, yet by trying to ignore difference they are reinforcing it. Recognising privilege means recognising that differences of experience exist which we may not be aware of. It means being willing to listen when people tell us about how their experience differs from ours. It means trying to conceive of a new "normal" that we can bring about through a differently structured society, instead of erasing experiences that don't fit into our privileged concept of "normal".

Intersectionality and Kyriarchy

Kyriarchy is the concept of combined systems of oppression, the idea that capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, cishnormativity, theocracy and other systems that we don't necessarily have names for, are all connected, influencing and supporting each other. The word "kyriarchy" is also a handy verbal shortcut that saves having to list all the systems of oppression every time you want to explain this concept. It means everybody who's fighting oppression of any kind is fighting the same war, we just fight it on a myriad of different fronts.

Intersectionality is the idea that we are all privileged by some of these systems and oppressed by others, and that, because those systems affect one another, our oppressions and privileges intersect. This means that we each experience oppression in ways specific to our particular combinations of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, age etc.[6] [7]

Class struggle analyses tend to mark out capitalism as separate from the other systems in kyriarchy. As explained above, capitalism operates differently from systems of oppression based on identity or culture, but it would be too simplistic to dismiss these oppressions as secondary or as mere aspects of capitalism. Patriarchy, in particular, existed long before modern industrial capitalism and, there's evidence to suggest, before the invention of money itself[8], and it's not difficult to imagine a post-capitalist society in which oppressive gender roles still hold true[9]. As anarchists are opposed to all systems of oppression, we recognise that fighting capitalism alone is not enough, and that other oppressions won't melt away "after the revolution". If we want a post-revolutionary society free of all oppression, we need all the oppressed to have an equal role in creating it, and that means listening to experiences of oppression that we don't share and working to understand how each system operates: in isolation, in relation to capitalism and other systems of oppression and as part of kyriarchy.[10]

We're used to talking about sexism or racism as divisive of the working class. Kyriarchy allows us to get away from the primacy of class while keeping it very much in the picture. Just as sexism and racism divide class struggle, capitalism and racism divide gender struggles, and sexism and capitalism divide race struggles. All systems of oppression divide the struggles against all the other systems that they intersect with. This is because we find our loyalties divided by our own particular combinations of privilege and oppression, and we prioritise the struggles we see as primary to the detriment of others, and to the detriment of solidarity. This is why the Anarchist Federation's 3rd Aim & Principle[11] cautions against cross-class alliances, but we should be avoiding campaigns that forward the cause of any oppressed group against the interests of any other - not just class. That doesn't mean that every campaign has to forward the cause of every single struggle equally, but it does mean that we need to be aware of how our privileges can blind us to the oppressions we could be ignorantly walking all over in our campaigns. We have to consider a whole lot more than class struggle when we think about whether a campaign is moving us forwards or backwards as anarchists. Being able to analyse and point out how systems of oppression intersect is vital, as hitting these systems of oppression at their intersections can be our most effective way of uniting struggles and building solidarity across a number of ideological fronts.

Some examples:

In the early 1800s, there were several strikes of male textile workers against women being employed at their factories because their poorer pay allowed them to undercut male workers[12]. The intersection of capitalism and patriarchy meant that women were oppressed by capitalists as both workers and women (being exploited for lower pay than men), and by men as both women and workers (kept in the domestic sphere, doing even lower paid work). When changing conditions (mechanisation) made it too difficult to restrict women to their traditional work roles, unions finally saw reason and campaigned across the intersection, allowing women to join the unions and campaigning for their pay to be raised.

From the 70s to the present day, certain strands of radical feminism have refused to accept the validity of trans* struggles, keeping trans women out of women's spaces (see the controversies over Radfem 2012¹ and some of the workshops at Women Up North 2012² over their "women born women" policies). The outcome of this is as above: the most oppressed get the shitty end of both sticks (in this case cisnormativity and patriarchy), with feminism, the movement that is supposed to be at the forefront of fighting the oppression that affects both parties (patriarchy) failing at one of its sharpest intersections. This also led to the fracturing of the feminist movement and stagnation of theory through failure to communicate with trans* activists, whose priorities and struggles have such a massive crossover with feminism. One positive that's come out of these recent examples is the joining together of feminist and trans* activist groups to challenge the entry policy of Radfem 2012. This is leading to more communication, solidarity and the possibility of joint actions between these groups.

The above examples mean that thinking about our privileges and oppressions is essential for organising together, for recognising where other struggles intersect with our own and what our role should be in those situations, where our experiences will be useful and where they will be disruptive, where we should be listening carefully and where we can contribute constructively. Acknowledging privilege in this situation means acknowledging that it's not just the responsibility of the oppressed group to challenge the system that oppresses them, it's everybody's responsibility, because being part of a privileged group doesn't make you neutral, it means you're facing an advantage. That said, when we join the struggle against our own advantages we need to remember that it isn't about duty or guilt or altruism, because all our struggles are all connected. The more we can make alliances over the oppressions that have been used to divide us, the more we can unite against the forces that exploit us all. None of us can do it alone.

The myth of the "Oppression Olympics"

The parallels that are drawn between the Black and women's movements can always turn into an 11-plus: who is more exploited? Our purpose here is not parallels. We are seeking to describe that complex interweaving of forces which is the working class; we are seeking to break down the power relations among us on which is based the hierarchical rule of international capital. For no man can represent us as women any more than whites can speak about and themselves end the Black experience. Nor do we seek to convince men of our feminism. Ultimately they will be "convinced" by our power. We offer them what we offer the most privileged women: power over their enemies. The price is an end to their privilege over us. [13]

To say that somebody has white privilege isn't to suggest that they can't also have a whole host of other oppressions. To say that somebody suffers oppression by patriarchy doesn't mean they can't also have a lot of other privileges. There is no points system for working out how privileged or oppressed you are in relation to somebody else, and no point in trying to do so. The only way that privilege or oppression makes your contributions to a struggle more or less valid is through that struggle's relevance to your lived experience.

A black, disabled working class lesbian may not necessarily have had a harder life than a white, able-bodied working class straight cis-man, but she will have a much greater understanding of the intersections between class, race, disability, gender and sexuality. The point isn't that, as the most oppressed in the room, she should lead the discussion, it's that her experience gives her insights he won't have on the relevant points of struggle, the demands that will be most effective, the bosses who represent the biggest problem, the best places and times to hold meetings or how to phrase a callout for a mass meeting so that it will appeal to a wider range of people, ways of dealing with issues that will very probably not occur to anybody whose oppression is along fewer intersections. He should be listening to her, not because she is more oppressed than him (though she may well be), but because it is vital to the struggle that she is heard, and because the prejudices that society has conditioned into us, and that still affect the most socially aware of us, continue to make it more difficult for her to be heard, for us to hear her.

Some would argue that governments, public bodies and corporations have been known to use arguments like these to put forward or promote particular people into positions of power or responsibility, either as a well-meaning attempt to

¹ http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2012/05/theres_nothing

² <http://manchesterfeministnetwork.wordpress.com/women-up-north-2012/>

ensure that oppressed groups are represented or as a cynical exercise in tokenism to improve their public image. This serves the state and capital by encouraging people to believe that they are represented, and that their most effective opportunities for change will come through supporting or petitioning these representatives. This is what we mean by cross-class alliances in the 3rd A&P, and obviously we oppose the idea that, for instance, a woman Prime Minister, will be likely to do anything more for working class women than a male Prime Minister will do for working class men. **It should be remembered that privilege theory is not a movement in itself but an analysis used by a diverse range of movements, liberal and radical, reformist and revolutionary.** By the same token, the rhetoric of solidarity and class unity is used by leftists to gain power for themselves, even as we use those same concepts to fight the power structures they use. The fact that some people will use the idea of privilege to promote themselves as community leaders and reformist electoral candidates doesn't mean that that's the core reasoning or inevitable outcome of privilege theory. For us, as class struggle anarchists, the identities imposed on us by kyriarchy and the politics that go with them are about uniting in struggle against all oppression, not entrenching social constructs, congratulating ourselves on how aware we are, claiming special rights according to our background or biology, and certainly not creating ranked hierarchies of the most oppressed to put forward for tokenistic positions of power.

In the AF, we already acknowledge in our Aims and Principles the necessity of autonomous struggle for people in oppressed groups; but rather than analyse why this is necessary, we only warn against cross-class alliances within their struggles. The unspoken reason why it is necessary for them to organise independently is privilege. Any reason you can think of why it might be necessary, is down to privilege: the possible presence of abusers, the potential of experiences of oppression being misunderstood, mistrusted, dismissed, or requiring a huge amount of explanation before they are accepted and the meeting can move onto actions around them, even internalised feelings of inferiority are triggered by our own awareness of the presence of members of the privileged group. This may not be their fault, but it is due to the existence of systems that privilege them. The reason we need to organise autonomously is that we need to be free of the presence of privilege to speak freely. After speaking freely, we can identify and work to change the conditions that prevented us from doing so before – breaking down the influence of those systems on ourselves and lessening the privilege of others in their relations with us – but the speaking freely has to come first.

To equate talk of “privilege” with liberalism, electoralism and cross-class struggles is to deny oppressed groups the space and the language to identify their experiences of oppression and so effectively organise against the systems that oppress them. If we acknowledge that these organising spaces are necessary, and that it is possible for them to function without engaging in liberalism and cross-class struggles, then we must acknowledge that privilege theory does not, of necessity, lead to liberalism and cross-class struggles. It may do so when it is used by liberals and reformists, but not when used by revolutionary class struggle anarchists. Privilege theory doesn't come with compulsory liberalism any more than the idea of class struggle comes with compulsory Leninism.

The class struggle analysis of privilege

This may all seem, at first, to make class struggle just one struggle among many, but the unique way in which ruling class privilege operates provides an overarching context for all the other systems. While any system can be used as a “context” for any other, depending on which intersections we're looking at, capitalism is particularly important because those privileged within it have overt control over resources rather than just a default cultural status of normalcy. They are necessarily active oppressors, and cannot be passive or unwilling recipients of the benefits of others' oppression. The ruling class and the working class have opposing interests, while the privileged and oppressed groups of other systems only have differing interests, which differ less as the influence of those systems is reduced.

This doesn't make economic class a primary oppression, or the others secondary, because our oppressions and privileges intersect. If women's issues were considered secondary to class issues, this would imply that working class men's issues were more important than those of working class women. Economic class is not so much the primary struggle as the all-encompassing struggle. Issues that only face queer people in the ruling class (such as a member of an aristocratic family having to remain in the closet and marry for the sake of the family line) are not secondary to our concerns, but completely irrelevant, because they are among the few oppressions that truly will melt away after the revolution, when there is no ruling class to enforce them on itself. We may condemn racism, sexism, homophobia and general snobbery shown by members of the ruling class to one another, but we don't have common cause in struggle with those suffering these, even those with whom we share a cultural identity, because they remain our direct and active oppressors.

When we try to apply this across other intersections than economic class, we don't see concerns that are irrelevant to all but the privileged group, but we do find that the limited perspective of privileged activists gives campaigns an overly narrow focus. For instance, overwhelmingly white, middle class feminist organisations of the 60s and 70s have been criticised by women of colour and disabled women for focusing solely on the legalisation of abortion at a time

when Puerto-Rican women and disabled women faced forced sterilisation, and many women lacked access to essential services during pregnancy and childbirth. Although the availability of abortion certainly wasn't irrelevant to these women, the campaigns failed to also consider the affordability of abortion, and completely ignored the concerns of women being denied the right to *have* a child. Most feminist groups now tend to talk about "reproductive rights" rather than "abortion rights", and demand free or affordable family planning services that include abortion, contraception, sexual health screening, antenatal and post-natal care, issues relevant to women of all backgrounds.[14]

We have to challenge ourselves to look out for campaigns that, due to the privilege of those who initiate them, lack awareness of how an issue differs across intersections. We need to broaden out our own campaigns to include the perspectives of all those affected by the issues we cover. This will allow us to bring more issues together, gather greater solidarity, fight more oppressions and build a movement that can challenge the whole of kyriarchy, which is the only way to ever defeat any part of it, including capitalism.

Notes

1 "A common form of blindness to privilege is that women and people of color are often described as being treated unequally, but men and whites are not. This...is logically impossible. Unequal simply means 'not equal,' which describes both those who receive less than their fair share and those who receive more. But there can't be a short end of the stick without a long end, because it's the longness of the long end that makes the short end short. To pretend otherwise makes privilege and those who receive it invisible." Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power and Difference* (2006).

2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16552489>, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/jun/12/police-stop-and-search-black-people> (statistics not available for Scotland)

3 <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/statistics/mojstats/stats-race-cjs-2010.pdf>

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/13/black-people-unemployed-britain-us>

5 "While it is important that individuals work to transform their consciousness, striving to be anti-racist, it is important for us to remember that the struggle to end white supremacy is a struggle to change a system, a structure...For our efforts to end white supremacy to be truly effective, individual struggle to change consciousness must be fundamentally linked to collective effort to transform those structures that reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy." bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 1995

6 <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/>

7 Intersectionality as a term and an idea has been developed by, among others: Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Leslie McCall, if you are interested in further reading.

8 Graeber's 'Debt: The First 5,000 Years' suggests that young women were used in some pre-money societies as an early form of currency or debt tally.

9 See the chapter with all the beautiful and sexually available house-keeping-cleaning-serving women in William Morris' utopia *News from Nowhere*.

10 One anarchist analysis of intersectionality: <http://libcom.org/library/refusing-waitanarchism-intersectionality>.

11 "We believe that fighting systems of oppression that divide the working class, such as racism and sexism, is essential to class struggle. Anarchist-Communism cannot be achieved while these inequalities still exist. In order to be effective in our various struggles against oppression, both within society and within the working class, we at times need to organise independently as people who are oppressed according to gender, sexuality, ethnicity or ability. We do this as working class people, as cross-class movements hide real class differences and achieve little for us. Full emancipation cannot be achieved without the abolition of capitalism." <http://www.afed.org.uk/organisation/aims-and-principles.html>

12 See Chapter 7 of *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* by Anna Clark.

13 Selma James, 'Sex, Race and Class' 1975.

14 Links to these examples are on these posts at the Angry Black Woman blog:
<http://theangryblackwoman.com/2010/02/26/reproductive-justice-linkspam-a-starting-point/>,
<http://theangryblackwoman.com/2008/04/14/poc-and-the-politics-of-medical-research/>

Published at <http://www.afed.org.uk/blog/state/327-a-class-struggle-anarchist-analysis-of-privilege-theory--from-the-womens-caucus-.html>

Privilege Theory. The Politics of Defeat

Sabcat

I've been blissfully ignorant of these ideas of privilege and the concept of checking it until very recently. It came across my radar after the fall out of a twitter row. A set of ideas were put forward, and argument was made. The response to this argument boiled down to the person was writing it from a perspective of "white male privilege". The issues were side stepped.

I assumed that this was an abuse of a theory that I didn't understand, that privilege theory wasn't simply a handy tool to dismiss an argument because you don't like the person making it. I asked on twitter for some links so I could find out what this theory was really about. The most interesting and by interesting I mean the most infuriating was A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory – from the Women's Caucus.

Before I explain my problems with the theory and it's uses I'll first briefly explain where I'm coming from. I'm a socialist. I believe in and strive for a universally applied set of values that can be simply described as equality and freedom. For a more complete explanation of these values AFED's own aims and principles¹ is a good place to look. These aims and principles provide a lens to view the world through and a yard stick to measure the validity or otherwise of ideas against.

People Act in Their Material Interest

The AFED Aims and principles criticism of unions touches on this, the interests of union leadership are often at odds with the interests of their members. The overthrow of the wage system, of capitalism while in the interests of the members is not in the interests of the leadership. Privilege theory takes no account of shifting material interests and instead is concerned with fixed categories of identity. Once analysis moves away from the material and into identity it's almost impossible to reconcile it with class struggle in all but the most crude terms. In their analysis of privilege theory AFED abandon class struggle almost completely:

The term "privilege" has a complex relationship with class struggle, and to understand why, we need to look at some of the differences and confusions between economic and social class. Social class describes the cultural identities of working class, middle class and upper class. These identities, much like those built on gender or race, are socially constructed, created by a society based on its prejudices and expectations of people in those categories. Economic class is different. It describes the economic working and ruling classes, as defined by Marx. It functions through capitalism, and is based on the ownership of material resources, regardless of your personal identity or social status. This is why a wealthy, knighted capitalist like Alan Sugar can describe himself as a "working class boy made good". He is clearly not working class if we look at it economically, but he clings to that social identity in the belief that it in some way justifies or excuses the exploitation within his business empire. He confuses social and economic class in order to identify himself with an oppressed group (the social working class) and so deny his own significant privilege (as part of the economic ruling class). Being part of the ruling class of capitalism makes it impossible to support struggles against that system. This is because, unlike any other privileged group, the ruling class are directly responsible for the very exploitation they would be claiming to oppose.

This idea that the middle class and working class are nothing more than socially constructed cultural identities is convenient for privilege theory. It's reduced the class struggle in the material sense to Alan Sugar and other owners of material resources oppressing everyone else. The middle class are part of the oppressed group, it's an identity no more or less significant than another. It's complete none sense. The middle class and working class as well as cultural difference experience different material conditions. The material and the cultural feed into each other in the form of connections and opportunities for the middle class that the working class don't enjoy. The interests of the working class and middle class are very different. People act on the basis of their material interests. Just as the union leaderships don't share the same interests as their membership, depending on the existing order for their material advantage and power so the middle class exist and enjoy material advantage in the same way.

¹ <http://www.afed.org.uk/aims.html>

Item 3 from AFED's aims and principles:

We believe that fighting systems of oppression that divide the working class, such as racism and sexism, is essential to class struggle. Anarchist-Communism cannot be achieved while these inequalities still exist. In order to be effective in our various struggles against oppression, both within society and within the working class, we at times need to organise independently as people who are oppressed according to gender, sexuality, ethnicity or ability. We do this as working class people, as cross-class movements hide real class differences and achieve little for us. Full emancipation cannot be achieved without the abolition of capitalism.

The twin issues of division and oppression are very real and need to be tackled. The important part of that is “*We do this as working class people, as cross-class movements hide real class differences and achieve little for us.*” The reason is that class is unique, other identity categories can feed into the material conditions and interests of a person but on a shifting basis. That's not to say that patriarchy or racism are not real or that they can be dismissed but it's not possible except on single, narrowly framed issues to equate the interests of any group across class lines. AFED claim this can achieve little for us. I go further and say that it ensures that struggles rooted in identity and not class can never feed into a wider struggle against capitalism because they are made up of people who don't share the same interests, class interests. The overthrow of capitalism is not in the interests of the middle class whether they're a cisgendered white male or not.

In their analysis of Privilege Theory AFED touch on racism:

At other times the benefits are more subtle and invisible, and involve certain pressures being taken off a privileged group and focused on others, for example black and Asian youths being 28% more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than white youths. The point here is not that police harassment doesn't happen to white youths, or that being working class or a white European immigrant doesn't also mean you're more likely to face harassment; the point is that a disproportionate number of black and Asian people are targeted in comparison to white people, and the result of this is that, if you are carrying drugs, and you are white, then all other things being equal you are much more likely to get away with it than if you were black. In the UK, white people are also less likely to be arrested or jailed, or to be the victim of a personal crime. Black people currently face even greater unemployment in the UK than they do in the USA. The point of quoting this is not to suggest we want a society in which people of all races and ethnicities face equal disadvantage – we want to create a society in which nobody faces these disadvantages. But part of getting there is acknowledging how systems of oppression work, which means recognising that, if black and ethnic minority groups are more likely to face these disadvantages, then by simple maths white people are less likely to face them, and that means they have an advantage, a privilege, including the privilege of not needing to be aware of the extent of the problem.

As they say, black and Asian youths are more likely to face police oppression, their example that a white person is more likely to be able to carry drugs and not get caught is odd and isn't privilege unless the police are harassing someone at all times and if they stop doing so on grounds of race white people are at higher risk.

The unemployment statistics make more sense, black people are oppressed in this way. Thinking of this in terms of privilege for white people isn't useful in terms of understanding it and is positively counter-productive in tackling it. What is described is a material reason for solidarity. There's a pile and some people are at the bottom of it, they belong to a variety of identity categories. The only way out of this is recognition that the injustice is the existence of the pile itself. Describing this in terms of white people being privileged fails to recognise the material conditions at the root of the issue, that the real issue is a class issue. Viewing it in terms of race only perpetuates the problem, the problem being the pile itself. Capitalism.

