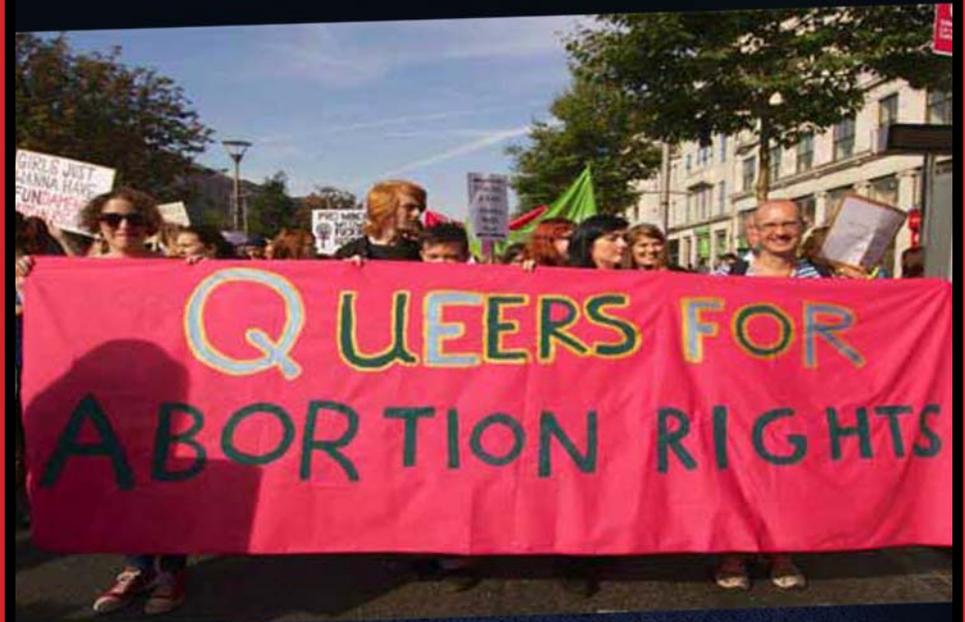


Creating an Anarchist Theory of Privilege



Dónal O'Driscoll



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"Knowledge is the key to be free!"

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>
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>

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References and Endnotes:

1. "The Politics of Voice: Notes on Gender, Race and Class," Aiden Rowe, <http://www.wsm.ie/c/anarchism-interseccionality-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/>
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10. "Privilege Politics is Reformism," Will, <https://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.
12. "Outlaw Culture", bell hooks, 2006

III.

Having grand critiques of the great abstract ideas or of social institutions is 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.

Guest Writer: 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 many issues dear to the hearts of anarchists, it is hard to avoid.¹ Yet, the two are not fitting together as well as they should and there is a sense of unease about this.² Much of this is because privilege theory has emerged from US academic circles rather than anarchist ones and, ironically, has been co-opted to protect middle-class privileges.³ This is a situation in need of repair if we are to maintain our links with feminist, anti-racist and other struggles against oppression. If we are to create a mass movement capable of social change then it has to be able to engage with everyone in the first place.

Solidarity cannot be built on blithe assumptions we are getting it right by virtue of being anarchists, or that every oppressed group is our natural ally. Nor is not sustained by being patronising or repeating forms of oppression in daily interactions. Anarchist should sidestep the mistakes of liberal NGOs and policies that are more about assuaging guilt than genuine mutual aid. That requires recognising privileges we take for granted. Often privilege theory is nothing more than a useful tool for pointing out unacknowledged assumptions and behaviours that liberal-capitalist-patriarchal society has instilled and which ultimately throw up barriers between those who should be allies.



The Flaws of Privilege Theory

Current society is set up to advantage some groups over others, consciously or otherwise. Thus 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 and maintain individuals and institutions in positions of power ⁴ – something anarchists should instinctively challenge.

Yet, the overwhelming privilege conferred by class and education is ignored by many. Much of the work of privilege theory appears to be about giving people access to a system built on exploitation. Tinkering with the social order rather than recognising that it is the current social order itself that maintains the inequalities.

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

This happens, in part, because too often the theory is deeply embedded in academia, available only to those with the education and time to access it, and their own privileges to maintain. These same liberal theorists are unable to envisage radical solutions, but see the answers as lying in reformism and state institutions. Capitalist society is inherently competitive which gives rise to the desire to use privilege to maintain status in the face of this pressure, whether in academia or otherwise. Without wider political analysis such as anarchism, this will be a fundamental weakness of privilege theory.

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.

Sometimes privilege theory can be used to shut down discussions when it reduced to being either all about the individual or 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 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.

Not all identity-focused movements are necessarily to be adopted, but we can learn how they combat oppression. 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. An anarchist politics of privilege theory will not place any group on a pedestal above criticism, but will seek to address issues raised from a point of view which taken into account the experiences of class and capitalism. Anarcha-feminists have already started this by raising the issue of misogyny as a working class issue,¹⁴ something that needs to be extended to the related topic of multiculturalism.¹⁵

spent years fighting the crap thrown at them, which should be applauded as the achievement it is.

