

A Class Struggle Anarchist Analysis of Privilege Theory

The women's caucus of the Anarchist Federation (UK)

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Contents

Aims and definitions	3
Answering objections to privilege	5
Intersectionality and Kyriarchy	6
The myth of the “Oppression Olympics”	8
The class struggle analysis of privilege	10

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 place¹. 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 youths². 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 crime³. Black people currently face even greater unemployment in the UK than they do in the USA⁴. 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*

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>

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, cisnormativity, 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

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-settingthere- 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.

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 itself⁸, and it's not difficult to imagine a post-capitalist society in which oppressive gender roles still hold true⁹. 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 & Principle¹¹ 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 workers¹². 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

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.

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 2012 and some of the workshops at Women Up North 2012 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

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

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 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.

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/>

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