The last race riots in the UK were in 2005 in the Lozells area of Birmingham. The fight between black and Asian people was caused by the multicultural policy of allocating resources based on ethnicity. This is explored by Kenan Malik in his essay How to Make a Riot:

Once political power and financial resources became allocated by ethnicity, then people began to identify themselves in terms of their ethnicity, and only their ethnicity. 'People are forced into a very one-dimensional view of themselves by the way that equality policies work,' says Joy Warmington of the Birmingham Race Action Partnership, a council-funded but independent equalities organization. 'People mobilize on the basis

*of how they feel they will get the resources to tackle the issues important to them. And in Birmingham it helps to say you're campaigning for the needs of your ethnic or faith community, because policies have tended to emphasize ethnicity as a key to entitlement. If somebody in Handsworth or Lozells wants a community centre or a health centre it is often easier to get funding if they say "We want an Asian community centre" or "We want an African-Caribbean health centre." They are forced to see themselves in terms of their ethnicity, their race, their culture and so on rather than in broader terms that might bring people together.'*²

The racism, the division of working class people had at it's roots material resources. The real grievances of those people who saw themselves as missing out were not racial they were class issues. Privilege Theory does nothing to help us understand let alone tackle this because there is no one with any actual privilege.

Privilege Theory is a tool for middle class people to tell people with no discernible privilege to "check their privilege". It provides nothing of any use to a working class movement and undermines solidarity. It formalises an ad hominem argument when the issues aren't convenient to discuss.

We don't need it, we have a set of ideas and values by which to measure arguments against. What we don't have, as working class people is much in the way of privilege unlike our middle class friends playing at being radical. It's not a game.

Published online at <http://sabcat.com/privilege-theory-the-politics-of-defeat/>

² http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/pp_fatwa_extract.html

The Poverty of Privilege Politics

Tabitha Bast & Hannah McClure

Privilege. Now there's a word we are hearing a lot. The concept and finger-pointing of privilege is coming to increasingly concern us as a problem and a poor semblance within the alternative left. We feel not only embarrassed by the simplicity of this undisclosed and undefined overarching theory but concerned that it further leads a stagnant movement down more dire dead ends. And yet our disquiet is not because we believe interpersonal politics are less worthy of our attention, nor because we are without awareness and rage about the oppressive power structures within our lives and political milieus. We do not believe that these are minor details that can wait til after the revolution. Whilst we are currently organising what is suspiciously like a women's consciousness raising group, we dismiss those laughable and cringeworthy lists that have gone viral in the social networking world. These might appear as conflicting positions, but as we hope to explain, we do not find them so.

As mentioned, we are confronted with endless lists asking us to 'Check our Privilege.' We have encountered the 'heterosexual privilege checklist' the "cis privilege checklist" and the "able bodied checklist." (examples of these checklists are included at the end of the article- the Eds.) We think you get the picture? Soon we will be carrying around score cards wishing to be the most victimised person in the world. This sort of privilege scorekeeping is tallied in our everyday encounters but most often called out in a certain political context, such as a political meeting, discussion or lecture. We now are presented with the 'manarchist' who uses his male privilege taking up space in meetings. Taking up space is not seen as only about the amount a person of privilege speaks but often the language used. We see a growth in these subcultural movements in the UK of an adherence to a new political language and analysis with a centrality of privilege as an overarching ideology. We find an anti-intellectualism where both theorising and militancy are seen as a privilege in and of themselves, as if acting on the front line as WELL as analysis are only weapons of the oppressive rather than weapons of the oppressed. We find this dangerous because it evokes that the most 'oppressed' are helpless and weak, encourages a lack of activity and analysis away from 'make do and mend' circles, and further rarefies the notion of resistance.

Another vagary is the self-flagellating groups emerging that prop up a culture of shame. For example, recent workshops have emerged under the theme of 'Men dealing with their patriarchal shit.' Whilst we want individuals to examine, analyse and challenge their own behaviour in political terms these punkier than thou equal ops sessions reinforce the holier than thou attitude of the attendees....and the ones who could do with it rammed down their hairy throats wouldn't dream of attending. These examples of new emerging themes demonstrate that on one side of the coin you have a points based oppression outlook (we've made the complexities of power into a handy ticklist for you!) and on the other you have individualised guilt and self- victimisation (which is another way of re-focusing on the 'more privileged' ironically). This focus on the individual and self as the problem is a product of privilege leading us nowhere. It's a dead end. We feel a political lens of privilege is divisive and unhelpful when we are part and parcel of a system that already thrives on the division of the working classes, through gender, class and sexual oppression.

So how then do we divide these concepts so we neither become a self parodying shell of victim politics nor replicate the power structures we seek to destroy? How does this differ from an analysis of power? Does it permit spaces for movement and resistance? Or does it revert back to the activist quagmire of guilt, shame and stagnation? These are questions that should be discussed within our wider political groups.

We recognise the well meaningness of checking your privilege. We too understand that people are silenced not just as individuals but due to identities. However, we perceive wrong footed attempts to right this balance. In meetings we witness call outs where someone will announce that six men have spoken and no women. This is an attempt to expose the hidden subtleties of patriarchy and male dominance, and to empower women. We have never seen this work to readdress power relations. This call of male privilege may serve to quieten the six men who have spoken, but it does not give more voice to the silenced. More awkwardly, it is often uncomfortable for the women in the group who may feel, as we do in this scenario, an obligation to speak, but with it comes an unnatural sense of representation. The opposite usually takes place; a silencing of people rather than the growth of new conversations. One that is forced, fake and full of disdain. Whilst the next person, woman, is to speak but feels an artificial pressure of representation that we are supposed to be speaking on behalf of all women, from an identity as 'woman', and only as 'woman'. And when we, or she, speaks, it is of course as a woman within patriarchy and to a room where she is being observed and judged by the six men who have spoken, under a political male gaze. Because of these things, and more, we do not see these clumsy attempts moving any steps toward challenging sexist oppression. To do that we need first to acknowledge intersectionality of power, history and privilege. With a singular identification of privilege we reduce the myriad of power relations within the group to a straightforward visible one. We don't want a politics that reduces and simplifies power into an ideology of privilege. Intersectionalities of power, oppression and privilege need to be examined mixed with relations of capital. Analysing and pinpointing privilege to an obsessive extent in political

circles can be demobilising as well as futile. But most damaging of all, these performances of privilege call out, mislead us into believing that challenging patriarchy within our interpersonal relations occurs within the formalities of a meeting and it is who speaks rather than what they say.

Because ultimately, it is not woman's voice we should be seeking but feminist voice. A feminist voice is not one based on identity but rather on a shared transformative politics. A feminist voice is a stance rather than a given. As bell hooks reminds us; feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. We suggest this will often be best realised through those most facing sexist oppression but also we are vigilant to note that not all oppressed are resisting, subverting or fighting this oppression, nor are those who seem to benefit in ways from it always or automatically in alignment with the oppressive forces. So where does that leave identity and privilege in the struggle for freedoms? Understanding politics through the lens of privilege is intrinsically entangled with identity politics. And, for reasons stated, we find identity politics a monolithic and restrictive way to understand the world. We are our identities but we are never just one identity, we are a complexity of them. And identities do not line up in a straightforward ABC of oppression, no matter how much the privilegists want them to. This just falls into binaries that we are attempting to escape from, or creates more. The queer movement challenges the notions of "men" and "women" yet seems to be opting instead for "cis" or "trans" giving new permanence and boundaries to our gender. This is not to downplay the struggles but we believe that these fixed linear positions are not just unhelpful but often false. Cis gender may not seem intrinsically a privilege to the women killed by domestic violence or childbirth. Nor male privilege to a gay Ugandan. The relationality of power has to be optimistically understood if we are to move beyond an idle determinism and singular identity code. But, also, to resist we must understand our power; the strength in our collective power rather than this frugal analysis of power where privilege divides us into mundane categories of oppression. We need to galvanise on our power as a class, as this class being fucked over by capital within all it's facets of everyday life. Rather than creating new prisons and new boxes to further tear ourselves to pieces within, we need to analyse and act with fluidity and creativity in terms of our intersectional identities in the kitchens, the bedrooms, the meeting spaces, the pubs and in the streets we demand to occupy.

Privilege Checklists:

- <http://queersunited.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/heterosexual-privilege-checklist.html>
- <http://takesupspace.wordpress.com/>
- <http://manchesterafed.wordpress.com/2012/03/09/how-not-to-be-a-manarchist/>

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Online at <http://libcom.org/library/poverty-privilege-politics>

Privilege Politics is Reformism

Will

Introduction: White Supremacy Lives on

It is crystal clear that white supremacy exists. It seeps through every pore in our society. It infects every social relationship. It obviously affects Occupy Wall Street.

Everyone knows the wealth divide, the incarceration numbers, gentrification, the education gap and more are part of the class and racial oppression of the United States. All this is obvious. More politically contentious matters are the social interactions, which are racialized in negative ways in society and specifically in OWS. It is always painful, because at best we hope movement spaces are places where people can finally engage with one another on universal-human terms. However, it is not a surprise that even in movement spaces people experience white supremacy. Our society is saturated with it, so to expect non-racialized human relations in the movement would be utopian.

The combination of structural oppression based on race and class, the history of white supremacy and capitalism, and how that affects people's interactions with one another, has led to a school of thought called Privilege theory.

Privilege theory recognizes structural and historical oppression, but has an undue focus on individual behavior and thoughts as a major way of addressing white supremacy (and other oppressions, but I will tend to focus on white supremacy and class). Privilege theory has a set of basic principles: a) Privilege theory argues that movement spaces should be safe for all oppressed groups. One way to make such a space safe is by negotiating one another's actions in non-oppressive ways. For example, this means straight white men should talk less or think about the privileges they have when discussing an action or political question. b) Privilege theory justifies that militancy and political sophistication is the domain of a privileged elite based on class, gender and racial privileges. c) Privilege theory roots political and strategic mistakes in the personal privileges that people bring into the movement. d) Privilege theory seeks to deal with these issues primarily through education, teach-ins and conversations. This piece will point out key failures in all four principles of Privilege theory. It will tentatively lay out some ways forward, while recognizing more research and, more importantly, more struggle is needed to resolve some of the outstanding problems facing the movement.

There is certainly a long history of people of color facing white supremacy inside the movement. However they have tended to focus around programmatic and organizational critiques. Areas where deficiencies could be more easily seen and addressed. For example, if a group does not organize around Black prisoners, it can be addressed by having political discussions, changing the program of the group, and making an organizing orientation towards Black prisoners. Privilege theory addresses this by claiming that someone's privilege creates a blind spot to the reality of incarceration of Black men.

Another aspect of oppression Privilege theorists tackle are social interactions. However, it becomes much harder to objectively assess if a white man's glance objectifies a person because of the color of their skin; if a white man yelling at a person of color is due to race, if it is a non-racialized-gendered reaction to political differences; or if a white man is taking up a lot of space because of his privilege or because he needs to speak because he simply has something valid/ important to say.

There is no doubt that in any organization or movement, where this is common behavior, people of color will either not join or leave after some time. But at the same time, any movement/ organization which spends tons of time on this will no longer be a fighting organization/ movement and eventually people of color will leave. It will become talk shops or consciousness raising circles. In a period when the NYPD are killing Black and Latino men with impunity, schools are being closed in POC neighborhoods, anti-Muslim propaganda is rampant, and immigrants are deported every day, few will join a group which only focuses on inter-personal relationships. The key is to understand the tension and get the balance right.

At the same time it is undeniable that that many POC believe this to be a serious way to deal with white supremacy.

That many believe a movement can be built from Privilege Theory's political and strategic claims. Privilege Theory has come to be the dominant trend under specific historical circumstances, which I will briefly address. I believe this to be a false strategy, ultimately failing to actually solve the problems Privilege Theory wishes to address.

Probably every person of color has experienced some variety of interaction described above. First, let's discuss the complexities: when this happens, even amongst people of color there is disagreement over the perception of what the interactions meant. Understanding the seriousness of the charge is tied up with the white militants' past behavior or track record. People of color are also coming in with their own experiences with white supremacy. This certainly affects how they see social relationships. Lastly, some agreement has to be found that as a general rule people who

join the movement are not white supremacists. This should be a fundamental assumption, otherwise, we are left with the ridiculous and suicidal political reality that we are building a movement with white supremacists. So that leaves us dealing with racial alienation or white chauvinism by people who we assume are against white supremacy. That seems to be a crucial point that needs to be recognized.

Usually people of color want acknowledgement that something fucked up happened. It is true that generally, most white militants flip out. On one hand the white militants grasp the seriousness of the accusation, but on the other hand, in their defense, they fail to give recognition of how another person of color perceived an event. The white militant usually acts as if the theory of white supremacy infecting everything stops with their mind and body when they are accused of anything. This is understandable, as no serious militant should take such accusations lightly.

This is particularly important as people of color, based on all the shit that happens to them, tend to see the world differently, and are obviously sensitive to racial slights. The lack of recognition usually escalates the situation as the person of color tends to feel, what is “objectively true” falls back on how the white militant defines reality. At such a point, productive conversation usually breaks down.

Lastly things are more complicated today because white supremacy is much more coded today in language and behavior. No one in the movement is going to call anyone nigger. People actually did so in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. No one is going to say that a person of color should not speak because of their color of their skin. Things are not that clear. This is partially a sign that struggles of people of color have forced white-supremacy’s anti-POC language to take a different form. However, white supremacy still exists. In the media for example talk of crime or poverty is code word for lazy Black or Latino people who ruin paradise for the hard working great white citizens of America.

Exactly how white supremacy works in coded language and behavior in the movement is still something that needs to be investigated.

While the difficulties of being a person of color militant in movements is difficult as hell, there are certain odd problems of being a white militant in the movement. People of color enter the movement expecting better racial relationships. This is certainly fair. This usually means that white male militants are expected to take up less space, talk less, etc. Every personal interaction, while always influenced by the weight of history, cannot be judged solely by that dimension alone. For example, Black people have been slaves in the US and specifically servants to white masters. Extrapolating that historical past to the social interaction when a Black man or woman gets a white friend a cup of water would be ridiculous. There is always agency and freedom in the actions we participate in today. They are always shaped by race, class gender, sexuality and history; but we are not completely trapped by the crimes of the past either. Otherwise friendship, love, camaraderie would be impossible. The very possibility of any form of human social relationship would be destroyed. We would be parroting the past and dogmatically replicating it in the present.

Usually, after acknowledgement, things can be left at that. However, sometimes deeper organizational and political issues come up. Especially if a person of color says there is a pattern/ history of such behavior. If this is the case, it should be dealt with in terms of organizational and political dynamics. The limitations of privilege politics in dealing with such situations will be spelt out later.

Fanon, Black Liberation, and Humanity

The most sophisticated traditions in Black liberation have struggled to deal with such problems. Revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin and White Masks* (BSWM) used the philosophical tools of Phenomenology to explore the experience of consciousness/ lived experience of people of color. This tradition in the movement is sadly dead. In light of his investigations of Phenomenology, there is strong evidence in Fanon’s writings and practice in his life showing that conversation cannot solve such racialized experiences; only the most militant and violent struggle can cleanse racialized human relations. The United States has not experienced high levels of struggles in over 50 years. Major problems develop because of the lack of militant struggle in the country.

Fanon also left a puzzling legacy by writing *Black Skin, White Masks*, which often is used to justify privilege theory. However, two problems exist with such a treatment of BSWM. The first is that this book was part of Fanon’s development; his working out of problems he saw and experienced. Second and more importantly, almost all privilege theorists ignore the introduction and conclusion of the work. This is strange considering those two chapters are the theoretical framework of the book. In these two chapters Fanon expresses equality with all of humanity and denies anyone demanding reparations or guilt of any kind for past historical oppressions. What else can Fanon mean by, “I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there

will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race.” The gendered language aside, this stands in stark contrast to privilege theory.

Fanon stands at the heights of attempting to reconcile the experiences of oppression with the need to develop human interactions and the necessity of changing them through militant struggle. There is no doubt that Fanon’s attempt to have human interactions with white people constantly clashed with white people’s racialized interactions with him. In other words, white people do talk to people of color in condescending ways, dismiss POC issues as secondary, ignore POC etc. The issue is how to address it when it happens and in that realm Privilege theory fails.

Privilege theory puts too much weight on consciousness and education. It ends up creating a politics of guilt by birth. At the same time, there is no doubt that more education is needed on the history of white supremacy in the United States and on a global level. Furthermore, the relationship of white supremacy and its effect on consciousness is vital and a legitimate field of politics and philosophical inquiry. W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Michelle Wallace, Frantz Fanon and others have all made vital contributions in the United States regarding this tradition. Re-framing the debate along such a tradition is vital.

New social relations can only be forged in collective struggle of the most militant character. No amount of conversation and education can form new relationships. It is only the mass involvement and struggle of oppressed people which can ultimately destroy white supremacy, re-establish the humanity of people color, and create social relationships between people as one among humans instead of the racially oppressed and white oppressor.

The Failure of Privilege Theory

Privilege theory seeks to redress and describe the huge inequalities which materially, psychologically, and socially exist in society. While it is often accurate in its sociological analysis of such inequalities, it fails in crucial realms of actual struggle. Privilege theory ends up being a radical sociological analysis. It ends up not being a theory of struggle, but a theory of retreat. Privilege theory’s main weakness are a tendency towards reformism, a lack of politics, and a politics of retreat.

Reformism

Privilege theory tends towards reformism or at best the radical politics of a group of people who seek to act above the oppressed. The latter is especially important. We have lived through a century of where people claiming to represent the masses claiming revolutionary politics acting above them: Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, Jawaharlal Nehru, Weather Underground, Josip Broz Tito or Julius Nyerere are just some figures who have fallen in this trap. Today the names are not so grandiose, but things are not so different.

There is no doubt that certain groups are more likely to be targeted by the police during political actions and that the repression they face will be greater, not to mention they might have less resources to call upon in their defense. These are all fairly obvious realities of white supremacy. These factors certainly hinder greater struggle. At no point should they be underestimated. At the same time, these factors are exactly the forms of oppression which must be defeated.

These movements must find ways to deal with these issues politically and organizationally. Who will defeat these forms of oppression and how? If the liberation of oppressed people must be carried out by oppressed people then the tasks of liberation remain in the hands with the people who have the greatest risks. If white supremacy can only be defeated by mass and militant action and not legislation or pithy reforms then the style of struggle is fairly clear as well. What is privilege theory’s response to these two fundamental premises? Privilege theory ends up in a dead end.

According to its arguments, the most oppressed should not struggle in the most militant ways because they do not have the privileged access to bail money, good lawyers and not to mention their racial status which will surely guarantee extra punishment. This leaves only one group of people who can possibly resist: those with a set of privileges who have access to lawyers, have the spare time to struggle, etc. This is in sharp contrast to the revolutionary tradition which has argued that the defeat of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism etc are the responsibilities of billions of oppressed people. This is exactly the group of people Privilege theory tends claims has so much to risk.

No doubt huge gaps exist in speaking, writing, confidence etc amongst movement activists based on race, class, and gender. Privilege theorists are at the forefront of acknowledging this reality. However, where the task is to make sure that everyone in the movement has roughly the same skills, privilege theorists are rarely clear on how to address this,

other than reminding the privileged of their privilege. Privilege theorists so far have not demonstrated how this can be dealt with.

Privilege theory in a partially correct way grasps that people of color do not participate in many of the militant actions precisely because they face greater risk of arrest and more punishment. But instead of finding ways to get around this problem, privilege theorists fetishize this problem into a practice of demobilization and reformism.

Lastly, Privilege theory has no response to the rich history of oppressed people who struggled in the past. In Privilege theories on words, these were some of the most under-privileged humans and yet their theories and actions were at the front of militancy and revolutionary politics. What makes the situation any different today is not clear.

Lack of Politics

Privilege theory de-politicizes most discussion from their most revolutionary potentials. Privilege theory has no political program other than a sociological analysis of who is more likely to be imprisoned, shot, or beaten in protests, strikes, and rebellions.

The past struggles have been over communism, anarchism, nationalism, Maoism, anti-colonialism, African socialism etc. These struggles have fought for the defeat of capitalism, the state, patriarchy, white supremacy, and homophobia (or at least they should have fought for all their defeats if they failed to do so in actuality). The point is that the greatest struggles of the oppressed rallied around mass struggle, militancy, and revolutionary theory. Privilege theory de-centers all three.

In the United States, generations of militants, since the defeat of the 1968 current, have developed with little revolutionary theory and organization, and even less experience in mass struggle. This has meant extremely underdeveloped politics. And at the university setting, where political theory resides, it has been generally dominated by middle class, academic, and reformist tendencies. There is little thinking through of this dynamic in the movement. At its worst, there is a sloppy linkage between any theory—even revolutionary theory — and academia, which only destroys the past tradition of oppressed people who fought so bravely to acquire the freedom to read, theorize strategies of struggle and liberation on revolutionary terms.