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 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, the advantages should be used to challenge the reasons for oppression.

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 to 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 is a liberal individualism that puts the onus 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, allying solely with one oppressed group shouldn’t allow ignoring other issues of privileged in ourselves. Anarchism should challenge the inverse hierarchies of oppression in favour of a complex intersectionality were individuals have multiple facets. It is not a place to hide behind simplified notions of class, gender or sexuality.

a. Middle Class Protectionism

Privilege theory has been wholeheartedly co-opted by middle class liberals of all stripes to maintain their position. Walter Benn Michaels⁵ astutely recognises this, noting how obsession with diversity in social institutions is used to cover up wider economic inequalities. This works to make the middle classes of minority or oppressed populations feel comfortable with their position rather than recognise that there remains a larger number who are not, regardless of how they are to be categorised. The dominant middle-classes are provided the moral high-ground for having done something, while the illusion that everyone can climb the social ladder is maintained. Thus, undermining justified anger at the inequality of the whole system.

It is re-enforced 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.

We see it again when anti-oppression professionals complain they are merely teaching the language to avoid being called out for racism, sexism, ableism, etc., but without changing deep-seated prejudices.⁶ Yet, rarely do they question the very system that causes this. It is not recognised 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, it often comes at the cost of an 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 of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’. This is an important failure as it undermines a key part of privilege theory – recognising difference as valuable in and of itself, to be celebrated even.⁷ Sticking with whiteness 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 examples of racism and ethnic struggle are glossed over – e.g. the six counties, Travellers and Eastern European immigrants are all examples of inter-‘white’ racism that is ignored. ‘White’ has become synonymous with the privileged / hegemonic group.

It treats all ‘non-whites’ as a homogenous group whose experience is universal – that is of being oppressed. Inter-group tensions and racism is 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 situations of concern to privilege politics, and are just as destructive to people who fall into the broadly drawn ‘oppressor’ groups.

Ironically, this is also a form of US cultural imperialism and emphasises why we need to develop our own anarchist theory and practice of privilege theory. Much of what is adopted as the politics of privilege theory comes from the US perspective. 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, contrary to theory, it is an imposition of identity by those who do not recognise it as such. Tariq Modood, in particular, points out how inappropriate the established anti-racist terminology of ‘white’ and ‘black’ as political terms is for the experiences of Muslim and South Asians in Europe (albeit, he is an example of the liberal intellectual who relies on laws and states for solutions).⁸

c. Status

This simplistic approach 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 do experience privilege. As an anarchist the notion of how different oppressions overlap

terms (imposed by the discriminators in most cases) to 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 but are less able to 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 compatriots 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 them in trust 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. It means being honest with ourselves that we all have both advantages and disadvantages and that 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 can be considered an opportunity to support people standing up 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 is because they have

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.

Conversely, collective responsibility is a tool 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 misses utterly 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

(‘intersectionality’, in the jargon) and affect people is something we can readily recognise through our own political critiques. However, often this intersectionality is only paid lip-service.

Instead, what we have the situation of the individual who seeks to protect the advantages they have in life by emphasising the particular oppressed group they belong to, even where they do not suffer oppression. The result is those with the loudest voice claim status in an inverse hierarchy of oppression, while less visible 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, there was the Köln-Düsseldorf No Borders camp where migrants complained that a section of the European activists were too focused on dealing with ‘critical whiteness theory’ to the point it came to dominate the camp – at the expense of the needs of the migrants the camp was there to help.

d. Victimhood and Pacification

A side-effect of the middle-class liberal approach to privilege theory is an encouragement of victimhood and pacification of those suffering oppression. By constantly emphasising that those oppressed are victims, it disempowers them from action. Yet at the same time, the oppressed are expected to be the source of radical social change. This vicious circle actually 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 movement,⁹ that revolutionary history is denied or discretely written out of history. Expression and definition is very much controlled by a middle-class narrative, and outburst of anger are neutered or discouraged as being counter-productive 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 It argues it being applied in a way that the liberal-capitalist structure of society does not have to be challenged. The aspirations become not 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 liberatory politics end up re-enforcing 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 what Audrey Lorde warned of when she famously wrote “The masters tools will never dismantle the masters house” is too often applicable.

Sadly, out of this we see emerging privilege theory as 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 or recognising contexts. As what has happened in many places with consensus decision making, a particular form of the theory is being taken up in a dogmatic sense and being applied uncritically, thus undermining what it is seeking out to achieve.

We see implicit hierarchies of oppression and a culture of seeing individuals as victims of oppression thus denying them histories of rebellion and even the ability to see themselves as agent of change. People become entrenched in their positions and see those they are most naturally allied with as part of the threat rather than seeking to incorporate them as solutions. 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....



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 anarchy-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, so 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