

Thinking Privilege

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Amy Allen

“The Critique of Privilege and the Privilege of Critique”

In *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno argues that, given how thoroughly the totally administered world of bourgeois capitalism and the culture industry shapes and distorts individuals, not everyone is capable of taking up a critical perspective with respect to it. “Only those who are not completely modeled after it can intellectually undertake something against it,” Adorno writes. In such circumstances, “the critique of privilege becomes a privilege: so dialectical is the course of the world” (Adorno, ND). In my talk, I will take Adorno’s remark as a jumping off point for exploring the complicated dialectical relationship between privilege and critique, though without following the details of Adorno’s own position. My main interest is in thinking through the ways in which being in a position to articulate a critique of privilege is itself quite often entangled with – even a function of – different kinds of privilege, whether epistemic or social-political. These kinds of privilege are, in turn, closely bound up with relations of domination and subordination. Indeed, often the term privilege – as in “check your privilege” – can be a problematic euphemistic stand-in for other, more negative but also more descriptively accurate terms such as “white supremacy” or “male domination.” Moreover, the very notion of epistemic privilege is closely tied to an analysis of the standpoint of the politically oppressed or marginalized. Too often, the entanglement between privilege and the critique of privilege is used as a way of dismissing critique – for example, as we saw last fall in the conservative response to the #BlackOnCampus protestors at institutions such as Yale or Amherst. However, I want to argue that acknowledging these entanglements not lead us to question the sincerity or validity of even relatively “privileged” critics of privilege. It should, however, serve as a reminder to the critic of the importance of being self-reflexive about our own positions of “privilege” and thus our own entanglements and investments in the very relations of power that we aim to critique.

Andrew Dilts

“Privilege, The Myth of Merit, and Abolition-Democracy”

If we are going to talk about privilege, and if we're going to deal with privilege in ways that are not necessarily self-reproducing of it or which recenter the axes of domination that privilege always already entails, then it must be in way that prioritizes an insurgent commitment to abolitionist politics. I argue that the accounts of privilege (and the social positions which both embody and wield it) must begin from a specifically political analysis that is attentive to the exercises of power, oppression, and domination that comprise it. What such analyses ought to demonstrate is that there can be no possible redemption for privilege nor its attendant positions. Weaving together Iris Marion Young's account of "the myth of merit"—applied to the institution of the academy specifically—alongside the epistemological analyses of Patricia Hill-Collins and Kristie Dotson, I argue for a reorientation to what W.E.B. Du Bois named the practice of "abolition-democracy." Abolition-Democracy, as taken up by 20th century theorists (such as Angela Davis and Joel Olson) and arguably practiced by radical queer and trans* liberation movements, mitigates projects of the positive reclamations of institutions (e.g. the university, prisons) and social positions (e.g. whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, etc.) whose meaning is necessarily tied up with privilege, and toward a world (following Olson) which recognizes that there is no privilege better than a world without privilege.

Gabriel Rockhill

"Five Hypotheses on Privilege and Violence."

Rather than presenting a commanding overview of privilege and violence in general from a theoretical position miraculously perched above the labyrinthine relations of the social world, this presentation seeks to escort us into the intricate complexities that render these phenomena untamable by theory (at least in its traditional sense). It outlines five working hypotheses for debate and discussion, each one of which sheds a different light on how what is called privilege—and violence—operates in concrete instances (ranging from compulsory and ubiquitous maleness, whiteness, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness to class and ‘third-world’ oppression). Highlighting the blind spots that perforate our very apprehension of what counts as privilege, it explores the extent to which the latter functions as a series of shifting, multidimensional and multivalent relations rather than a simple possession dividing those who definitively have it from those who do not. It also invites us to reconsider the cultural modes of visibility that render certain forms discernible while masking others through meta-privilege and meta-violence, meaning forms that generally remain beyond the pale of social visibility (such as much of the violence unleashed against indigenous populations in the history of the Americas). Finally, rather than complaisantly accepting the perpetuation of the status quo or idealistically projecting a world in which such phenomena would definitively disappear, it invites us to undertake a process of reckoning by which we reflexively and collectively seek to transform a labyrinthine world from the inside.

Shannon Sullivan

"Rethinking White Privilege."