Privilege theory is completely divorced from a revolutionary tradition. I have yet to meet Privilege theorists who hold classes on revolutionary politics with unemployed people, with high school drop outs, with undocumented immigrants etc. Privilege theory's fundamental assumption exposes its proponents class background when they claim that theoretical-political knowledge is for people who come from privileged backgrounds. That is true if the only place you develop that knowledge is in universities. Privilege theorists have not built the schools the Communist Party did in the 1930s or the Panthers did in the late 1960s. These were not official universities, but the educational institutions developed by the oppressed for the oppressed.

They claim that to act in militant ways or to theorize is the luxury of the privileged. This actually leaves no solution for freedom for the oppressed. The theory that the oppressed cannot theorize or struggle militantly is the theory of an elite who see the oppressed as helpless and stupid. It is the oppressed who must theorize and must eventually overthrow capitalism. They actually have the power.

Political mistakes as seen by Privilege theory roots in the privileges a given person has. Usually the person is asked to check their privileges as a way to realize whatever political mistake. This obscures political and organizational conversations, instead diverting the conversation into unmeasurable ways of addressing politics. How do we know this person has checked their "privilege"? By what political and organizational means can we hold this person accountable?

The more important tasks are what is the political program, what organizing does the group actually do, are people of color (or any other oppressed group) developed as revolutionaries and through development they too are leaders of the group/ movement.

The Politics of Retreat

Privilege theory has only come to dominate the movement in the last twenty years or so. In the United States the last forty years has been a period of massive retreat in militancy and revolutionary politics. The rise of privilege theory cannot be separated from the devastation of mass movements. It is in this context that privilege theory has risen.

Privilege theorists are a generation who have never known mass and militant struggle. They are a generation who have never seen the masses as described in Frantz Fanon's *Towards the African Revolution*. They have never met an oppressed people who have simply stated, I will either live like a human or die in struggle. I do not know if they have been in rebellions where very oppressed people choose to fight the police and other oppressors risking imprisonment and much worse. Have they seen such a people? Is there any doubt it is only a people who are willing to go this far who have any chance of defeating white supremacy?

Privilege theory thrives off the inactivity of the masses and oppressed. They seek only to remind the masses of its weaknesses. Instead of immortalizing fallen heroes they only lament of the tragedy of the dead. Perhaps it is better to be beaten and killed in struggle than to die on your knees like so many have in the past 50 years. Who does not live on their knees today? Humiliation by the police, humiliation by the boss, humiliation everywhere we go. Ironically these privilege theorists who claim to be representatives of the underprivileged tokenize and trivialize the struggles of the past. They name drop past struggles only to argue that the conditions are different today. They fail to recognize that "the conditions are not right for struggle" is an old argument going back hundreds of years constantly reminding the oppressed to delay revolution and mass struggle. Who is willing to tell the oppressed, "the system sees you as a dog. Only when you struggle on the terms of life and death will you achieve humanity." Every fighter in the past has known this. The privilege theorists are afraid to accept from where human freedom comes from.

Every struggle for freedom carries the risk of death imposed on the oppressor or the oppressed. It is a universal reality. There was a time when Harriet Tubman simply told all slaves that. Ironically, she is lionized today, but her life and wisdom have no practical political lesson for revolutionaries other than tokenizing this brave Black woman.

I simply state: those who speak of privilege are reformists. Their only task is to remind oppressed people of what it cannot do and what it has to lose. The privilege theorists have not lived in an era of rebellions and revolutions. They are far removed from the days when Black and Brown worker-unemployed militants shook 1968. Such privilege theorists cover their own tracks by hiding behind the risks which the proletariat must take. No doubt, deportation, imprisonment, and certainly death are at stake. Is the price of freedom and human recognition be any else?

When any militant action or militant politics is proposed in a meeting, privilege theorists are the first to stand up and remind those at the meetings that only those with such and such privilege can participate in such and such militant action. That the oppressed has no such luxury in participating in militant actions.

Gone are the days when revolutionaries such as Harriet Tubman simply stated that human life was meant to be lived in freedom or not at all. That existential proclamation of humanity has been lost to fear and political degeneration. Those are the stakes. There is no denying that militancy and revolution are a grave risk for the oppressed. The struggles of the past are littered with corpses and destroyed lives.

If capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, ableism, homo and transphobia can only be destroyed by the most violent, militant, and revolutionary means, what other option then all out struggle do oppressed people have. What say the Privilege theorists? Is there any other strategy? Voting for the Democrats?

My experiences in the POC Space

The People of Color Working Group at Occupy Wall Street in New York City was certainly a testing ground for the effectiveness of Privilege theory. One of the most contentious issues was the question of Queer politics where some members of the working group argued that being Queer had nothing to do with being a person of color. The argument tended then to dissolve in people saying those members did not recognize their straight or male privilege. This ignored the reality that not all straight men of color agreed with the anti-Queer politics put forward, but more importantly that there should be a discussion of program and organization.

In terms of program, the working group could have struggled to put out a document which stated that the POC Working Group is against anti-Queer politics. That seems simple enough. And in fact, if memory serves me correct this was eventually done. However politics must always be enforced or otherwise they are just empty words on a piece of paper.

This brings us to the organizational dimensions of the discussion which as far as I am aware of were never discussed. Once a group of people agree to something, what are the repercussions when someone violates that set upon agreement? This is a question which has no easy solutions. In a tightly knit organization, the person could be kicked out. But OWS has a very open and fluid organizational structure. Hell, it cannot even be called an organization in sensible way. This poses serious problems. At the same time it seems OWS can ban people from the space as seen in the discussion around the Spokes Council and the decision to ban folks who are violent.

Another problem in the POC Working Group was that few if any people had a revolutionary pedagogy in teaching others about the relationship of Queer oppression to POC oppression. Attempts to address the question were left to accusations that some were not recognizing their straight privilege, or informal discussions with little historical or theoretical discussion of the questions. It simply was not enough to bridge the political differences. The inability to come to terms with such questions seems to have alienated many people, further hampering whatever possibilities of unity in the POC Working Group.

A Concrete Example and a Possible Alternative

There is no denying that if Graduate students from Columbia or NYU demanded that workers at a McDonald's go on strike for the upcoming May 1st meeting it would be a preposterous politics. Grad students at these two institutions have huge autonomy. If they are not teaching or if they have class on May 1st, missing it is going to be of little or no consequence. If they teach, cancelling class is also an option with much less consequences for going on strike. It is absolutely correct that the stakes are different for workers at McDonalds. At best they can request the day off, but that is hardly in the spirit of going on a one day strike. If they do not go into work that day and they were on schedule, they could risk losing their job in an already poor economy.

Privilege theorists would focus on the privilege the Grad Students have which blocks them from recognizing the political or organizational problems. It is almost as if the Privilege theorists are divorced from concretely thinking through the organizational and political tasks required to ultimately have McDonald workers going on a general strike. That is the point of organizing isn't it? So, yes the dangers of going on strike are huge for McDonald workers. How do we make it so that the McDonald workers can enforce their class power on the boss and the company? That is something you never hear the Privilege theorists discuss.

I am not a full expert on the rise of Privilege theory in academia. But one can wonder if people like Peggy McIntosh or Tim Wise have ever had to organize. Obviously many organizers today are major Privilege theorists. Instead of finding militant and political solutions to problems of the most oppressed, I see them pointing out sociological realities as I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, organizing is not a Grad School sociology class. Organizing means class struggle—with all its different subjectivities— and revolution.

Conclusion

The implications of Privilege theory run much deeper than what has been addressed in this small essay. While they have not been addressed, some of the best readings regarding this are the works of Frantz Fanon. He sharply dealt with the very question of being a human being in light of the color of his skin, in relationship to the anti-colonial struggle, and the desire to forge a common human-bond.

The purpose of this essay has been to challenge the framework of Privilege theory. This theory fails in its ability as a theory of struggle and actual emancipation of oppressed people. In fact, it locks in people in the very categories capitalism assigns them by only focusing on their oppressed category: whether it be Black, woman, Queer, worker or student. It fails to develop actual politics, organizations and strategies of liberation, because it was never meant to do that. Privilege theory is the politics of radical sociology attempting to struggle.

Privilege theory forces serious discussion of revolutionary politics, organization and strategy out. Forms of oppression obviously mean different risks depending on who you are, but what solutions does Privilege theory offer? It is only the revolutionary tradition which offers a way forward so oppressed people, through their own militancy and politics, can destroy all the things which oppress them.

Appendix

Our generation has few older revolutionaries to learn from. Their wisdoms are largely being forgotten as they pass away. For this purpose, I paraphrase a conversation I recently had with an ex-Black Panther. I outlined the basic points of this article and his responses were the following. They are brief, but I believe outline some important questions revolutionaries of our generation should think through. At times there are contradictory pieces of advice, but helpful none the less.

First this Panther was against politics of guilt. The Panther felt that privilege theory created such a situation and people who are guilty are not good revolutionaries. The Panther off handedly also mentioned the politics of guilt are the bedrock of the Catholic Church.

Second, the Panther said that you should just “fuck’ em” when negative racial incidents happen. It is about remembering people who make you feel that way do not deserve your respect and attention—so “fuck’em”. This could also be read as simply having thick skin.

Third, the Panther said that one should not focus on the little things. That the goal of politics is to achieve big things: general strikes, smashing the state, getting rid of the police, ending patriarchy etc. Perhaps the Panther was also saying out organize such people. Make them irrelevant by your organizing skills.

Fourth, the Panther said that there has been a rightward shift in all aspects in the United States for over thirty years. Such interactions are bound to happen. People are a part of this society.

Last, the Panther went on to explain the importance of keeping your dignity. It was not clear why the Panther brought up this point. The Panther said if someone is ignoring you because of your gender, class, or race; clear your throat, or directly go up to them and say, “excuse me, but I believe we have the following things to talk about.” But keeping your dignity seemed important.

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Be Careful With Each Other, So We Can Be Dangerous Together

Invisible Man

Comrade Will's piece "Privilege Politics is Reformism," for the Black Orchid Collective blog, is a timely and valuable contribution to understanding how the revolutionary movement of the early 21st century will develop. In essence, what he tries to do is to identify the dynamics of racial oppression within the Occupy movement and identify some tentative ways forward. I fully agree with his premises, but wish to carry them to their logical conclusion.

Will's understanding of how race politics shapes everything in political, social, and organizational relief is a breath of fresh air that's been a long time coming in this movement; but the problems he identifies are not new. Rather, the importance of "Privilege Politics is Reformism" is that it brings the debate back to where it belongs: undoing the reverse political-correctness that has marked non-White contributions to racial debate. I will be frank about my meaning. Far too often, we cut our White allies slack because they are our allies, while at the same time making token, ineffective, and useless complaints about their unconsciously (or consciously) racist attitudes. We tolerate their mistakes because they are "good people" and because we don't want to be perceived as too extreme.

What this really means is that we've been content to work within the racist dynamic of a movement that is White and middle-class to its core. Its outlook is alien to our lived experience. Not only are we not culturally or physically White and thus have had different life experiences; but we are also less likely to hold middle-class occupations because our opportunities in the workforce are circumscribed by racism. It should come as no surprise that the movement we've worked so hard to build has no place for us.

For all its professed ideological diversity, "the movement's" dominant outlook and perspectives belong to a very specific social group which paradoxically sees itself as a mere aggregation of "free individuals." We, the racialized, are perpetual outsiders, exotic curiosities, constant irritants who never quite fit into this movement's prescriptions. (White workers, for all the problems we have with them, can't relate to this social group either. They think these people are weirdos who need to get real jobs. North American "revolutionary" organizations, of whatever stripe, can usually be identified by their lack of appeal to actual workers, of whatever racial status. That should tell us something.)

We plead from the margins for White militants to play fair, be nice, and stop acting like idiots, while neither they nor we acknowledge that this movement's psychology and tactics flow from its racial and class foundation, behaving according to clearly identifiable trends and social laws. Fundamentally, we tolerate this movement's mistakes toward us – its subtle oppression of us – because we have no independent movement of our own.

As Marx put it in the *18th Brumaire*, "Him whom we must convince we recognize as the master of the situation." White domination of the anti-capitalist movement's racial discourse and organizational behaviour is a direct and unavoidable product of White domination of the capitalist social, economic, and political framework. It can only be combated by developing independent sites of economic, political, and cultural power – by rebuilding our own movements, and revolutionizing our existing cultural institutions and racialized workplace associations – where we may articulate our viewpoints without interference. Naturally it is true that race is a social construct invented by the capitalist class to create a social base for itself and forestall working-class revolution. But as comrade Will already understands, long decades of experience should have taught us by now that we do not convince our professed allies in struggle by talking, nor do we gain equality by letting things slide in the name of "unity": we maintain our dignity by holding power.

In a comradely spirit, therefore, I'll be critiquing Will from this perspective. He's on the right track, but what he says contains a lot more than meets the eye.

First and foremost is this fact: as Will points out, "conversation cannot solve...racialized experiences; only the most militant and violent struggle can cleanse racialized human relations. The United States has not experienced high levels of struggles in over 50 years. Major problems develop because of the lack of militant struggle in the country." (Canada has not yet had its major racial confrontation, but with the development of the First Nations struggle and the building

tension in its urban ghettos, that day of reckoning is coming very soon. I'm not speaking alone in this; I'm practically quoting from recent articles in the *Toronto Star*.)

Fanon was perhaps a famous foundation-stone of "anti-oppression" or "privilege" theorizing, but his work did not emerge from a vacuum and is not without historical parallel. The psychological traits of the racially oppressed that Fanon describes are present in the fiction of Richard Wright and the polemics of CLR James, predating Fanon's earliest work by over a decade. These, in turn, are based in earlier writings by revolutionaries of all kinds.

The present theoretical and organizational impasse in the movement, which is increasingly recognized by all but only addressed by a few (based on what I've seen, I'd put West Coast Occupy organizers in the latter category), is not as simple as a crisis of ideas. The ideas are already there in books for everyone to read; they interpreted a social situation very similar to our own. However, one understands these ideas differently based on one's position in society. Viewing the problem this way exposes the psychological and practical weaknesses and incapacities of the middle class, and in particular the middle class of the ruling White nation.

Privilege politics are reformist, precisely to the degree that they have been taken up and watered down by the White middle-class movement. This movement has worn the various mantles of Abolitionism in the 1860s, Stalinism and Trotskyism in the 1930s-50's, the Hippie/New Communist Movement of the 1960s-70s, the Anti-Globalization Movement of the early 2000s, and Occupy today. Fundamentally, however, it is the same social layer in action throughout, with the same relationship to the means of production, and the same historical and social conditioning shaping both its outlook and its treatment of allies in struggle.

Moving past the present blockage in the movement, reaching actual workers (and particularly racially-oppressed workers) means leaving these folks behind: establishing revolutionary working-class and community organizations that explicitly exclude them. Just as "the liberation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves," our liberation as racially-oppressed people is our job, and ours alone.

The bourgeoisie of the French and American revolutions sold out their plebeian social bases, establishing new forms of class domination out of struggles that they did not initiate and even feared. In the era of socialist revolutions, the same pattern of hijacking other people's movements led to Lenin's gross error in *What is to be Done?*, which even he later recanted. Lenin stated that the working class by itself could only produce a trade union consciousness and needed the contribution of intellectuals to fully realize itself as a class. But the Russian working class independently developed Soviets and factory committees as organs of working-class power – without the help of Lenin's agile brain. Similarly, Trotsky famously reduced the crisis of capitalism to the "crisis of leadership:" once again, the workers needed proper leaders, inevitably recruited from the middle class, to properly articulate what they actually wanted and meant to say. These middle-class elements were renamed "the proletarian party," and thus by changing its name, the essence of the thing was magically transubstantiated.

In my debates with comrades around the Recomposition blog, I've learned the word "substitutionism" to describe this phenomenon. It's not exactly that simple – I do believe there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice with implications that I'm not going to get into here – but my judgement of this phenomenon should be clear. It doesn't stop with class, though. Race politics works the same way.

As Will points out, but does not elaborate fully, members of the White middle class see themselves as the legitimate leadership of a liberation struggle precisely to the degree that the independent struggles of other oppressed groups wane. Rather than establishing themselves within their own constituencies, White middle-class activists appropriate the prefabricated struggles of other classes and racial groups, and often succeed in emerging within these struggles as leaders. This is partly accomplished by the deference they come to expect as their birthright, but where this does not succeed, such opportunists subtly combat and defeat legitimate, established working-class and community leaders – by hijacking community organizations and union bureaucracies. Of course, few actually see it this way. The means and methods of this racial power struggle are never overt: they rely on personal manipulations, gossips and slanders, and playing on individual psychological weaknesses and "hot buttons." I've seen these tactics, not once or twice, but dozens of times, in the decade I've spent as an activist and organizer. I'm not the only one who's seen them put into practice. Some of the best militants I know have burned out and given up because of this brand of activism; I've seen unions destroyed by the same means. I refuse to use these underhanded tactics, but I'll never bend to them either.

Acquiescence to and accommodation of the political and personal power dynamics within movement politics is no more than the internalization of a racial power structure. Thus it is that getting a drink of water (or a bottle of beer) for a White comrade is in fact a racializing experience. I've been asked to do this more than once by Whites in the movement, but to my recollection, have never asked it of anyone at all. I don't need and don't want anyone to do for me what I can do for myself. It makes me feel weird.

Here I'll quote directly from Will's piece.

...some agreement has to be found that as a general rule people who join the movement are not white supremacists. This should be a fundamental assumption, otherwise, we are left with the ridiculous and suicidal political reality that we are building a movement with white supremacists. So that leaves us dealing with racial alienation or white chauvinism by people who we assume are against white supremacy. That seems to be a crucial point that needs to be recognized.

Usually people of color want acknowledgement that something fucked up happened. It is true that generally, most white militants flip out. On one hand the white militants grasp the seriousness of the accusation, but on the other hand, in their defense, they fail to give recognition of how another person of color perceived an event. The white militant usually acts as if the theory of white supremacy infecting everything stops with their mind and body when they are accused of anything. This is understandable, as no serious militant should take such accusations lightly.

This is particularly important as people of color, based on all the shit that happens to them, tend to see the world differently, and are obviously sensitive to racial slights. The lack of recognition usually escalates the situation as the person of color tends to feel, what is "objectively true" falls back on how the white militant defines reality. At such a point, productive conversation usually breaks down.

Lastly things are more complicated today because white supremacy is much more coded today in language and behavior.... Exactly how white supremacy works in coded language and behavior in the movement is still something that needs to be investigated.

There are several important considerations in this passage which the author does not take to their logical conclusions.

Why "must" we assume that those we are building a movement with are not White supremacists? Actually, both Whites and non-Whites alike in the movement are products of a racist society. We have all internalized the value system and racist judgements of a culture that systematically de-values non-White lives and intellects, while morally elevating those of Whites beyond all reasonable proportion. This is precisely *why* conversation does not convince them.

This is perfectly recognizable by observing political groups and social circles where Whites and non-Whites interact. Except when there is a conscious strategy of tokenism, Whites inevitably monopolize leadership roles in official capacity. Where they do not take these roles, they function as "alphas" in unofficial capacity. This plays out in dating patterns and friendship dynamics. Power relations that would otherwise be objectively considered oppressive and racist are rationalized away as "personal choice" and "individual" personality dysfunctions. This is simply dishonest, and it functions to perpetuate oppression on the micro-scale.

Here's what Malcolm X had to say about working with White allies in his *Autobiography*.

"I have these very deep feelings that white people who want to join black organizations are really just taking the escapist way to salve their consciences. By visibly hovering near us, they are "proving" that they are "with us." But the hard truth is this isn't helping to solve America's racist problem. The Negroes aren't the racists. Where the really sincere white people have got to do their "proving" of themselves is not among the black victims, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really is – and that's in their own home communities; America's racism is among their own fellow whites.

...I'll go so far as to say that I never really trust the kind of white people who are always anxious to hang around Negroes, or who hang around in Negro communities. I don't know – this may be a throwback to the

years when I was hustling in Harlem and all of those red-faced, drunk whites in the afterhours clubs were always grabbing hold of some Negroes and talking about “I just want you to know you’re just as good as I am – ” And then they got back in their taxicabs and black limousines and went back downtown to the places where they lived and worked, where no blacks except servants had better be caught.”

It is exactly the case, as Will points out, that White militants are incapable of perceiving themselves and their actions as individually racist. This is because of a basic psychological defence mechanism. As Black American militants Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton pointed out (quoting French philosopher Camus) in the 1967 manifesto *Black Power*, people do not and cannot condemn themselves. They inevitably rationalize and justify their personal actions even when such acts fit into a larger sociological pattern of oppression and injustice. There are any number of demonstrations of this fact (I would recommend the film *Glory* as one of them), but the point is that there is no way to convince someone of the incorrectness of their actions by conversation.

Where non-Whites challenge such dynamics, they are first ignored, and after escalation, considered “aggressive” and “reverse racists” by both Whites and fellow non-Whites. White supremacy (and all other forms of domination) is, in fact, as subtle as comrade Will says it is. That is why our entire society – both the half-hearted bourgeois-liberal campaigns and the revolutionary struggles against capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia etc. – is infected by all the problems it claims to fight against.

Contrary to what Will says, these factors do, in fact, breach the boundaries of friendship, love, and comradeship. Consider this analogy. Can anyone really say that the Republican/Conservative offensive against women has no reflection in the personal, loving relationships of heterosexual American and Canadian couples? Of course not. Male attitudes (including mine) are affected by the patriarchal social situation that produces them. Such attitudes cannot be changed by mere conversation, but by women actually challenging those power dynamics within the family and within the broader society, rather than internalizing them against themselves. The same is true of any power relation. There is nothing special about race, except its peculiar history in obstructing working-class unity against the common class oppressor.

As Marx pointed out, “material conditions determine consciousness.” If criticisms coming from an individual or group of racialized people fail to convince White militants that they are “fucked up,” this failure is not an isolated exception; it is rooted in a very solid social and material underpinning. All of North American society is built on the self-image of Whiteness and the assumptions of its superiority. Thus, as Will states, what is perceived as “objectively true” is actually what upholds White supremacy. The non-White movement activist subjects herself or himself to feelings of self-doubt, rather than challenge the weight of an activist social grouping that denies its constant connection to the broader society that produced it.

It is quite easy for the White militant to retreat into the comfort of his or her society and dismiss comradely criticism as irrelevant: for to do otherwise is to challenge the influence of centuries on his or her psyche. And, in any case, non-Whites who have internalized the same power dynamics can always be called upon to soothe the White ego. But for both these Whites and these non-Whites, this is “doublethink,” a psychological contradiction within a single mind, reflecting the material contradictions of a society that both professes opposition to, and materially upholds, racism. White militants only differ from overt White supremacists in that they are psychologically conflicted, but both are products of the same reality. Non-White militants, like all non-Whites, live in a constant state of psychological tension which can only be resolved by struggle against the oppressor.

Here we get into the territory of guilt. This is the most hypocritical and annoying aspect of race politics today: the overcompensating and insincere attitudes of White militants who attempt to mask their internalized racism by public denials of racist opinions and token associations with non-Whites. Often, these White militants will refrain from openly criticizing non-White perspectives on racial issues, but will use their in-group social status to undermine such perspectives with subtle and appropriately anti-oppressive jargon. (Much of the time, it’s not even that refined.) What is the point of engaging in such games? When someone pretends to back down, but is not actually convinced, no productive conversation has occurred. This is the behaviour of patronage, not comradeship.

It is precisely for this reason that Malcolm X’s, Fanon’s, and Carmichael’s perspective of separate organization towards racial power is necessary. Consider these assorted quotes from *Black Power*:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks....The point is obvious: Black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea – and it is a revolutionary idea – that black people are able to do things themselves....

...In the past, white allies have often furthered white supremacy without the whites involved realizing it, or even wanting to do so...

...Black people cannot afford to assume that what is good for white America is automatically good for black people...Take the case of Tom Watson. This populist from Georgia was at one time a staunch advocate of a united front between Negro and white farmers....But this is the same Tom Watson who, only a few years later, and because the political tide was flowing against such an alliance [the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow], did a complete turnabout... “‘The white people dare not revolt so long as they can be intimidated by the Negro vote,’ he explained. Once the ‘bugaboo’ of Negro domination was removed, however, ‘every white man would act according to his own conscience and judgement in how he should vote.’”

...the building of an independent force is necessary...Black Power is necessary. If we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it, and that is precisely the lesson of the Reconstruction era. Black people were allowed to vote, to register, and to participate in politics, because it was to the advantage of powerful white “allies” to permit this. But at all times such advances flowed from white decisions. That era of black participation in politics was ended by another set of white decisions. There was no powerful independent political base in the southern black community to challenge the curtailment of civil rights.

Power is complex. It involves sociological, economic, political, military and cultural dimensions. They are all interrelated. But ideology is not propagated by the word: it is premised on the deed. Before the racist ideology caught on with White American workers and farmers, Black American workers and farmers had first to be enslaved and, during the backlash against Reconstruction, killed en masse, for the proper social context to be established. Similarly, anti-racist ideology will not be propagated by well-intentioned efforts (not even the piece of writing that you are reading right now); it will be established by organized force that utilizes all of the sociological, economic, political, military, and cultural weapons that its White antithesis has used. This is what the arguments of Fanon, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael really mean, and it is this tradition that we must rediscover as anti-racist non-White militants.

While Will explicitly states his approval of the proposition that militant action, and not conversation, will do the job of convincing, he prescribes *organizational* solutions to the difficulties he faced as a member of the POC working group during Occupy Wall Street. He recognizes that resolutions are not worth the paper they are printed on unless they can be enforced. But how can organizational procedures solve socially-rooted problems? The same problems he faced in New York came up repeatedly at Occupy Toronto. Drafting better constitutions and voting for better-worded resolutions does not alter the social balance of forces. These constant racial humiliations are not just part of the job or part of living in the neighbourhood, they are also part of remaining within a White middle-class movement.

During the American Civil War, Black Americans allied with Northern Whites against the Southern slave-owners to gain their freedom. This made perfect sense. But, as Stokely Carmichael pointed out, this merely resulted in exchanging the domination of one group of Whites for another. The same dynamic applies in our own struggle, today, for racial liberation. Even if we do succeed in overthrowing capitalist racism by united struggle, what is to prevent a *socialist or anarchist* racism from superseding it?

Only independent power of our own, built on our own, keeping our allies at a proper distance from our struggles.

The scope of the problem is larger than even this society as a whole. Race politics cannot be abstracted from the international political context. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon predicted the enormous effect of the establishment of the State of Israel on the political power of the international Jewish Diaspora. It even allowed Jews to join the White race. It's the most recent instance of colonialism and genocide to establish national power.

But while taking care to avoid these pitfalls, racialized communities today need such bases of national territory to assert themselves and consolidate their position within other societies. As we can find in the compilation “*Toward the*

African Revolution,” this is why Fanon joined the Algerian liberation struggle: as a Caribbean Black man, he recognized that liberating the African continent from colonialism would have a direct influence on the status of Black people abroad. In a military and strategic sense, he saw that Arab Algeria was actually the best place to direct his efforts toward that goal.

White power in our societies was historically premised on the European domination of the world order; that geographical domination is fading today. The self-assertion and equality of racialized groups within North America rests on the independent political and economic development of what Fanon called the “Third World.” It means the internationalist unity of African, Latin American, and Asian countries, against national-capitalist divisions and toward their cohesion as supra-national revolutionary societies.

Just as the anti-colonial movement of the 1950s and 1960s (revolutions in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam in particular) had a dialectical relationship with the Black Power movement in the United States, so today the decline of the West (both in Europe and North America) and the rise of India and China have already had a dramatic effect on race relations within Western societies. Powerful immigrant voting blocs, and the international economic and political ties they bring, give their communities a certain breathing space in an asphyxiating racial environment. It should be clear enough to all readers, but I want to make clear where I stand on this. The international balance of power is a temporary and uneasy *détente*; it will likely lead to imperialist war in our lifetime. It is not a substitute for organized working-class power; but today we witness massive strikes in India and a staggering wave of demonstrations in China. These, too, will have their effect on the immigrant communities in Canada and the USA.

As I’ve stated, there is an important pitfall here. “Divide and conquer” is simply a tactic of minority rule, whether that minority is the capitalist class of a country or the aggregate of Western countries. Race is incidental to the deliberately-created social fractures that capitalism rests on. As Fanon pointed out in *Wretched of the Earth*, Africanization of the top posts after decolonization eliminated visible White political control; but new social divisions based on tribe, region, and language became the tools of the new African capitalist classes. This led to internecine struggle and ultimately genocide in many ex-colonial countries. While we must begin to build the structures of racial power within the shell of the capitalist society, if they remain on a capitalist foundation they form the basis of a new oppression. (The class politics of oppressed communities is a site of struggle that we as militants will have to contend with. But that is an internal struggle, and not the business of outsiders.)

I’ll return now from the general to the particular. Anti-racist struggle means independent social development of oppressed ethnic and national groups within Western societies, who self-organize to find their niche within the economy, maintain ties with their homelands, and strategically use these strengths to leverage social and political power. In their early stages, such movements will adapt themselves to capitalist economics and bourgeois politics: but the basic demand for racial equality undermines the economic and social basis of Western society as a whole. “Equality” is not a demand that can be satisfied on capitalist grounds, for all wealth-generation under capitalism is premised on hierarchy. It can only be satisfied by working-class self-organization within the community.

Building independent racial power will destroy the construct of Whiteness and thus make class unity possible. As CLR James pointed out in a 1967 speech, referencing Stokely Carmichael and the thesis of Black Power as the fruition of his own theoretical observations in 1939, the independent struggle of the Negro people for their democratic rights and equality with the rest of the American nation not only had to be defended and advocated by the Marxist movement. The Marxist movement had to understand that such independent struggles were a contributory factor to the socialist revolution. Let me restate that as crudely as possible: the American Negroes in fighting for their democratic rights were making an indispensable addition to the struggle for socialism in the US.

Perhaps May 1968 in France best illustrates what James was talking about. Seven years after Fanon’s death, the Algerian revolution provided a spark to Algerian workers in France. These workers, oppressed by both race and class, became the catalyst for a revolution that drew in – not only the workers of their own nationality, not only the racially-oppressed workers – but the whole working class of France, in one of the most dramatic European revolutions since the end of World War II. It was not only these Algerian workers who felt the revolutionary urge: the war to occupy Algeria cost many French workers their lives, holding down a country for the bosses’ profits. French workers could be

and were won over to social revolution by the independent anti-colonial struggle and the self-organization of Algerian workers.

So it is that the “Arab Spring” – a response to pro-American regimes in the Middle East – is the progenitor of the North American Occupy movement. However, North American activists did nothing to start the Arab Spring, and can do little to help it reach its goals. Here in our own countries, it is the shared experience of all people of colour within the movement of the White middle class that we have not been treated as equals, have been denied the respect due our intellects and organizational abilities, and seen as objects to condescend to or tokens to use and manipulate for White political objectives. The struggle for recognition will not be achieved by begging and pleading to convince our White allies within the movement. Our job is to organize independently of them so that, when it does become possible to build a united movement, they have no choice but to recognize and respect us as a force to be reckoned with.

I salute my comrade Will’s statement that “human life is meant to be lived in freedom or not at all.” It is precisely this knowledge - that in the end, we all die, and so life is too precious in every moment to waste in humiliation - that motivates the revolutionary impulse. This requires, on the individual level, the courage and dignity to maintain full self-respect against all odds. Such psychological development is an intensely personal odyssey of self-discovery and self-creation, but it is forged through daily acts of self-assertion within this society. It goes hand in hand with the material struggle to destroy oppressive structures and build structures of community power.

The solutions are not cut-and-dried, and will often not involve 100% racial separation. Genuinely implementing these ideas requires flexibility and adaptation to particular circumstances. But for us within the movement, rediscovering how to implement these traditions is just the starting point. Achieving our goals will be much harder.

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Response to Privilege Politics is Reformism

Suzy X

According to its arguments, the most oppressed should not struggle in the most militant ways because they do not have the privileged access to bail money, good lawyers and not to mention their racial status which will surely guarantee extra punishment. This leaves only one group of people who can possibly resist: those with a set of privileges who have access to lawyers, have the spare time to struggle, etc. This is in sharp contrast to the revolutionary tradition which has argued that the defeat of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism etc are the responsibilities of billions of oppressed people. This is exactly the group of people. Privilege theory tends claims has so much to risk.

No doubt huge gaps exist in speaking, writing, confidence etc amongst movement activists based on race, class, and gender. Privilege theorists are at the forefront of acknowledging this reality. However, where the task is to make sure that everyone in the movement has roughly the same skills, privilege theorists are rarely clear on how to address this, other than reminding the privileged of their privilege. Privilege theorists so far have not demonstrated how this can be dealt with.

Privilege theory in a partially correct way grasps that people of color do not participate in many of the militant actions precisely because they face greater risk of arrest and more punishment. But instead of finding ways to get around this problem, privilege theorists fetishize this problem into a practice of demobilization and reformism.

This was a piece written by a comrade of a comrade's. His grievances seem to be explicitly with the discourse on privilege within organizing structures (and completely on point in the way he describes the immobilization it can cause). However, he also makes a lot of assumptions about "privilege theorists," how much Hegel or Fanon they might have read, where they come from and their intentions. A couple of days ago I wrote a long and annoyed response to this but I want to take my cue from the author and start thinking about this more constructively.

He says that "privilege theorists are a generation who have never known mass and militant struggle." Okay, let's stop romanticizing what "mass struggle looks like" and face the facts. Now, seeing as it's much harder to attain guns nowadays, when communities of PoC are largely under surveillance, and when non-profit industrial complex has taken over the task of community building FOR these communities [albeit from a distant, even colonialist position].— is it hard to see why? We cannot discuss what proper, more "revolutionary" forms of resistance are without discussing the current chokehold the state currently has on mass movements of any kind. Meaning, we need to get creative.

He tends to focus on a somewhat dated notion of what "militant" and "violent" struggle (note: arrestable actions) constitute. He also overlooks the potential of any action that is not [at least immediately] arrestable. **My issue is that in centering such actions in his analysis, in the context of the piece they read as the only legit forms of revolutionary resistance. Meanwhile, there are plenty of non-arrestable actions that constitute resistance.— i.e. organizing autonomous communities, teaching people how to read, isolating abusers, taking care of each other out of good will instead of doing it for capital.— in a state that benefits from the latter.** These all constitute actions which the Black Panthers, the author's model for revolutionary struggle, actually did. Other examples include feminists who emphasized bodily autonomy by writing guides to reproductive health, introducing herbs and other techniques to safely terminate pregnancy, those who chose to raise children with their friends.

In the article, these actions are eclipsed by armed struggle, which in the '70s, couldn't hold a candle to the threat these activists made by helping each other. As if to say to the state, "You won't give us the support we need? You wanna keep our communities in the gutter? All right then. We're gonna stop relying on YOU, or paying YOU to do this shit, and we're gonna do it ourselves." **This is more or less why OWS was so much of a threat that the NYPD had to put it out. This country hasn't seen such communistic mutual aid on that large of a scale in years.** (Aside from the fact that OWS basically morphed into a non-profit by the time Zuccotti Park was shut down, but I digress.)

Meanwhile, the author assumes that this vague group of privilege theorists are only theorists and not actual organizers who might possibly value and engage in any or all actions that 1) actively resist the status-quo and 2) foster trust and safety among comrades, who may not want to take part in high-risk arrestable actions otherwise. **This hierarchy of actions should not exist. If there are people in your action who can't get arrested, make sure there are other ways in which they can contribute. Make sure they are as respected as those who can. Make sure you don't make martyrs out of those who are arrested, lest you shape the meaning of credibility to those who do have the**

privilege to do so. Calling it out isn't always done for the sake of calling out, but for the sake of expanding our ideas about action and expanding each person's potential to resist. If I call you out, it's because you're undermining my/someone else's ability to resist.

Now, I can agree with him in that **privilege theory isn't supposed to be an end in itself. Of course it isn't. But it is a way that people can negotiate space, and figure out who they can work with**, much less feel trusting enough to organize any of the high-risk revolutionary actions" the author talks about. Being honest with each other about how much space we take up is a strategic decision that many organizers, including myself, sometimes have to make. We have every right to pick and choose who our comrades are, and establish conditions under which we can work with them. If you are not willing to part with what power you may have, how can I trust you not to take advantage of it in a way that detracts me and my cause?

I admit that I have felt that successive call outs for the sake of catharsis or for the sake of establishing power** CAN and DOES facilitate a stasis in an organization. Some people also misunderstand privilege.— for example, a teenager at an action once tried to say everyone there had queer privilege because we (queers) outnumbered the straight people. Naw-aw. **It's not supposed to be a point system, but it's a way to gauge one's relationship to a space under heteropatriarchy/white supremacy**.** The conversation should not start nor end with "You're white, you're not allowed to talk." It should be a process of deep analysis and accountability; like if you're a white person working in an organization against the prison-industrial complex, be conscious of what experiences you CANNOT speak to, but also offer support where you see it. **People who organize together don't show up with color-coded cards listing what privileges they have, so instead of resting on the topic of privilege, they need to sit down and have honest discussions about the work they plan to do and offer a variety of contributions.**

In short, I do not think calling out privilege excludes any kind of "revolutionary" action, but instead should be done with the intent of better understanding and developing a space in which people can better realize their revolutionary potential. **It's not about you personally, but about the space you inhabit and the relationship you have to it, as shaped by institutional and cultural norms and practices.** (And also, seriously, let's talk about how to disrupt the relationships we have to such spaces and how we go about reinventing new ones. It's still kind of vague, but instead of getting mired in static identities we need to step it up!)

Notes

*Now, outside of an organization, trolling cis men or white people by poking at their privilege is something I like to call a confrontational tactic (and at best, for the lolz), only in that the value is just in purely making them uncomfortable. But that's a different story altogether, and a phenomenon that's usually encountered/more easily executed on the internet, which I have my own raves/grievances about.

Given all this, I will acknowledge that there are problems with identifying as the monolithic "oppressed,.." as though our experiences are the same. This is definitely not the case, and should never be construed as such. **Privilege and identity exist as a complex, fluid network of relationships, not s static forms (which is why identity politics is a bad thing). There is a critique to identity politics and the Black Orchid piece here, but I think it's only good for liberal-baiting and saying almost the same thing as the Black Orchid piece but from a really disembodied, holistic point of view. I think that as long as people are systematically experiencing violence and oppression from whichever place they come from (whether they're black or queers or women), I respect those who resist from the site of identity. Whether you're smashing a bank or reinventing social relationships, do what you gotta do.

The origins of this article are unclear and seem to have come from a blog now disappeared. This text has been found in other publications.

The Hidden Struggle

Daniel Townhead

Foreword

This is a reprint of the first half of my booklet published at the very end of 2012. Due to the sensitive content and extreme reactions (both positive and negative) that the writing received, I think it is appropriate to add a few comments in this, a small foreword.

There are a few issues or mistakes in the writing which should be identified. Firstly, "White Privilege Theory" is identified in a hard, unqualified manner with certain ideas. Is this a correct identification? There are many who would tell you that that the ideas I have identified as "White Privilege Theory" in fact are not a fair or accurate representation of the theory. I can only respond to this by saying that I have personally often encountered the ideas I will discuss below in association with this theory, but this does not mean that I am in a position to accurately define the theory. We encounter a situation which I believe is increasingly prevalent in our radical movements, in which ideas masquerade as a theory and theories provide shelter for ideas, but the two are not necessarily the same thing. The purpose of this republished first half of "The Hidden Struggle" is to destroy the dogmatic aspect of the ideas discussed; not to take down a theory. If the theory holds to all or some of the ideas discussed, it is subject to the writing; if not, it is not. Therefore throughout the piece the abbreviation "WPT" is effectively used as a lazy shorthand for "the ideas under discussion", similarly when I refer to a "theory" at many points it would have been more accurate to say for instance "way of thinking". Do not let this qualification weaken the urgency of this message to you; in whatever form they take, the ideas discussed are highly present in our movement. That they are completely counter-productive to an anti-racist movement, and indeed show up deep problems in the radical movement in general, is demonstrated clearly below.

The second mistake is an unqualified critique of the term 'people of colour'. I was in a theoretical mindset when I wrote this piece, and therefore I neglected to recognise that the term is used as an identity as well as a theoretical concept. I can see no problem with the term when used in terms of personal identity; the critique below applies when it is turned outwards, and used as a theoretical, categorising concept to refer to groups and dynamics between groups. This critique of course, still stands.