Working from a “trash crit” perspective, this essay will analyze the concept of white privilege in the service of racial justice for people of color. Reclaiming “white trash” as epistemologically and politically valuable, trash crit criticizes white domination from the perspective of poor and lower class white people (Preston 2009). My starting point will be the refusal of many white people to agree that they benefit from white privilege. Rather than assume that this refusal necessarily is a manifestation of racism, I will argue that it can reveal the false universalization built into the concept of white privilege. Trash crit helps show that the concept of white privilege is born out of a privileged experience that is not shared by all white people. It also demonstrates that white privilege should instead be called white class privilege. The question that then follows is how to describe the advantages of whiteness held by poor white people? Those advantages do exist, after all, but the term “privilege” does not accurately capture them. (Nor does the prevailing alternative term, “global white supremacy.) A different term is needed, and this need is more than a narrow terminological issue. It is practical and political, concerning whether large numbers of unprivileged white people—the “unglorious majority” of white folk (Alcoff 2015)—will be motivated to or turned off from challenging racism against people of color.

George Yancy

“The Empty Knapsack: Doing Philosophy in Black”

In this presentation, I invoke Peggy McIntosh's concept of white privilege as a knapsack of unearned privileges. I will explore what it means to be an embodied Black philosopher within the domain of philosophy that is shaped by white privilege and whiteness as the transcendental norm. Here I will explore what it is like to undergo the lived experience of engaging white philosophical spaces and white philosophical texts from the perspective of a raced body that is not granted the same a priori credibility as white privileged bodies. I will explore what it means to undergo experiences of alienation within white philosophical spaces and how those white spaces privilege white bodies as always already belonging, as being at home within those spaces. My aim is to show how the Black body is marked within such spaces as weighed down by racist history, how my body moves through those spaces in ways that are not indicative of expressing white spatial privilege. In this case, the Black body is "out of place." I will conclude with an example of what it means to be marked as a philosopher/intellectual in ways that white bodies are not. In this case, I explore the white racist vitriol that I received after the publication of *Dear White America*. What I found is that white intellectuals and philosophers who had dared to speak truth to power were able to maintain their whiteness as unmarked vis-a-vis the vitriol, the threats that they received. However, as Black, my body was marked with vile racist vitriol in ways that were designed to specifically dehumanize.

Rocío Zambrana

"Double Binds: Reflections on Privilege and the Practice of Philosophy"

Notwithstanding promising developments in the discipline of philosophy, Audre Lorde's famous dictum "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" articulates an important worry that diverse practitioners within the field by and large understood as "minorities" might share. As Myisha Cherry recently reports, "women still receive only about 28% of philosophy PhDs in the United States, and are still only about 20% of full professors of philosophy – numbers that have hardly budged since the 1990s. And among U.S. citizens and permanent residents receiving philosophy PhDs in this country, 86% are non-Hispanic white." The notion of privilege is helpful tool for understanding these disconcerting numbers and their protracted change. But what is privilege, and what are the structures of privilege distinctive of the field? If philosophy seems to be, by and large, a "white man's game," can diverse practitioners working within the field subvert the structures of privilege distinctive of the field? If philosophical inquiry and practice has critical-transformative potential, as I believe, can we recover this potential from within? In short, can minoritized philosophers dismantle the master's house if their very existence in it has already required of them using the master's tools?

Determining what privilege is in the context of the field of philosophy, in my view, requires tracking what privilege does. I'd like to suggest that tracking structures of privilege distinctive of the field involves considering the double binds that the discipline generates for its diverse practitioners. Despite promising developments in the field, important work by minoritized philosophers suggests that they find themselves in double binds. Their fate is best described in terms of double binds, since the strictures of the discipline that make possible their work within the field fundamentally restrict that very work. Their work is thus predicated on a necessary contradiction: The very conditions of possibility of the work restrict and thereby compromise the work itself. Diverse peoples within the field are hence "faced daily with situations in which . . . options are reduced to a very few, all of which expose [them] . . . to penalty, censure, or deprivation" whether personal or professional. I suggest that these double binds can be clarified by considering what Kristie Dotson calls a "culture of justification" and "academic passing" distinctive of the field. Justification and academic passing can, in turn, be further specified as structures of privilege by considering what Sirma Bilge calls the "political economy of genealogical and thematic re-framings," determined "citational practices," and a "politics of canonicity."