Besides these mistakes, I will also add to the arguments presented. Below you will find examples of the ridiculous nature of making generalised assumptions of privilege when a person happens to have a white skin colour. A common reply to certain of these examples that is not discussed in the piece is that an ethnicity or group of people with a white skin colour who are subject to racist or cultural discrimination/oppression (i.e. a white Polish person subject to a racist murder in an English town) are in fact not considered to be 'white'. What we have here is an embarrassing example of Orwellian doublespeak/doublethink, in which the meaning of words can be arbitrarily changed. We have a contradiction between a 'white person' being a person of a certain skin colour, and a 'white person' being a person who belongs to a certain cultural group or who enjoys a certain level of political or societal privilege. At one point the term is used to refer to the former; at another the term is used to refer to the latter. We encounter apologists who claim that a white Irish traveller is not actually considered to be white; the next day the Irish traveller goes to a No Borders workshop where they are told - with no argument allowed - that they have white privilege. Could these ideas be tortuously made to resolve their contradiction? Possibly. Would such a tortuous resolution make sense, or be palatable, to anybody outside of a tiny scene? Almost certainly not.

We are fighting a right wing that is growing stronger and stronger, and all we can come up with are contradictory, self-defeating concepts. We already have the tools we need; we must build an anti-racist movement that is truly non-assumptive, and that applies its concepts universally. We have a valuable tool in the concept of privilege, to check foolish and assumptive thought and action wherever it occurs - and yet we turn ourselves into hypocrites who often make assumptions when we use the word, completely ignoring a whole stratum of radical thought. This stratum is mentioned to an extent in the section of 'The Hidden Struggle' presented below; for a deeper exploration of it, please see the second half, available at Libcom's library (www.libcom.org).

Daniel Townhead 2013, owlunks@googlemail.com

The Hidden Struggle

This piece has been written because of the contradictory and divisive attitudes and ideas on race and culture that currently exist, in society at large but especially in the anarchist and radical left movements. This is the seed of the piece, but analysis on this subject helps to reveal many things beyond it – as a result, the main body of the work attempts to develop our understanding regarding forms of control, how certain people see themselves or do not see themselves, and many things besides. The first task of this work is the analysis of some of the existent discourses on race, primarily in the form of a critique of 'White Privilege Theory'. After this critique we simply take some of the relevant underlying issues, examine why contradictory attitudes and ideas are in existence, and move forward with the resolution to these contradictions. Hopefully the result is something that will help to cure the terrible and unnecessary divisiveness that has developed in this area within radical discourse, and also produce positive and strengthening ideas out of these contradictions and out of this division. The desire to move forward with ideas, and to strengthen our understanding as a whole, has led to many digressions and comments on specific situations within, chiefly, the anarchist movement – there are several of these at the end.

Note that this is primarily aimed at those who are 'within' anarchist, radical left or counter-cultural movements, or interested or familiar with the ideas of these movements – however it may be of interest to others also. When I use the words 'us' or 'our' within this piece, I am generally referring to people within these movements. I am writing specifically about situations within the UK in this work, but the core ideas should be applicable more or less to Northern Europe and to a lesser extent the U.S.A.

Unfortunately this had to be written in a fairly complicated theoretical style, as it grew out of analysing theoretical concepts. However, hopefully it has been made as accessible as it can be. Words whose use may not be clear even with the use of a dictionary have been defined when they arise. The main academic-style word that I will be using is 'discourse', which I take to mean the acceptable content and form of communication, i.e. what is said, what it is acceptable to say and how it is said. It is especially applied to formal communication and media, i.e. writing, debates, the content of films, etc. Different discourses can operate in different groups of people or in different media, so many of the discourses of for instance the anarchist movement or scene will be different to those you would find on the BBC, which would also be distinct from those you find in the Sun.

White Privilege Theory

White Privilege Theory (WPT) currently dominates discourse regarding racism, race and culture in the radical community, in Europe more recently than in America, from whence it comes. It is totally insufficient as a theory used by groups who aim for any kind of international perspective. It is equally insufficient as a theory dealing with any localised racial or cultural situation in Europe. Though I am not from the U.S. it seems to have a lot more relevance and value regarding the situation there, although some of the grave criticisms I will level in this piece will apply to the theory even when localised in the U.S.A. 'Critical Whiteness' theory is, if not exactly the same, very similar to it with many related ideas.

WPT is a theory which is used as the basis for certain workshops conducted at various radical events and locations. (It is also in my experience the dominant theory among far left or anarchist intellectuals, in so far as there is any debate or discussion regarding the matters of racism, race and culture). The workshops are notable for being in some cases 'compulsory' (though of course without any disciplinary measures behind them). They are also often characterised by a kind of ideological prescription (that is, ideas and theories that you are told are the case) that does not allow any form of debate or discussion. This situation is especially common at No Borders and Queer events. Similarly debate on the subject seems often underlaid with fear. We will be analysing the theory fairly aggressively, and this situation is the reason for this aggressive analysis. If a theory is aggressively pushed, it must expect to be aggressively analysed, especially if it has obvious flaws. After this analysis the piece becomes far less oppositional. So as readers do not initially get the wrong idea, we are not here desperately trying to show that such a thing as 'white privilege' does not exist in certain situations, for certain people, in certain places, at certain times. What we are critiquing is the way that this concept is applied to people, and some of the concepts and ideas that are often attached to it within discourse.

Here are some of the important ideas you may come across in the radical scene that are associated with WPT.

- White people are privileged in a number of ways that they do not consciously realise.
- There is an invisible web of hierarchical-style privilege that permeates the structure of societies that heavily

favours white people.

- A conceptual division of the world into 'white people' and 'people of colour'.
- The idea that racism is only possible from 'white people' towards 'people of colour'.
- The idea that all white people are racist.

International Perspective

The above set of ideas are completely inadequate and counterproductive to anyone who wants any form of international perspective or who wants to think or act regarding any localised situation outside of 'the west'. Firstly, as you can see, the above perspective is completely obsessed with white people. To have to tell far left/anarchists off for thinking the world revolves around white people is simply embarrassing.

Specifically, there are various racialised conflicts around the world that have nothing to do with white people. Many who have done migrant solidarity work, for instance helping out migrants on the ground in Calais, will be aware of sharp divisions and prejudices between different racial and ethnic groups. This is apparent in this immediate situation, but also from the life experiences of many of the migrants themselves. A friend of mine enquired after the story of a man who had a picture of himself wielding twin AK 47s; he replied he needed them to defend against Arab slave traders who targeted black african villages. There are also reports of racism operating as of late 2012 in the conflict in Mali.¹

WPT holds that white privilege exists everywhere in the world, and some would say that it has created racial prejudice in other places. This is true to an extent in for instance Africa. If it is true for the Middle Eastern world it is to a much, much lesser extent. But neither aspect of the theory applies in Japan, China, Korea and so on. They have never believed that whites were superior to themselves; on the contrary they have their own conceptions of racial superiority that go back thousands of years. Theories of white superiority have indeed affected much of the world, but do not be so blinkered and obsessed with this specific race and culture to think that they hold sway and have permeated everywhere, or that they were the first such ideas.

Going back to the situation in for instance Africa, ideas of white superiority have indeed made the situation worse, but being unable to talk about specific situations without the discourse being centred around white people is not going to help.

The Situation in Europe

Similarly there are many racial/ethnic/cultural conflicts within Europe that have little or nothing to do with white people. Conflict between black and Muslim communities, and Hindu/Muslim prejudice in Britain is well known, as well as for instance Somalian/Jamaican conflict. What gives us the right to either ignore or make assumptions about these conflicts? Why the fuck do we think that making anti-racism workshops and anti-racism zines that completely revolve around theories of white privilege and demand self-chastisement on the part of white people is a good idea? Such a stance a) pretty much assumes that the participants or readers are white, or b) makes massive assumptions about its 'people of colour' participants; for instance, that they must be the victims and never the perpetrators of racism, and that when they are the victims of racism the perpetrators must have been white and not anything else.

The points so far seriously call into question the division of the world into 'white people' and 'people of colour'. Conflicts and problems exist beyond these categorisations. As a minor but embarrassing aside, the term 'people of colour' is just a slightly different way of saying 'coloured people', which has notoriously racist overtones in the UK. I was in a workshop that was underlaid with WPT one time which used the distinctions 'white people' and 'people of colour', and right at the beginning a 'person of colour' said that he was uncomfortable with the term 'people of colour'. hilariously - if you have a dark sense of humour - he was immediately silenced by the 'facilitators' who said that we were 'not here to discuss semantics'. They actually acted completely justly, because nobody was allowed to raise any dissenting voice in that workshop at all; they made that clear at the start. I completely disapprove of using the term, but I am forced to use it in this writing in order to criticise theories which make use of it conceptually.

The origins of WPT specifically can be traced back to some essays by Peggy McIntosh in 1988. In one of these essays she lists aspects of white privilege that people are unconscious of. In fact many of these situations are localised to the USA, apply only to certain economic groups, or do not apply internationally, all of which problems invalidate the theory in its current incarnation. For instance:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

... This is a problem of numbers of people in an area. This is nothing to do with privilege. This does not apply if a 'white person' is in an area without a lot of 'white people' in, or if a 'person of colour' is in an area with a lot of

¹ e.g. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201212190660.html>

'people of colour' in.

2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area, which I can afford and in which I would want to live.

Anybody in the UK is lolling right now. I don't think this was even true in 1988. 40 years ago, yes.

3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

Again she is making assumptions about economic status and type of housing choice. I have been squatting for four years. This does not apply. This does not apply in Glasgow. This does not apply in Belfast. Please tell me why we are using this theory in Europe.

4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

The assumptions are just getting ridiculous now. Certainly, racial prejudice with regards to stop and search in London is a big problem. The MET is racist towards black people. This has been demonstrated as a fact, and it is a problem. Now, do you think the police in Glasgow, Belfast or Newcastle, where there are no very large ethnic minority populations and where for instance in Glasgow there are huge amounts of white gangs, or where in Belfast oppression and violence operate because of belief or ethnicity rather than skin colour, choose who to harass based on their race? No. There are about a hundred other things wrong with this point, but it can be a fun activity to think of them yourself. This point is relevant to the U.S.A. The theory was made for the U.S.A. Do not take a theory that was made for a specific place and forcefully apply it to a completely different place.

5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

The population of the UK is 85% white. Should we not expect the media in particular areas to proportionally represent the ethnic groups that make up that area? The alternative is for all media in all countries to represent all hundreds of races and ethnicities at all times, including languages etc. Are the ethnic groups present in the UK proportionally represented on for instance television? I cannot find statistics, but it is unlikely. The question is, whether we can find such statistics or not, who is actually represented or not represented, and why? This question will pose problems for WPT if, as I suspect, certain 'people of colour' groups are over-represented and others are under-represented, and certain 'white' groups are over-represented and others under-represented. This situation is one of a multiplicity of race and culture relations, not a binary.

Others of the points are actually valid for most 'white' people. Most of them however are gravely flawed, offensively so for anybody who knows anything about the current UK situation or UK history. For instance, "23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the place I have chosen." This unveils another massive inadequacy that comes about when the theory is taken into Europe, the fact of, which should be completely obvious to everybody, racism from white people towards other white people. By the way, WPT is utterly insufficient as a theory in that it does not qualify what a race is. No matter about the technicalities of the point, the fact is that Irish people have been treated as a separate race historically, and suffered great prejudice from it. Remember the sign hung on many London pubs as recently as the 60s, 'No Blacks No Dogs No Irish' - or the extreme prejudice still meted out to white-skinned Travellers of all kinds, Irish, Romany and New Age. I can't believe anarchists here in the UK can allow the propagation of such a bullshit theory when so many of them fought with their own bodies to protect the travellers at Dale Farm. Or, are Jewish people classed as white people? If so, are we going to forget events as recent as those of 1933-45, or forget that the Aryan Brotherhood, the largest white supremacist gang in the U.S, has an initiation ritual in which the only race specifically mentioned as objects of conflict and hate are the Jewish? And if not, does whiteness then refer to ethnicity and not skin colour? What ethnicity precisely? With none of these options can WPT remain intact and respectable.

Is racism only possible from 'white people' towards 'people of colour'?

There are strands of WPT, and also far-left thought, that claim that racism is impossible from 'people of colour' to white people (whether they believe it is possible from one 'person of colour' to another I do not know). This belief plays into certain practices in the left-wing media, which I would never expect to publicly state such a doctrine but which seems to tacitly want to reinforce this belief. This practice of the LW media actually has some sensible motivations - shared by the way with Government and law enforcement - namely of course to quell racism among white people, which they believe has the potential to flare up. This practice is now arguably backfiring in the UK. It is accomplished by simply not naming racist or prejudicial attacks from 'people of colour' towards white people as being racist in nature. This type of racist attack is therefore invisible to white people unless they actually live in poor, multicultural areas, which is unlikely for anyone who actually matters to the literate world (middle class people). By

the way, I am not trying to spread fear about such areas. I have lived in areas in which white people were a minority for 3/4s of my life, and I did not experience them as being especially dangerous. White people are by no means victimised in such areas – though there are a few exceptions to this around the country. All I am saying is that occasionally racist attacks or the unveiling of racist views towards white people happens, and that this fact is silenced by the media. Again, I would guess that they do this for relatively good reasons; this is no great conspiracy. But how does an intellectual theory dare to make an assertion that most of the people of the world are not capable of racism? Firstly, through the aforementioned invisibility of such racism in the media. Secondly, through theoretical subtlety and the changing of certain words' meaning. Thirdly, through being fucked up.

Regarding the second point, there are several different arguments used to justify this kind of assertion. One you may come across is that racism is impossible without 'power' supporting it, and as 'people of colour' have no power due to the structure of society and the institutions that compose it a). holding all the power and b). systematically privileging white people and un-privileging 'people of colour', it is impossible for them to exercise racism. The problem with this is that power is not just held by the institutions of society; every human being holds potential power, which can be exercised towards other human beings in various ways including love, aid, direct violence, manipulation, creativity, etc. To take the negative example, one human being can kill another independently of a power structure, because they possess physical power either in the form of weaponry or being bigger, stronger or more skilled than the other. If you think this example is too individualised, a group of humans can also exercise said physical power over other humans for various reasons and motivations that again are not directly tied to any white-privileging power structure or discourse, including practical competitive reasons, cultural conflict, or ideological motivations that they have developed themselves.

Another argument is that as modern racist theory originated in claiming white supremacy, and was originally made by white people, that it somehow eternally retains this historical 'spirit' and can only ever be used in this sense. Besides the above arguments, direct examples are the easiest way of combating this point and also clarifying my theoretical arguments regarding the subject of 'power'. One type of racist attack that is often exercised against white people in Britain today is the following: in areas with large Muslim populations, white or black men can be attacked for walking with or being seen in public with what *appears* to be a Muslim woman (though the only criteria seems to be that she have brown skin). This happened to two of my friends in Bradford, who were beaten up in the attacks, and I later met a man from London who described being stabbed several times and nearly killed. This was a black man who was accompanying a young woman from a Muslim family to see her white boyfriend. This romance had been going on for a while, until eventually the family had suspicions and waited in a certain area for the young woman. They assumed my acquaintance was the person who was seeing her. Alternatively of course, there are occasionally random acts of violence against white people because of the colour of their skin, such as the case of the murder of Chris Yates, which is easily found in news stories via a search engine. This story does not contradict what I said earlier regarding the media; the media did not have to report it as a racist attack, as the courts did not classify it as a racist attack – this is despite witnesses overhearing clear racist attitudes.

Regarding the first examples – of violent racial/sexual control – this is one of the oldest, most pervasive, and most harmful types of racism; it is combined with possessive sexism and has as its object racial or cultural 'purity'. Of course, there are many accounts of white people perpetrating this kind of attack (i.e. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Emmett Till*, etc. As an aside, you can also see an account of this kind of sexual racism in the black community in Elle Varner's 2012 music video 'I don't care'), and if you read the manifestos of white racist groups, this kind of sexual 'protectiveness' is notably present. It is an emotive subject that goes back to old days when women were regarded as possessions of a particular group, and if one group conquered another they would kill the men and take 'possession' of the women. This dates back to way before any kind of racial theory. In terms of power, in these instances the perpetrators' physical power was blatantly enough to exercise a terrible form of racism beyond any structure besides ancient, xenophobic patriarchy. A note on the left-wing media situation is that another reason they avoid the reporting of such events is that they are used serially by the extreme right to gather support for their racist, fascist parties. This is one of the reasons why, as I noted earlier, this apparent policy of left media is backfiring badly. If you are in an area in which such events happen, and the media either ignore or downplay the significance of them, you are clearly driven towards the right wing, as they are the only ones who take any notice of what is going on. If all the media was united in its condemnation of such events, and was united in, in their terms, 'naming and shaming' the small number of clearly racist attacks as actually being racist, just as they have done with instances of white-perpetrated racism, there would be one less reason - one less big reason - for people to gravitate towards the extreme right. Yeah, your theories are fucking up so bad that you are driving people towards nazi parties – well done.

A third argument you may come across is an attempt to change the meaning of the word 'racism' to mean only situations which are associated with a societal structure which privileges one group of people (white people) over another. This is just a straight changing up of the dictionary definition of racism, which includes the definition 'hatred or intolerance of another race or races'. To give them a little bit of credit, it has a small degree of validity in that the word racism DID specifically refer to the racist theories that were invented in Europe in the 19th century, however the

word has extremely clearly changed in its meaning, as the dictionary suggests, and has had a changed meaning for an obviously long time. If WP theorists insist on alternative meanings to words, they need to be up-front about it and define all relevant words and which situations they can refer to; i.e. what word describes the above attacks, and are we allowed to consider the subject in enforced racism workshops?

Although there are these given explanations for the perspective, they are, as we see, obviously flawed. The reality of the conception that racism is not possible from 'people of colour' towards 'white people' is simply a fucked up one of denial of humanity, a denial which can usefully go either way - denying the humanity of 'white people' by according all the evil and power of the world to them, and associating all white people with the dehumanised structure that we in the radical left and anarchist movements are meant to be fighting against, or denying the humanity of 'people of colour' by implying they are somehow racially incapable of having the cruelty, intelligence, prejudice, independence of moral will and ability to create discourse that are necessary for any racist perspective. These are HUMAN characteristics; to claim them for one race is ridiculous, and, uh, racist.

Are all white people racist?

No, not all white people are racist (or if they are, so is everybody else in the world and there is no need to designate white people in this or any similar statement). I actually have no idea what the reasons behind such a theoretical conception are – they are probably variations on those given above, and would have similar answers. Some reasons why an unwelcoming atmosphere may be present in many white-majority communities are given later in this piece, but they are not due to racism. I would only say that if someone tries to argue the above assertion, ask their reasons and either argue against them if you are able to, or e-mail them to me or something.

The Cultural Question

An argument that could be given against many of the examples I have used so far is that they are demonstrative of something like a 'culture clash'; that many of the conflicts derive from practical differences in culture rather than 'racial hate'. This is certainly possible, but again, I have been using the terms of radical left race/culture theory, which refuses to talk about cultural difference. People do really need to start discussing problems of a cultural nature, and having sufficiently dealt with WPT using its own terms I will approach the fringes of the subject. Firstly note that if we start considering cultural questions in examples of racism from 'people of colour' towards white people, such as Muslim marriage law regarding the above attacks, then we also need to consider cultural questions as regards to instances of perceived white racism. The left does not want to enter into such considerations because it is still under the sway of Marxism, the ideas of which continually force it into an economic materialism; a refusal to consider any aspect of human relations beyond those of hierarchical economic oppression, class systems, material poverty or richness, etc.

What is especially sad is that anarchists are also generally attached to such ideas, even after our experience of creating so many autonomous spaces where we can see human relations and culture flowering beyond the necessities of hierarchy, the creation of new and beautiful things, and also clear, sharp cultural conflict, that exist without any clear economic divisions. I observe every week the necessities of squatting continually throwing up new living situations and combinations of people, but they are also continually separating and keeping apart groups with different cultural ways - approaches to drink and drugs is a big one, also approaches to the spaces we live in and relations with each other (i.e. safer spaces policies etc). If cultural differences keep apart small groups of mostly white people, cultural differences will also create divisions on a national scale across race/culture fault lines. If there are cultural differences that create conflict - which there are, here and all over the world – when they happen to be between people with different skin colours, they will at the same time appear as race conflicts to people who cannot see beyond the race question. Without considering questions of culture we will therefore be entirely unable to move forward with minimising or abolishing racism, which obviously still exists alongside cultural conflict. Unsurprisingly it is convincingly arguable that WPT and far left race discourse is reinforcing racism, through the process of making skin colour into such an important classification. I.e. through WPT it is entirely necessary to see a 'person of colour' as a 'person of colour' and a 'white person' as a 'white person'; we should be aware of other dynamics which govern group relations besides this. Alongside culture, an equally relevant concept here is the situation of a group, to understand which we must be aware of the history of the group. WPT is an example of situational theory in this sense; it differentiates and categorises groups, but instead of attaching properties to those groups, it makes us aware of the situations that the groups face. Unfortunately it is incredibly obsessed with one physical characteristic (whiteness) in considering situations, and is incapable of seeing deeper historical or cultural aspects.

The radical left/anarchist movements also cannot consider culture or history/situation because of the complex and fucked up relationship the industrialised northwest (corresponding almost precisely with the assumed 'white

people' of WPT and excluding the 'white people' that WPT forgets about) has with its own culture and history; furthermore because of the particular relationship and viewpoint the radical left has on and with this culture and society. Though people seem to think we are solid in our aggressive stance towards 'the system' and the powers that incorporate it, our discourse is actually rent down the middle with the worst kind of contradictions, and it is in this subject that they become the most divisive and apparent.

In investigating these contradictions, let us consider for a moment the concepts that we are dealing with when we are considering a question such as 'white privilege'. Consider the points that Peggy McIntosh outlines, a few of which I have repeated, with criticisms, above. Note that though I have criticised their absolute form, these points do privilege many people. Underlying these points is a society and a system, a culture and certain institutions and powers. These differ in detail from country to country, but across the northwestern world at least - Europe and the U.S. - they are very similar in practice and effect. This society, culture, system, these powers, as we have noted, exclude many people from their substance. They exclude many people from their benefits. As they exclude, they of course include many. Race is a factor in the process of inclusion and exclusion, but it is not an absolute factor, to anywhere near the extent that WPT implies - i.e. 'people of colour' can rise to the very top of the hierarchies involved in the system and powers, and can become very influential and respected in the society and culture (though of course potentially still be subject to prejudice). White people similarly can be on the bottom. This is an important observation, but it is not the point I am trying to make. What precisely is the anarchist and far left stances with regard to the dominant society, culture, system and powers? We know that the anarchist stance is one of opposition, and that the far left stance is generally considered to be one of opposition, with some co-operation. In this opposition lies the largely unexamined contradiction; as well as the possibilities of opposition or support, within opposition we have the question of what we actually know and feel about this system and culture, what we recognise it to be. There are two stances or discourses here that are causing great confusion, the conjunction of which lies largely unexamined.

One is that which is historically derived from Marxism, the materialist perspective. In this perspective material situation is the most important aspect of life. Opposition to the system derives from the injustices associated with it; the tendency of the richest to preserve their wealth at the expense of others. The tendency of the most powerful to exploit and abuse others. The tendency of the privileged (who are granted privilege by the system) to maintain their privilege. Injustice thus becomes central to the discourse - so at the same time, those who do not suffer from injustice, or who suffer from far less injustice in regards to their material situation (in terms of either wealth or their 'rights') are regarded as privileged, and are expected to either help those with less privilege or work towards some kind of revolution or construction of a system which will realise the goal of complete equality. Note that, in this conception, oppression and injustice are experienced by those either excluded by, on the periphery of, or on the bottom of the system, while those fully 'inside' the system, not under its heel, are regarded as privileged. It is of course an accurate description of the material processes, and social processes of exclusion, of the western system that is becoming and has become the world system.

The second is no less accurate. Instead of material life, it is concerned with social, cultural and spiritual life. We have noted that the system forcefully excludes some; it forcefully includes far more - it needs them to operate the system. At the same time its very nature has the potential to destroy any meaningful social, cultural and spiritual life for those positioned within it. The processes involved in this destruction are extremely diverse and complex, and I cannot enter into an exposition of what they entail here (though we will understand them far better at the end of this piece). It has already been done many times in radical, generally anarchist literature, and more importantly in fictional literature, music and art, in many different ways and using many different words, but all referring to the same processes.² It is in the artistic world that you will find the real exposition of this perspective, but this only lessens its importance if you have an over-intellectualised, dehumanised culture, which, oh shit, we do. I'll just give a few song quotes to make the basics clear and to remind us of this perspective's presence:

Crass-

"I'm just a person, a human being.

NO YOU'RE NOT YOU'RE A PART OF THE MACHINE.

You're a part of the machine 'cos we want you to be.

We've got you now, and you'll never be free."

(So What')

"And their systems, christ, they're everywhere,
School army church, corporation deal,
A fucked up reality based on fear,
A fucking conspiracy to stop you feeling real"

² For instance, Grant Morrison - 'The Invisibles', Theodore Roszak - 'Where the Wastland Ends', William Blake, Fight Club (film or book), AK Thompson - 'Black Bloc, White Riot', Erich Fromm, etc etc etc.

('Banned from the Roxy')

Radiohead-

"A patient, better driver, a safer car...
At a better pace, slower and more calculated,
no chance of escape
Now self employed, concerned, but powerless
An empowered and informed member of society,
pragmatism not idealism..
the ability to laugh at weakness
Calm fitter, healthier and more productive,
a pig in a cage on antibiotics."
('Fitter Happier')

"Rows of houses, all bearing down on me
I can feel their blue hands touching me
All these things into position,
All these things we'll one day swallow whole

...
This machine will, will not communicate
These thoughts and the strain I am under
Be a world child, form a circle
Before we all go under

...
Immerse your soul in love"
('Fade out/street spirit')

To those forcefully included in the system and culture described, escape is as much of a choice as the joining of the system is to those excluded from it - it is possible,³ but more difficult than you would think, and many things bar the way. Discourses as to why privileged people remain privileged whatever they try and do, serially used to show that they have no way of ever identifying with or becoming one of the un-privileged, work with exactly the same degree of accuracy and precision when turned the other way into the second discourse. So the rich kid can never know what it's like to be homeless because they can always ask mum or dad for money when it gets really bad? If the safety net is always there, then they can never, ever, walk the tightrope without a safety net. Do we understand the psychic effect this has, the claustrophobia it entails? Money is a minor issue compared to the systems which govern the behaviour of people. These have historically progressed from discipline, to surveillance, to internal surveillance through discourse, by which I mean in this case the words running through your head. Crimethinc, who could potentially be able to change the world if they were actually able to synthesise and move forward with the dozens of theories they take from other people and places, describes these systems like so:

"Covering the surface of this society is a complex network of minute rules and norms through which the most original minds and energetic characters can barely penetrate. People's wills are not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided. We are seldom forced to act, but are constantly restrained from acting. Such repression does not destroy, but rather prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but instead compresses, stifles, and stupefies, so that each individual grows up into a dutiful lamb that needs no shepherding to stay within the fence-line. This is not political repression, which necessitates secret police and prison camps, but cultural repression, in which people police and imprison themselves."

This is an accurate description of a significant part of the second discourse. Tellingly, this quote is taken from their piece entitled 'Undermining Oppression', which is largely concerned with privilege and uses white privilege almost exclusively as their 'example', a preoccupation that mirrors the current trend in the anarchist and radical left movements. After this accurate description, they then go on to state that what they describe exists and permeates everywhere. It does not. What they describe is precisely what is used to police and govern the 'privileged whites', those included by the system (which of course, as we have seen, extends far beyond 'privileged whites'). It is the

³ See Note on the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (available in 2nd half)

substance of the system. Any attempt to argue otherwise demonstrates the doublethink that is alarmingly common in the far left, in which we 'know' two contradictory facts. We KNOW that political repression as described by crimethinc is and has been used, is and has been necessary (to the authorities) to keep black people in America and black and poor white people in the U.K. down. We KNOW that black males are imprisoned at a completely disproportionately high rate. How can we know that and at the same time claim that they also 'police and imprison themselves'? It is not they who imprison themselves, it is the authorities and powers of western society that imprison them. Evidently. This is political repression, not cultural repression, and it is doled out to those who are outside of or resistant to cultural repression. To bring it back to earlier terminology, those included by the system and culture are subject to cultural repression, those excluded are subject to political repression. Note that this political repression is often brought to bear *against the resistant culture*, such as the alleged propagation of crack cocaine among black communities in the 1970s, or the destruction of Aboriginal culture by concrete political policies of the Australian government and white Australian institutions and powers. This however is still political repression, not cultural repression. We have to rely on punk groups again to sum it up - remember that this was written after Joe Strummer took part in riots in black communities, and is thus derived from emotional knowledge and insight;

"Black people got a lot of problems, but they don't mind throwing a brick
White people go to school where they teach you how to be thick"
- 'White Riot'

Now, this is technically a racist categorisation if it were formed as a serious idea, but we understand that poetry and song are not trying to set out logical truths; this statement is aimed at summing up a general situation. With great precision it sums up the situation that I have set out above; a politically oppressed group nevertheless are mentally free enough to rebel, while a second group do not rebel because they are indoctrinated and mentally controlled/inhibited by the same system that oppresses the first group. These groups of course in reality do not correspond precisely to racial groups, however it often happens that there are broad racial correspondences to the two different forms of control. One of the reasons for this will be that the processes of cultural oppression requires groups to be part of the Cypher culture (the cypher culture is explored and defined in the 2nd part not printed here), which is a specific though pervasive culture; if a group has its own resistant culture they will not be subject to this control in the same way – and one of the main ways culture is propagated is through parents to children, i.e. ancestry, i.e. race.

Privilege

All these observations relate back to criticism of the concept of white privilege, and privilege itself. Now, earlier we thoroughly attacked WPT for making its concepts absolute and making various assumptions about people of all skin colours. We saw that the privileges it names are not by any means held by all white people, especially when considering situations in Europe. However, we must acknowledge the existence of a politically/materially 'privileged' group and a politically/materially oppressed group. In the USA these groups may well correspond more or less to white people in the politically privileged group and 'people of colour' in the politically oppressed group (though this pattern certainly does not correspond to many). In Europe we need to understand that many white people are in the politically oppressed group, along with people of African and Middle East/Pakistani descent.

Besides these qualifications, our above observations should serve to massively qualify our use of the concept of privilege. Simply enough, we cannot assume an individual's relationship to the external world on the basis of their skin colour. I shall go over the two basic points.

Firstly, we cannot assume that a privilege has been granted based on skin colour, because -

- a) There is racism, prejudice etc between groups of white people across Europe.
- b) The mechanics of race privilege as described by WPT break down with regards to law enforcement in poor, massively white-majority areas.
- c) The mechanics of race privilege as described by WPT change in areas where white people are a minority.

Note that this is a criticism of WPT's embarrassing tendency to make assumptions about people based on their skin colour, i.e. this point would not need to be made if it were a better theory (or better applied by ourselves in the radical movement) and was applied to specific people in specific situations, not forced upon all people in ways determined by their external appearance.

Secondly however, relevant to but going beyond the race question, we must re-examine privilege itself, in that in cases where a privilege IS granted an individual or group by one part of the system or by a situation, another part of the system or the situation may oppress the same individual or group. In many cases the privilege will lead to the oppression; it is the 'privilege' of cultural assimilation and inclusion that leads to a group being left alone and 'free' to go about their daily life without hassle from the authorities – but the same cultural inclusion will in many cases lead to, or be associated with, the above-described cultural oppression and repression, taming and removing life from the

supposed privileged. Similarly, there is a correspondence between material wealth and 'involvement' in capitalism, in that the degree to which you benefit from or acquire material wealth is linked inextricably with the degree to which you are bound and governed by that wealth and the system that created it; full involvement in the capitalist system will most likely lead to such often-observed phenomena as the replacement of human relationships based on personality and feeling to human relationships dictated by money. Even if the individual who experiences this situation is not aware of its degradation and emptiness, we are, or should be, aware of it.

If we see truth in these arguments, how do we then change our conception of what privilege is, and how we use the term? The problem becomes one of specific vs general use. The term is often used in a general sense, and by this I mean that we refer to an individual as being generally 'privileged', i.e. "You are a privileged person", "they are a privileged group" - and this can be used to attack or silence a person, i.e. "shut up you privileged wanker", or to assign properties or power dynamics to groups, i.e. "privileged people should behave in such and such a way". I hope that in following the above arguments we can see this use of the term is dangerous and assumptive. There is no way of accurately assigning the property of 'privileged' to a person *in a general sense*, because privilege necessarily refers to a relationship to a system or structure, and we cannot know the individual's full current or past relationships to those systems and structures.

Distinct from this is using the term specifically associated with a certain privilege - for instance in the example of a materially rich person acting or talking as if they know what homelessness is like, it may well be appropriate to remind the person that they have no way of knowing what it is like due to their specific privilege. Similarly many people in the radical left act and talk as if they are politically oppressed when they are either clearly not politically oppressed, or their political oppression stems from them wilfully and repeatedly putting themselves in the way of the fist of political oppression, it being a simple and easy decision to remove themselves from in front of it. In this case again it may well be appropriate to remind those who talk or act in such a way that this oppression is not 'native' to them, while it is 'native' to many others. Bringing it back round to the subject of race and culture, if we know or highly suspect that someone has not suffered oppression because of their race or culture it is of course right to suggest to them that their background or area of current and/or past residence has afforded them a privilege, and that they cannot know or accurately discourse about such oppression. Again I will remind us that, while most 'white' people in the UK have not experienced such oppression and thus at certain times should be reminded of this fact (in contrast to many people of for instance African descent), many other white people *will* have experienced it and we cannot assume this aspect of their past due to their skin colour. If privilege theorists wish, these notes are easily made compatible with the concept of 'Intersectionality' (which is the combination of different privileges and oppressions operating on a particular person), we are just extending the number of possible 'intersections' and extending the potential people to which the concepts can apply themselves (i.e. they must be extended to everyone).

So, to take an example. I had a friend who died recently. He was a white male. He was also a social recluse, who had not spoken to people for so long that before he died he refused to see even me, his old best friend. I mention that he died because the way of his death was linked to the way of his life. What are we to do with such an example? Are we going to take the medical route, and conclude he probably had some kind of mild or severe medical social disorder? You may if you wish, and I will reply that he had an unbelievably good sense of humour, and great emotional warmth and empathy. In examples like this, what happens to our inclination to note that it is the material, social and cultural surroundings of an individual which we must read in order to understand their situation? We cannot ignore, in noticing that he had failed to function socially, (or rather that he once had but had lost contact with this world), the broken nature of the culture surrounding him, the lack of community and support networks, and the fact that he rejected the culture that was offered to him, which was nothing other than the cypher culture, which, as he recognised, itself is nothing. His 'intersections' of 'privilege' were largely meaningless, because he did not exist in a social world in which they had meaning (besides the relative material comfort of living in the UK, something similarly available to people in the UK whatever their gender or skin colour - note here that he lived in, relatively to the rest of the UK, a very poor household). In contrast, when are we going to recognise the corresponding intersections of cultural repression and oppression, which he was unlucky enough to fall victim to? Recognising these factors does not remove our recognition of potential privileges. It merely makes us take each person, and case, as it comes, and not assume a privilege or an oppression until we recognise it. As people should be aware, my friend's case is by no means unique.

The Politics of Voices: Notes on Gender, Race & Class

Aiden Rowe

As class-struggle anarchists dealing with the relations between gender, race and class, we must, in theory and practice, pick a path between two pitfalls. On one side is economic reductionism – the reduction of all political questions to the social relations of production – which erases the perspectives and struggles of women, queers and people of colour; submerges their voices within an overly generalised class narrative, in which the idealised Worker is implicitly white heterosexual and male; or consigns their struggles to a secondary importance compared to the “real struggle” of (economic) class against class. On the other is a stultifying and inward-looking liberal-idealist identity politics, concerned fetishistically with the identification of privilege and the self-regulation of individual oppressive behaviour to the (near) exclusion of organised struggle, which, while amplifying the voices of the marginalised, consigns them to an echo chamber where they can resonate harmlessly.

While both poles described are actualised within the anarchist milieu, we should not make the mistake of thinking that both pitfalls are equally imminent. White supremacy and patriarchy[1] are hegemonic within our society and this is reflected in anarchist spaces: dismissive “critiques” of identity politics are far more common than over-enthusiastic engagement. Therefore this piece will not offer yet another of these critiques, which more often than not function only to justify the continued ignorance and inaction of those unwilling to destabilise their privilege.[2]

Rather this piece deals with a more difficult question: “How does one reconcile the diverse political perspectives of feminists, queers and activists of colour with the tradition of class-struggle anarchism?” I do not offer a complete or authoritative answer, but rather attempt to move forward a conversation which seems to be perpetually re-iterating its own beginning: “we must begin to talk about gender and race issues”. Indeed we must, but we must also move beyond beginning.

The traditional approach

Most class-struggle anarchist understandings of the inter-relation of gender, race and class allude in one way or another to the Marxist base-superstructure model of society, whereby the relations of production are the base of society, which generate the political superstructure which includes the state, culture, gender and race relations etc. A vulgar Marxist idea of the base-superstructure model holds that the base determines the superstructure absolutely and the superstructure is unable to affect the base. The implication of this is that no specific agitation on gender or race issues is needed: if women, queers or people of colour wish to improve their position in society they should simply participate in the class struggle which will necessarily and automatically result in the dissolution of all hierarchies. A particularly crude but somewhat instructive example of this thinking tells us:

“In any class society—thus, in any society in which the state and the economy exist—only the ruling class can be truly said to have privilege... [S]ocalled privileges are nothing more than a minimal easing of the conditions of exploitation experienced by people in these specific social categories. They are intended to convince these people that they have more in common with their exploiters than with those not granted the same “privileges” and to convince the others that their real enemy is not the ruling class, but rather those granted a less intense level of exploitation... Since only the ruling class truly has privilege, the destruction of privilege will only occur when we destroy all rule.” [3]

This sort of utopian thinking denies that gender or race have any autonomy from class: patriarchy and white supremacy are merely tools employed by the ruling class to divide the workers. Of course, in reality, the establishment of a communist economic system does not preclude the continuation of patriarchy or white supremacy. One can easily imagine, for example, a communist system where women are held to be the collective sexual property of men, with sexual access ensured by systematic rape and battery, whose economy is perfectly functional.

More sophisticated variants of this model, often accompanied by some dialectical flourish, acknowledge the necessity of specific anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-transphobic agitation, lest these dynamics persist “after the revolution”, but still understand gender and race issues as being essentially forms of bigotry fostered by the ruling class to divide workers against themselves to prevent the realisation of their collective “objective” interests as a class. Gender and race struggles are thus positioned as ancillary to the class struggle, even if they are formally considered “central” to it. Patriarchy and white supremacy are not understood as constituting systems in their own right and forms of power other than the economic are rendered invisible. The pertinent question here is not whether this picture is correct in some “objective” sense - whether metaphysically all power “really” resides in the means of production - but rather: which voices are amplified by this framing and which are muted? What forms of action are opened and

foreclosed by choosing this framework at the expense of another? Who among us has the power to define the “objective” interests of the working class?

'Scientific socialism' and subjectivity

No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world. - Mikhail Bakunin[4]

A particularly egregious influence of Marxism on anarchist thought is the supposed need to understand the world systematically – to render the world objectively knowable through the development of a theoretical system, which totally describes reality, and provides a set of objective truths against which other understandings of the world can be compared – related to the failed project of “scientific socialism”. Anarchists (Bakunin in particular) have long recognised the authoritarian nature of this project: a movement mobilised according to scientific theories can only be a movement of “experts” leading the masses – the “false consciousness” of the masses can only be directed to revolutionary ends by the Party, which, by some unknown means, comes to be the bearer of true consciousness backed up by objective scientific facts.[5]

Objective or universal knowledge is impossible. We exist within a web of social relations and only a god would be able to view the totality of social relations as an objective observer. What we see and what we do not see is dependent both on how we are positioned relative to others and in which directions we choose to look. Since men don't experience the world as women, for example, the reality of women's oppression is knowable to us only indirectly and partially. The systems we develop for understanding the world are therefore products of the particular web of power relations in which we are situated; are necessarily at best partial, subjective and tentative. They reflect both the oppressions and privileges to which we are subject. Their proper function is as working theories that enable us to act as effectively as possible within our social context, not as dogmas to which reality must be made to fit. Claims to objectivity and universality are nothing other than a power grab; what is considered central to the struggle for human liberation is a reflection of who has power within the movement. The centrality of economics to our theory, and our particular conception of what class struggle entails and what it does not must be critically re-evaluated in this light.[6]

Intersectionality and privilege

[T]here is an important value in overcoming the fear of immanent critique and to maintaining the democratic value of producing a movement that can contain, without domesticating, conflicting interpretations on fundamental issues. - Judith Butler [7]

Feminist theory provides useful theoretical tools for analysing the inter-relations of gender, race and class. Critiques of second-wave feminism, particularly from women of colour, highlighted the role of universalist feminist narratives in the marginalisation of working-class women, women of colour, and those whose gender expression or sexuality deviated from the norm: the idea of a universal female experience in practice meant the universalisation of the issues of the most privileged sections of the feminist movement. The theory of intersectionality was developed to address the issue of how a movement could begin to accommodate the incoherence of perspectives entailed by the abandonment of universalism and still continue to function effectively.[8]

Intersectionality recognises that these incoherences are not merely intellectual disagreements, but rather reflect real differences in the experience of oppression from different subject-positions. We are all oppressed and privileged in various ways within various systems, and these systems interact in complex ways to produce a totality within which gender, race and class cannot be disentangled and approached as distinct objects: ones positioning with respect to race, for example, changes qualitatively what it means to be a certain gender. We must therefore reject the notion that the class struggle is or could be the same for everyone, and turn to the more complex task of treating class as contingent on other hierarchies.

"Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchy is, dare to go against the grain of the conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope." - bell hooks[9]

Examining intersectionalities means not just developing an understanding of the different forms of oppression and the struggles against them, but also means asking certain questions about the ways in which they intersect. To illustrate, let's examine two seemingly distinct areas of recent WSM activity - the Campaign Against the Household and Water Taxes (CAHWT), which is a particular tactical engagement in a more generalised struggle against austerity, and the campaign for abortion rights in Ireland, which forms part of a wider struggle to maximise reproductive choices for women – and ask: what is the relationship between austerity as a generalised imposition on our class and the

restriction of reproductive choice as a particular imposition on women? What are the common forms of social control mobilised in these two seemingly discrete spheres?

Both are biopolitical projects; that is, both aim, at the level of the individual and of the population at large, at producing certain kinds of people and not others in the furtherance of particular objectives. Austerity, which is commonly understood as a mechanism of extracting capital from the population and transferring it to a capitalist class in crisis (which is true), is also a project aimed at reshaping our lives to produce austere subjects: idealised workers primed for participation in neoliberal markets, who provide a maximum of productivity at a minimum cost, living lives with a minimum of material comforts, a restricted sphere of social activity, whose activity is continually aimed at maximising marketable skills, actively seeking job “opportunities” etc.[10] The restriction of reproductive choices, while often seen as merely a result of backward religious moralism, must also be understood in this way: by denying women access to abortion outright and ensuring that access to contraception is expensive, sexual activity (and the social activity surrounding it) is disciplined toward the production of life within certain normative contexts (i.e. the stable monogamous relationship, called marriage in its ideal form) while other forms are precluded.[11] Both involve the mobilisation of many of the same mechanisms of social control: the police, the judicial system, the contraction of the welfare state (in particular the cuts to child benefit function to prevent problematic sections of the working class from reproducing and placing a burden on the state, while imposing a particularly cruel form of discipline on those that do), the taxation system (VAT on condoms, for example), education, public health etc.

An intersectional approach thus reveals the deep interconnections between superficially distinct spheres of political activity. Women's struggles and the class struggle are found to be inseparable. The slogans “Can't Pay, Won't Pay” and “My Body, My Choice” resonate deeply with one another, as both involve a refusal of biopolitical control and an assertion of the right to live self-directed lives autonomous of the demands of the powerful. Intersectional praxis involves, in part, uncovering these interconnections and writing them into the public discourse.

Speaking and listening

As anarchists, we are not immune to the effects of being formed within a social context in which women, queers and people of colour are systematically oppressed. Practices of dominance and submission are deeply ingrained into our culture and habituated within normative forms of social interaction, and cannot simply be dispelled with the performative declaration: “I am anti-racist”, “I am anti-sexist”, “I am an anarchist” etc.[12] Put simply: if left unexamined, our subconscious habits in social interactions will reproduce the marginalisation of the already-marginalised within the anarchist movement.

If, as I have argued, the building-blocks of anarchist theory and practice are the subjective perspectives of those who experience oppression directly (as opposed to ready-made theoretical systems) then an awareness of the ways in which privilege manifests in interpersonal relations is of particular importance.[13] The ability to contribute to shaping the direction of the movement is predicated on the ability to speak and be listened to by others within the movement. The ability to speak from an authoritative position, with the expectation of being listened to, understood and treated seriously, the ability to rely on certain culturally-specific assumptions (common sense [14]) in making a point, and so on, are more readily available to those who are already privileged by power structures than it is to those who are not. Awareness of privilege, then, is an important counterbalance to social forces which produce marginalisation, which allows us to organise more effectively against those forces. This is the precise opposite of the liberal-moralist theory of privilege, which elevates privilege awareness to the status of an abstract good.

The class struggle

At this point one might be wondering what precisely the implication of this argument is. Do I mean to say that class must no longer be at the centre of anarchist politics? Or am I saying that class is understood in a way that is too narrow? I am saying both of these things, or, more precisely, both are valid ways of parsing the same argument. If class is understood as being simply a matter of economics, and particularly those aspects of capitalist economics that appear most pressing to white heterosexual men; if class-centricity means that a deep understanding of the way in which capitalism produces capitalists and workers is essential for all anarchists, while deep understandings of the way in which patriarchy produces men and women, and white supremacism produces white people in relation to a multiplicity of (in) subordinate races[15], are not; then class must be removed from the centre of our theory. If, however, class is understood as encompassing the totality of hierarchical social relations, as being the product of many systems acting sometimes in concert and sometimes autonomously of one another, and moreover as bringing together a diversity of experiences and struggles in a spirit of solidarity and mutual recognition, then this is precisely the heart of anarchism.

Endnotes

- [1] I am using these terms in a broad sense for the sake of readability. White supremacy encompasses all oppressions on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, nationality and migration status which function to empower whites. Similarly, patriarchy includes the oppression of women, queers, trans* people and others oppressions on the basis of gender.
- [2] For a balanced critique, see “The Poverty of Privilege Politics” by Tabitha Bast and Hannah McClure, Shift Magazine, <http://shiftmag.co.uk/?p=679>
- [3] “A Question of Privilege”, Venomous Butterfly, http://www.geocities.ws/kk_abacus/vb/wd8priv.html
- [4] Quoted in Michael Bakunin (1961) by E. H. Carr, p. 175
- [5] Within the Marxist tradition, this attempt to attribute the “perspective of totality” to the Party has been criticised by John Holloway. See Change The World Without Taking Power, p.35, <http://www.edtechpost.ca/readings/John%20Holloway%20-%20Change%20the%20W...>
- [6] At the risk of stating the obvious, I am not advocating here a rejection of science as a methodology or the embracing of irrationalism; rather we should embrace a certain epistemological modesty and reject the power effects of positioning a particular set of ideas as scientific/universal/totalistic.
- [7] “The End of Sexual Difference” in Undoing Gender by Judith Butler, p. 176
- [8] See “Refusing To Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality” by Deric Shannon & J. Rogue, <http://www.anarchiststudies.org/node/339> for an account of the history of this development, as well as an excellent exposition of intersectional theory.
- [9] “How Do You Practice Intersectionalism? An Interview with bell hooks”, Common Struggle, <http://commonstruggle.org/bellhooks>
- [10] In particular, various reforms of the social welfare system have a particular aim of disciplining the unemployed in this way.
- [11] The fact that this project is increasingly an abject failure producing an assortment of individually and socially problematic situations is besides the point here.
- [12] See, for example, “Towards an Anarchist Anti-Racism” by Dónal O’Driscoll, <http://www.wsm.ie/c/toward-anarchist-anti-racism>
- [13] For another class-struggle anarchist perspective on “Privilege Theory”, which takes a somewhat different approach from mine, see “A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory” from the Anarchist Federation Women’s Caucus, <http://www.afed.org.uk/blog/state/327-a-class-struggle-anarchist-analysis-of-pr...-womens-caucus-.html>
- [14] “Many quite nefarious ideologies pass for common sense. For decades of American history, it was “common sense” in some quarters for white people to own slaves and for women not to vote. Common sense, moreover, is not always “common” – the idea that lesbians and gay men should be protected against discrimination and violence strikes some people as common-sensical, but for others it threatens the foundations of ordinary life.” “A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back” by Judith Butler, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/wash/www/butler.htm>
- [15] See “Abolish Whiteness” by Noel Ignatiev, <http://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/AbolishWhiteness.pdf> for a development of this point.

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Creating an Anarchist Theory of Privilege

Dónal O'Driscoll

Privilege and the theory around it is a significant topic of debate at the moment among those interested in radical social change. Touching on issues dear to anarchist hearts, it is hard to avoid.¹ Yet, anarchism and privilege theory are not fitting together as well as they should and there is a sense of unease about this.² In large part, this is because privilege theory has emerged from US academic circles rather than anarchist ones – in that milieu it has ironically been co-opted to protect middle-class privileges³, and that behaviour is starting to develop within anarchist circles. This is a situation in need of repair if we are to maintain our links with feminist, anti-racist and other struggles against oppression. To create a mass movement capable of social change, we must be able to engage with everyone in the first place.

Solidarity cannot be built on blithe assumptions that we are getting it right by virtue of being anarchists, or that every oppressed group is our natural ally. And it is undermined by patronising behaviour and by repeating forms of oppression in daily interactions. Anarchists must sidestep the mistakes of liberal NGOs and policies that are more about assuaging guilt than genuine mutual aid, and that requires recognising those privileges some of us take for granted. Done right, privilege theory is a useful tool for pointing out unacknowledged assumptions and behaviours that liberal-capitalist-patriarchal society has instilled and which unwittingly sustain barriers between those who should be allies.

I. The Flaws of Privilege Theory

Current society is set up to advantage some groups over others, consciously or otherwise. Privilege theory is a way of identifying how nearly everyone benefits in some fashion from the oppression of others, whether or not it is intentional. At its heart is the understanding that hidden hierarchies exist, which maintain individuals and institutions in positions of power⁴ – something anarchists should instinctively challenge.

Yet, the overwhelming privilege conferred by class and education is ignored by many working in this area. Throughout the literature is are assumptions that the end-point is to give people access to a system built on exploitation. It is more about tinkering with the social order rather than recognising that it is the current social order itself that maintains inequalities.

The failure to use privilege theory with a revolutionary analysis of economics, power and community is the source of its problems. In this first part I shall look at how it is often implemented from a purely liberal perspective. The result is a perversion of the original theory, as it is pressed into service maintaining individual social standing and systemic inequality.

This happens, in part, because too much of the discussion and development of privilege theory are embedded in academia, available only to those with the education and time to access it and their own privileges to maintain. Many of the authors who discuss privilege are unable to envisage radical solutions, but see the answers as lying in reformism and state institutions. Capitalist society is inherently competitive, meaning privilege theory becomes another tool to maintain status in the face of this pressure, whether in academia or otherwise. Without the wider political and power analysis of anarchism, this is a fundamental weakness.

¹ “*The politics of Voice: Notes on Gender, Race and Class*,” Aiden Rowe, Irish Anarchist Review, Spring 2013; <http://www.wsm.ie/c/anarchism-intersectionality-gender-race-class>

² This is not to say that there are not grassroots movements and authors who are not tackling this, however, as we shall note later on, much of this is buried in a US perspective where identification of class position with oppression / privilege has its own strong dynamic. For example see “*White Benefits, Middle Class Privilege*” by Paul Kivel, a leading practitioner in US identity politics with a strong grassroots outlook. Much of Paul Kivel's work is worth looking at – www.paulkivel.com, but there is a vast amount of material online around US grassroots anti-discrimination activism. For a particularly anarchist viewpoint, see the Katrina Reader – katrinareader.org

³ “*A Question of Privilege*”, Venomous Butterfly, http://www.geocities.ws/kk_abacus/vb/wd8priv.html ; “*The Promise And Pitfalls of Privilege Politics*,” 2012. <http://zinelibrary.info/files/ThePromisesAndPitfallsOfPrivilegePolitics.pdf> ; “*Privilege Theory: The Politics of Defeat*”, Sabcat Printing., <http://sabcat.com/privilege-theory-the-politics-of-defeat/>

⁴ “*Privilege, Power and Difference*”, Allan G. Johnson, 2005.

(A) Middle Class Protectionism

Privilege theory has been wholeheartedly co-opted by middle class liberals of all stripes to maintain their position. Walter Benn Michaels astutely recognises this⁵, noting how obsession with diversity in social institutions is used to cover up massive economic inequalities. It is more about making the middle-classes of minority populations identify more with the entitled middle class and less with the rest of their disadvantages population. Thus they feel more 'comfortable' while much more do not – regardless of which category they fall into. The dominant middle-classes are given the moral high-ground for having done something 'fair', while the illusion that everyone can climb the social ladder is maintained, undermining justified anger at the inequality of the whole system

This illusion is reinforced when journalists and politicians discuss the need for 'positive' cultural / ethnic minority role models. Examples used are consistently drawn from those who have reached elite positions and emphasis is placed on upward social mobility. Rarely are champions of resistance exemplified. Albeit, this is a classic way in which the dominant classes maintain power over everyone, not just those lacking privileges. Those radical heroes that do make it to the wider social stage are neutered - such as the discrete airbrushing over with Nelson Mandela's militant past.

We see it again when anti-oppression professionals complain they are employed to teach the language of anti-oppression so institutions can avoid being called out for racism, sexism, ableism, etc., but without changing deep-seated prejudices⁶. Yet these complaints rarely question the very system that causes this. There is no recognition that their critique incorporates the flawed politics of liberalism, with its emphasis on the individual, and meritocracy as the basis for position and power in society – two notions that work to maintain the (economic) status quo.

(B) Binaries

On a practical level, the way privilege theory is incorporated into anti-discrimination politics focuses on the individual in ways that drastically simplify the world. Thus when individuals recognise themselves in oppressed groups it comes with an implicit hierarchical baggage. This is embedded in the language of anti-discrimination. So, while stereotypes of oppressed groups are denounced, the cost is implicit stereotyping of everyone else.

This manifests in several ways, including a simplistic view of privilege through reductionist binaries. An example of what I mean by this is the notion that 'whiteness' = privilege and 'blackness' = lack of privilege. This is an important failure as it undermines difference as being valuable in and of itself, to be celebrated even.⁷ Freedom is only valuable if we are free to be different.

Sticking with skin-colour as a useful example for the moment, what we have is a very simplistic view of race that is used in many circles to overlook other issues. For instance, by focusing on skin colour, other forms of racism and ethnic struggle are glossed over – e.g. inter-'white' racism in Northern Ireland; or against travellers and Eastern Europeans immigrants. The reliance on particular forms of anti-racism theory has meant 'White' has become synonymous with the privileged / hegemonic group which has the effect of creating the belief among some activists that because some groups are white-skinned means they cannot know racism, so denying their experience.

In a similar process, this binary can treat all 'non-whites' as a homogenous group whose experience is universal – that is of being oppressed. Inter-group tensions and racism are likewise ignored. It allows people to ignore how social class and national culture affects experience of racism for different peoples.

Just because someone has an attribute that confers privilege in some contexts, there are other factors which mean they don't get those benefits in others. Their experience is not so much devalued as considered non-existent. This is something commonly seen in the way 'white male' is used as a set phrase, yet also is played on in a classist way, for example in discussions of 'chavs'. Experiences of patriarchy and economic powerlessness are relevant across all situations of concern in privilege politics, and are just as destructive to people who fall into the broadly drawn 'oppressor' groups as they are to those in the oppressed groups.

I believe this is in danger of becoming a form of cultural / academic imperialism centred on the US experience, and emphasises why we need to develop our own anarchist theory and practice of privilege theory. In particular, the notion of 'whiteness' is very much based on US racial laws and is not applicable to the situation in other parts of the world. It is rarely asked if the wholehearted application to Europe is actually appropriate. The irony is that, in the UK at least, it is an imposition of identity by sections of the anti-racist Left on oppressed populations who do not see themselves in

⁵ *"The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality"*, Walter Benn Michaels, 2006.

⁶ *"Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice"*, Lena Dominelli, 2002.

⁷ *"Justice and the Politics of Difference"*, Marion Iris Young, 1990.

those terms. Tariq Modood, in particular, points out how inappropriate the terminology of 'white' and 'black' as political terms are for the experiences of Muslims and South Asians in Europe (albeit, he is a liberal intellectual who relies on laws and states for solutions)⁸.

(C) Status

This simplistic approach of binaries also means that individuals can focus on that aspect of their life where they experience membership of an oppressed group and conveniently ignore all those other aspects in which they experience privilege. Through our own political critiques, anarchists readily recognise the notion of how different oppressions overlap ('intersectionality', in the jargon) and affect people. However, often this intersectionality is only paid lip-service and anarchist are often equally as much at fault as those with reformist / liberal politics when it comes to privilege.

Instead, we find individuals, anarchists included, who seek to protect the advantages they have in life by emphasising the particular oppressed group they belong to, even where they do not suffer disadvantage. The differences between disrespect and oppression are blurred as it is ignored that oppression is specifically about disadvantages. The result is those with the loudest voice claiming status in an inverse hierarchy of oppression, while quieter ones often get ignored. Thus, for example, we see working class carers being abused by middle class disabled employers. Or the needs of a person with a hidden disability being ignored because their ethnicity is white or they are cis-male. Action ceases to be about revolutionary change, but asserting that they are members of an oppressed group regardless of context. One effect of this is a tendency towards separatism.

It is worth citing at this point that obsession with identity is a problem in itself. As an example, at the 2012 Köln-Düsseldorf No Borders camp, migrants complained that a section of the European activists were so focused on dealing with 'critical whiteness theory' that it came to dominate the camp – at the expense of the needs of the migrants, whom the camp was there to help.

(D) Victimhood and Pacification

A side-effect of the influence of the middle-class liberal approach is encouragement of victimhood and pacification of those suffering oppression.

By constantly emphasising that those oppressed are victims, they are disempowered from action. Yet at the same time, the oppressed are expected to be the source of radical social change. This vicious circle maintains the status quo. And where oppressed groups have sought to break out of it, famously the Black Panthers or the militancy of the suffragist movement⁹, that revolutionary history is denied or discretely written out of history. Expression and definition is very much controlled by a middle-class narrative, and outbursts of anger are neutered or discouraged as being counterproductive to the reformist approaches that serve their needs.

This 'pacification of the oppressed' aspect of the implementation of privilege theory is pointed out in the article, "Privilege Politics is Reformism," published by the Black Orchid Collective.¹⁰ They argue it is being applied in a way that does not challenge the liberal-capitalist structure of society. The aspirations of oppressed groups ceases to be to be about radical social change and a fair, just society, but about getting access to the class ladder. A focus on the individual makes it easier to ignore the wider impersonal social structures which are just as important sources of oppression.

So, apparently libtatory politics end up reinforcing the very discriminations they want to challenge through poor application of the politics, something that goes right back to anti-colonisation struggles.¹¹ Failure to recognise the role of class politics in shaping the theory is undermining it and is what Audrey Lorde warned of when she famously wrote "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".

Sadly, I see privilege theory becoming a way of maintaining status in some activist circles, where advocates of identity politics create in-groups based around a particular identity, rather than perceiving a wider notion of solidarity (aka love & caring) or recognising contexts. In parallel to what has happened with consensus decision making in many places, a particular form of the theory is being taken up dogmatically and is being applied uncritically, undermining what it is seeking to achieve.

⁸ "Multicultural Politics", Tariq Modood, 2005

⁹ "How Non-Violence Protects the State", Peter Gelderloos, 2007; "Pacifism as Pathology", Ward Churchill, 1986.

¹⁰ "Privilege Politics is Reformism," Will, <http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/03/12/guest-post-privilege-politics/>.

¹¹ "The Wretched of the Earth", Frantz Fanon, a key text of the related notion of decolonisation theory.

We see implicit hierarchies of oppression and a culture of seeing individuals as victims of oppression, thus denying them histories of rebellion (many anarchist circles excepted) and even the ability to see themselves as agents of change. People become entrenched in their positions and see those they are most naturally allied with as a threat, rather than seeking to incorporate them in the solution. This is often closer to home than we like to admit – how many working class groups are focused around men, implicitly excluding women, arguing that class is more important than gender in revolutionary change? And vice versa...

II. Re-introducing Class: An Anarchist Approach to Privilege

Much of this is understood already. Feminists and people of colour have expanded the sites of social struggle from the workplace to the rest of society, challenging a Left which saw identity politics as distraction from the purity of class struggle. Those of a more radical background, particularly anarcho-feminists, highlighted the flaws of liberation movements too focused on the needs of the bourgeois.

In part, this was achieved by applying the central dynamic of anarchism – neither pure liberal individualism nor total submission to the will of the collective. The core of anarchism, as set out in Bakunin, Goldman, Landauer etc., is the constant balancing of these two needs. Thus, an anarchist solution to the flaws of liberal individualism within the politics of privilege theory is to remember the core principles of solidarity and mutual aid, combined with collective responsibility.

The anarchist dynamic introduces another important aspect that addresses flaws in privilege theory – awareness of context. Anarchism is not grounded in huge universal narratives and ideas, but in the struggle of everyday life. When we lose sight of this, as often happens, we talk in grand terms of challenging social institutions, while ignoring daily reproduction of the oppressions we are supposed to be fighting.

That does not mean we won't fall down; sometimes it is easier to fight against an abstract foe than actually see ourselves as being part of the problem. The fact that many anarchist groups only focus on larger ideas is a good reason to face up to the challenges of privilege theory. If we are not inclusive, then a chunk of the problem lies within ourselves.

After all, why join a group if it means listening to particular voices dominate discussions and where the desires of a few are met without question at the expense of everyone else? When supposedly there are no leaders, why are so many groups dominated by a few individuals in ways that are seemingly impossible to challenge? A bit more self-awareness would go a long way. Equality only works if everyone gets to say what equality means for them; it cannot be imposed. If the definitions are not compatible, that needs to be brought out and if possible addressed, not dismissed, but we cannot tell others to accept what we consider equality to be.

Yet, the interaction between the individual and the collective can, if done right, give greater understanding of how oppression is played out and thus make solidarity with each other and other groups stronger. Demands to end hierarchies will only have strength when anarchist groups are not riddled with implicit hierarchies because they have failed to recognise how individuals have been shaped by the social conditioning of liberal-capitalism.

Understanding the importance of context in lived oppression via class provides tools to identify it in other spheres. It is uncomfortable to be challenged, but solidarity without seeing ourselves as part of the issue is an empty, even insulting, gesture. However, it is possible to explicitly break down labels and acknowledge practically that everyone has multiple aspects, and how they interact varies with context.

Collective responsibility is a lens for considering the materials produced around privilege theory. This is too short a space to go through all the issues, but I will draw attention to one approach of privilege theory practice that is problematic for anarchists – the principle that those in oppressed groups do not have to speak of their oppression. Thus, if you are concerned around issues of disability, the disabled person has the absolute right to not answer your questions. This is reasonable. As someone in this position, there are various times that I do not want to talk about it.

However, I resist the individualist implications some draw from this approach. Especially where it changes emphasis on those of the oppressed group to be the source of change in themselves, while leaving those from the non-disadvantaged group who want to effect change floundering – only to be slammed when they get it wrong. This serves only individuals who have the ability to cocoon themselves or who want to identify themselves solely by their oppression. It misses the point that the lead for change must come within the oppressed groups.

It ignores that while I have a health disadvantage, I am fortunate to have another set of advantages that class society has given me, which I should not ignore. I have an obligation not to be silent. The above approach is indicative of the binary approach where everyone else would be defined by the privilege that I do not have. It is not how I face life, or

how most people do. It utterly misses multiple identities and protects other privileges from being questioned. As bell hooks puts it,¹² we cannot let the reduction of our identities to simplistic terms (imposed by the discriminators in most cases) blind us to our own complicities and accesses to other privileges.

This individualism is mitigated by collective processes. In my case, I resolve it by actively involving my community (a housing cooperative), accepting they are not going to get it right all the times and there are times when I am going to have to educate people on how they have disadvantaged me (I struggle to say it amounts to an 'oppression' when I look at that word in the light of other people's experiences). Standing up as a voice for others with the same issue, who are less able, is putting my anarchist politics in action.

Anarchism teaches me that no state or institution can make my life better by simply legislating away discrimination. What improves my life is talking to my comrades and working together to resolve disadvantages each of us face. My needs cannot be met solely by myself and there are things they require of me. There is a need to accept that not everything is possible all the time, but rather than tie ourselves up in theoretical possibilities, we address what is before us.

Thus, perfection is not required, but rather there is the flexibility to change as needed. However, if I am not prepared to enter into that dialogue, to trust my collective and facilitate their trust in me, there can be no effective solidarity, only ignorance and misunderstanding, an approach that scales up to all levels. At the end of the day, people are not going to get things right if competitive approaches get preference over respect, listening and co-operation. In my experience, many from oppressed backgrounds without middle class privileges are not looking for complete agreement, but acknowledgement they have a cause and to be able to be heard in their own voices – not to be spoken on behalf of or ignored. Something that applies even to the statements put out as part of our political struggles.¹³

It is one reason why the ongoing interplay of individual and community that informs anarchism is such a powerful mechanism for analysing politics. However, an anarchist theory of privilege first needs to deal with how we have been infected by liberal ideology – and we all have.

It means taking identity politics seriously, but deciding our own reactions and guiding principles. It means being honest with ourselves that we all have both advantages and disadvantages and being aware how they interact in complex ways. Solidarity includes awareness of the needs of others and adapting behaviour to ensure they are empowered. Rather than seeing these issues as a distraction, they are an opportunity to support people standing up for themselves in the face of years of oppressive social conditioning and experience. If they are 'empowered', it does not make them offensive or 'over-privileged', rather it means they have spent years fighting the crap thrown at them, which should be applauded as the achievement it is. Everyday anarchism is about creating spaces that allow each of us to know we will be heard without having to shout.

A collective is strong when it can communicate and show respect to all its members. It does not make assumptions about other people that suit how its members want things to be. Likewise, anarchism does not let us off with the excuse of reducing ourselves to being victims. Not being silent is an important part of our politics. Rather than using advantages to offset disadvantages and sustain particular privileges, an anarchist theory turns this on its head: advantages should be used to challenge the reasons for oppression of others.

To be honest, this is mostly common sense. It does not have to be dressed up in the language of privilege theory to be recognised.

However, what I am bringing the table is the anarchist analysis of power and how it is used. Too often in the liberal conception of privilege this is the part that is deliberately ignored. Solutions are based in the state – laws, courts and commissions that do not address the economic inequalities feeding the oppression. Anarchism demands a challenge to all community leaders voicing their agendas in the name of communities they supposedly represent.

Likewise, anarchism is wary of definitions being imposed by the more powerful. What use is equality when it serves only one side? Unfortunately this is a common mistake in our groups, when we tell people from disadvantaged groups that they are equal to us in our eyes – what matters is how they perceive it. It is a matter of asking, not telling, and if the answer is they do not feel equal, then we ask why not.

In anarchism, empowerment through the self is an equally strong route to liberation. People who are encouraged through solidarity and mutual aid to stand up and resist will effect the change needed to end oppression. Those strands of privilege theory which have been adapted to encourage victimhood create a liberal individualism that puts the onus

¹² “*Outlaw Culture*”, bell hooks, 2006

¹³ For example, the May 1st Anarchist Alliance statement “*Towards an Anarchist Policy on Syria*” and the response from Shiar, a Syrian anarchist, unpicking in a constructive manner the latent Orientalism in it at <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/26148>

of support back into the hands of the State. This is where it is important to recognise that everyone has advantages and disadvantages and bring the former to the struggle against the latter.

Crucially, anarchism questions supposedly universal terms and methods. It suspects them of hiding hierarchies and power. For instance, there should be a suspicion of whiteness as a category, recognising there are many issues of racism within 'white' society that should not be devalued. Conversely, identifying with one oppressed group can't allow ignoring other issues of privilege in ourselves. Anarchism challenges the inverse hierarchies of oppression in favour of a complex intersectionality where individuals have multiple facets. It is not a way to hide behind simplified notions of class, gender or sexuality.

There is the power to recognise how solidarity is offered. Resisting grand narratives imposed by middle class intellectuals helps us avoid the traps that plague much of the Left with its blind support for groups of dubious politics. We are capable of making our solidarity conditional, not caught in the trap of tolerance for groups whose politics really are opposed to ours.

Privilege theory can be used to shut down discussions, both when it is reduced to being about the individual or about monolithic narratives around race, etc. Anarchists have a powerful role in keeping these debates open, rooted in wide communities and in each individual's complex relationships with those communities, rather than fragmenting down to insular, selfish perspectives. For instance we can recognise racial hatred against one group while acknowledging that group is deeply patriarchal and actively address it. Or we can critique simplified comments on race and religion to ensure that other issues are not buried.

There is much to be learned from how identity-focused movements combat oppression in daily and cultural life. For instance, the queer scene counteracting the increasing commercialisation and co-option of the gay pride movement, or tranarchy groups challenging heteronormative concepts of gender within social structures. However, an anarchist politics of privilege theory should not allow any group to place itself or its aims above criticism simply because they are experiencing disadvantage. Cases of discrimination should be acknowledged for what they are, but responses should seek to address issues raised from a point of view which takes into account the experiences of class and capitalism. Anarcha-feminists have already started this by raising the issue of misogyny as a working class issue¹⁴, something that needs to be extended to the related topic of multiculturalism¹⁵.

III. End Words

Having grand critiques of the great abstract ideas or of social institutions are not sufficient if we want to show solidarity and mutual aid on a daily basis. The police, the State and fascists are all clear enemies. It is harder to look at ourselves and acknowledge that we too are potentially oppressors. Nor is it sufficient to lump patriarchy and racism in with capitalism – capitalism needs patriarchy and racism to sustain itself, but they can both exist independently of them. If we did not have capitalism to fight against, we would still have patriarchy and racism to contend with. The struggle has to be thus against all oppression simultaneously.¹⁶

It is for this reason we need to de-liberalise privilege theory and use that to form a politics that is liberatory for everyone, demonstrating true solidarity.

Afterword: Capitalism, Stereotypes and Rights

Privilege in many quarters has adopted the tone of defending 'rights'. Rights are inherently a liberal notion and accompanied by the subtext that a State is required to protect and enforce them. They are also a way to categorize issues and thus exclude those that cannot be neatly boxed up. These categories, often defined by NGOs, government departments and university studies are pitched against each other in struggles over access to economic power. The rights being demanded are for equal representation in the liberal system or securing status in the market-place. Thus hiding the fact that it is the structure of the economic system is ground on which the oppression is built. Demands for rights are important and have a significant role to play in all struggles, class included, as a stepping-stone to liberation

¹⁴ <http://anarchalibrary.blogspot.co.uk>

¹⁵ For instance, how should we react or analyse when a man of an ethnic minority refuses to shake the hands of a woman on cultural grounds? Maybe unsurprisingly, where I have heard accounts of this it tends to be men from middle classes who express such behaviour. While I have not explored multicultural theory here, it is closely related and throws up many issues. As well as Tariq Modood, see also "*Rethinking Multiculturalism*" by Bhikhu Parekh, or "*Cosmopolitanism*" by Kwame Anthony Appiah.

¹⁶ "*A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory*", AFED Women's Caucus, <http://www.afed.org.uk/blog/state/327-a-class-struggle-anarchist-analysis-of-privilege-theory--from-the-womens-caucus-.html>

for all. But they are also a warning flag that the politics may be missing deeper analysis; or worse, sustaining the very system that caused the oppression in the first place. Liberation and rights make for an uneasy companionship.

The liberal politics of placing the individual above community allows for the wholesale appropriation of the label privilege. When it is done without any form of class analysis it becomes pure co-option; a betrayal of the politics of liberation as it is a refusal to acknowledge that it is accepting a capitalist system. In this incarnation, it can manifest as the breaking down of solidarity. Take 'thin privilege' for example¹⁷: the entire argument is based within a framework of consumption. Thus, the oppression and lack of economic power that women, thin or not, face within a patriarchal society is ignored in a squabble over who is worse off in the status stakes. There is no recognition that capitalism itself is part of the very problem in setting up the dynamics through the imposition of stereotypes.

Stereotypes make it easier to market and sell products. This is not only more efficient economically, but helps normalise and commercialise desires. It is the nature of marketing within capitalism that it seeks the largest possible market for the least effort as that is where the most profit is to be made. Stereotypes allow it to do this, whether they have to be manufactured or whether they play on existing divisions in society. Reaching out to those who are not part of dominant stereotypes is done only in proportion to their spending power and to how much they can be convinced to emulate hegemonic stereotypes (something succinctly recognised by the Black Panthers). The anxiety created by the desire to fit closer to a stereotype is a valuable resource to the capitalist as it can be harnessed to drive consumerism. A useful way to consider one's own privilege is to see how close or far you are from dominant stereotypes.

The same process takes place for the politics of social climbing and the class aspiration. Stereotypes created by capitalist-liberal forces define the stereotypes that others are encouraged to aspire to or emulate. Thus capitalism maintains privilege and in particular class structure to sustain profits and the system of exploitation that generates them; indeed, it needs this social structure to function on an ideological level. Any solution which misses this will always be superficial in that it allows the condemnation of those not able to afford to join the middle-classes. Making people believe it can be otherwise is the real danger of privilege politics. Even within minorities, racial, gendered and other, (non-dominant / sub-altern) stereotypes are used to market to them, facilitating co-option without truly granting power. Thus, even multiculturalism becomes a marketing tool.¹⁸

Even when some gains are made, they are achieved only in law. All this does is hide the fact that economic pressures are never far from the surface, awaiting only the desperate politician or business-leader to stir up hatred and discrimination once more in order to protect their own class's narrow interests. After all, for many discrimination boils down to protection of social status and economic exploitation. Again, the perpetuation of stereotypes is at play here, allowing those who are different to be dehumanised and declared unacceptably different or to self-justify oppression.

For too many, anti-discrimination is seen solely as gaining access to the middle-classes, ignoring the fact that only a few ever make it. In this context, any emancipatory power claimed in the name of liberation is an illusion, but one that benefits those who have already obtained political or economic status. The loss of communities fractured by upward mobility is often bemoaned by commentators who yearn for the sense of solidarity, yet rarely do they recognize that it is class politics undermining that solidarity.

As long as identity politics and privilege theory plays the game of stereotypes they play to the hands of capitalism. It makes it easier for groups to be packaged and marketed to, to be co-opted and ultimately neutered by being granted only the semblance of power. The more we segment ourselves away into niches and categories the harder it is to build solidarity in the face of capitalism. Too long this was because leaders of movements protected their interests as they gained wealth or maintained class privileges; or separatism allowed them to gather power into their hands.¹⁹

The end freedom of anarchism is the freedom to be recognised as an individual with many facets, not constrained by stereotypes, where difference is welcomed and does not have to matter. It is hard to break out of this way of thinking given how conditioned we are. It is done by meeting people in groups and one-on-one with all sides being willing to be open and engage in dialogue and find points of common experience. This is the reason why I am opposed to politics and groups that are fundamentally separatist or forces people into alternative stereotypes of behavior, creating their own constraining norms. This is not to deny each group their spaces to allow empowerment and to come

¹⁷ <http://thisisthinprivilege.tumblr.com/>

¹⁸ "Whatever you do, get away with it", Jason McQuinn, <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jason-mcquinn-whatever-you-do-get-away-with-it>

¹⁹ For protecting class privilege, see, for example, the Pankhursts selling-out the suffragette movement by acquiescing on voting for middle-class women only; for separatism, see the politics of Malcolm X.

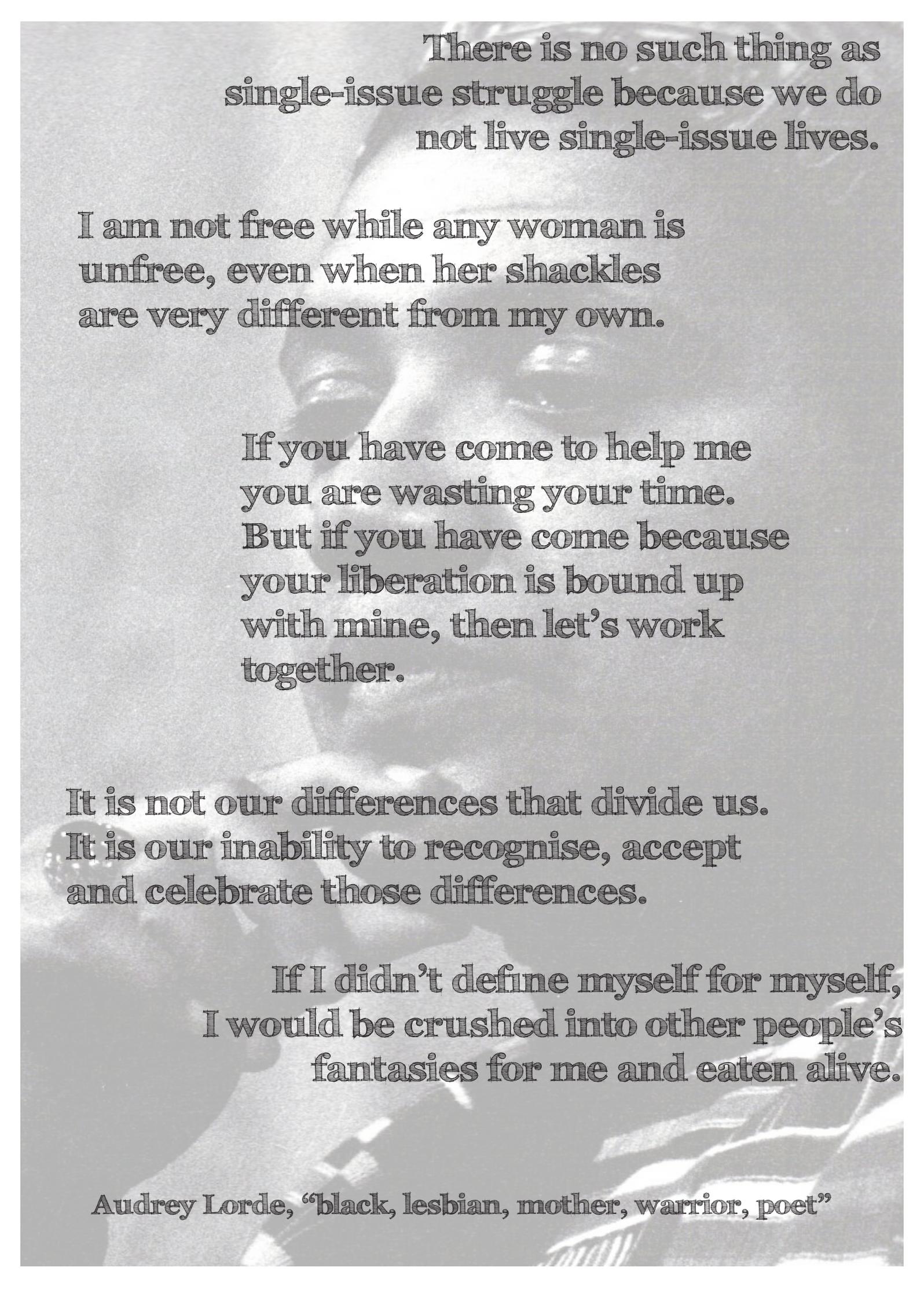
together, but ultimately we are seeking a society in which everyone is accepted over the things they cannot change about themselves.

Anarchists talk about from each according to their ability to each according to their needs. In order to respect needs we need to know what the actual needs of others are (not just assume they are the same as ours) and the willingness to respect them. Needs are not rights that are reducible to stereotypes. Everything will vary from situation; my needs in one context will differ from another. No generic checklist on privilege is going to be able to work that out; a webpage on dealing with US racism will not teach you about anti-Irish racism in the UK. What may disadvantage a person in one situation may be an advantage in another. This means that those who have shall be willing to give up more but that this should be done voluntarily in a spirit of mutual aid and just basic respect, and to not solely define ourselves around one advantage or disadvantage.

There is one final challenge here, not to those with privilege, but to those who are disadvantaged. Like it or not, we are part of the process of change. People do not magically learn and improve by themselves. We have to engage and let them know, gently at first, where they are getting things wrong. Too often people's first mode of reaction, particularly on the internet is to attack and assume that everyone is intentionally malicious. Far too regularly criticism is not done in mutual respect but blames others for not being perfect. This is not liberal-capitalism; there are no rights, just voluntary co-operation and the struggle is everywhere. Allies do not form on demand, and we owe it to those less capable than us to build up a common movement. Only we can ensure that the change of society we need is shaped to meet our needs as well. Seeking out spaces in which we can be comfortable will not achieve that; it insulates us from others and all we can learn from them – and them from us.

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There is no such thing as
single-issue struggle because we do
not live single-issue lives.

I am not free while any woman is
unfree, even when her shackles
are very different from my own.

If you have come to help me
you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because
your liberation is bound up
with mine, then let's work
together.

It is not our differences that divide us.
It is our inability to recognise, accept
and celebrate those differences.

If I didn't define myself for myself,
I would be crushed into other people's
fantasies for me and eaten alive.

Audrey Lorde, "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet"