

Seminar on Privilege

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Lewes Seminars at the Lewes Public Library

One of the most often referred to ideas in recent public discourse is “privilege.” As a sociological concept it can be defined as the availability of special rights and/or advantages to particular individuals or groups. It can be considered as unearned access to societal benefits based on a person’s status with regard to a particular identity group. The focus of this seminar is on the social norms of society that grant unequal advantages to groups and individuals. It is not a discussion of privileges allowed under the law, but it does look at institutional privileges developed by both laws and societal practices. It is implied that these special rights create social inequities for those to whom these privileges are not available. Besides the social consequences, there are a number of psychological and emotional aspects to privilege that we will explore in this seminar.

There is general agreement that privilege exists in American society. Nevertheless, it has a negative connotation when applied to non-elite groups. It assumes that the average man or heterosexual or nondisabled individual is unfairly given special rights. There is much resistance to labeling such persons as privileged. Accepting the notion that I am privileged for being a white male with unearned rights seems contrary to my notion of myself and my hard earned achievements. A study by Pratto and Stewart described what they identified as Social Dominance Orientation, which they defined as “how much a person tolerates or even supports group-based dominance, versus supports [the support of] group equality and inclusion.” The authors also propose that “Social dominance theory argue that group dominance societies advantage dominant groups objectively, with laws and public allocation systems that suit [the] dominants’ ways of being better than those of subordinates and also privilege [these] dominant groups ‘psychologically’.” The researchers concluded that persons in dominant positions recognize inequities but do not recognize their superior position as privilege, but normal. At the same time, subordinates are more likely to view group advantage as privilege. (Stewart, 2012)

Many whites fail to see how their skin color automatically provides them with privilege. White working class folks often rail at the notion that they have any special privileges over others, given the many difficulties they may be experiencing just trying to navigate an economy that has not really been fair to them. They don’t see their “whiteness” as a privilege. Conversely, Michael Eric Dyson asks the question “How can we possibly combat the blindness of white men and women who are so deeply invested in their own privilege that they cannot afford to see how much we suffer?” (p.21) He goes on to say “Whiteness has privilege and power connected to it, no matter how poor you are.” (p.46) (Dyson, 2017)

In 1986 Peggy McIntosh wrote a seminal paper called “White Privilege and Male Privilege.” In this paper she identified 46 examples of white privilege. (<https://www.deanza.edu/faculty/lewisjulie/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>) As you read over the list you can see that a number of the issues she

raised in 1988 continue to exist in 2017. In 2006, she wrote “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” (McIntosh, 2006) Gina Crosley-Corcoran, who came up poor, related her experience after reading McIntosh’s list. She wrote: “If you read through the rest of the list, you can see how white people and people of color experience the world in two very different ways. BUT LISTEN: This is not said to make white people feel guilty about their privilege. It’s not your fault you were born with white skin and experience these privileges. BUT, whether you realize it or not, you DO benefit from it, and it IS your fault if you don’t maintain awareness of that fact.” (Crosley-Cprepram, 2014) This focus on privilege as a way of addressing inequity is also now being discussed in terms of class, sexual orientation, financial status, ability, religious beliefs and citizenship, as well as others.

Hopefully, the focus of this seminar is to take an honest look at the advantages (privileges, if you will) we have as a result of our status in society and to discuss its effect on its members. To do so, we will be reading several articles and participate in one on-line survey to help focus some of the conversation. We are hopeful that others may bring in materials to support different perspectives on this topic.

PLEASE DO THE FOLLOWING TO PREPARE

1. Articles to Read

Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack:

<https://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/white-privilege-essay-mcintosh.pdf>

Tal Fortgang. “Why I’ll Never Apologize for My White Male Privilege” (Article included in this document. However, a version that include responses from other students is available at: <http://theprincetontory.com/main/checking-my-privilege-character-as-the-basis-of-privilege/>)

Response to Tal Fortgang Article in Huffington Post (Article included in this document)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kristen-howerton/white-privilege-doesnt-me_b_5296914.html

2. Survey to Complete and Video to Watch

Buzzfeed has an interesting inventory you can complete, which gives you a privilege score. It is worth taking, as it gives you an idea of the factors that go into the consideration of privilege. Some of the questions are oriented more towards younger people, so if you are older, please consider this. Also, this is not a scientifically developed instrument. The video associated with the test is short and rather informative. To access this, go to:

https://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you?utm_term=.fpGGeV6DK#.pqwNG7aW1

3. Questions for Discussion

Is the concept of Privilege an accurate way to discuss social inequities, or is there a more useful approach?

If you were to have a personal conversation with Tal Fortgang, what would you want to say to him?

Using the paradigm of privilege, if there is a strong nationalist movement in the United States, who would be the advantaged and who the disadvantaged?

Since it is impossible to give up unearned privileges, what approach is best to have a more equitable society?

Why I'll Never Apologize for My White Male Privilege

[Tal Fortgang](#)

May 02, 2014

There is a phrase that floats around college campuses, Princeton being no exception, that threatens to strike down opinions without regard for their merits, but rather solely on the basis of the person that voiced them. "Check your privilege," the saying goes, and I have been reprimanded by it several times this year. The phrase, handed down by my moral superiors, descends recklessly, like an Obama-sanctioned drone, and aims laser-like at my pinkish-peach complexion, my maleness, and the nerve I displayed in offering an opinion rooted in a personal Weltanschauung. "Check your privilege," they tell me in a command that teeters between an imposition to actually explore how I got where I am, and a reminder that I ought to feel personally apologetic because white males seem to pull most of the strings in the world.

I do not accuse those who "check" me and my perspective of overt racism, although the phrase, which assumes that simply because I belong to a certain ethnic group I should be judged collectively with it, toes that line. But I do condemn them for diminishing everything I have personally accomplished, all the hard work I have done in my life, and for ascribing all the fruit I reap not to the seeds I sow but to some invisible patron saint of white maleness who places it out for me before I even arrive. Furthermore, I condemn them for casting the equal protection clause, indeed the very idea of a meritocracy, as a myth, and for declaring that we are all governed by invisible forces (some would call them "stigmas" or "societal norms"), that our nation runs on racist and sexist conspiracies. Forget "you didn't build that;" check your privilege and realize that nothing you have accomplished is real.

But they can't be telling me that everything I've done with my life can be credited to the racist patriarchy holding my hand throughout my years of education and eventually guiding me into Princeton. Even that is too extreme. So to find out what they are saying, I decided to take their advice. I actually went and checked the origins of my privileged existence, to empathize with those whose underdog stories I can't possibly comprehend. I have unearthed some examples of the privilege with which my family was blessed, and now I think I better understand those who assure me that skin color allowed my family and I to flourish today.

Perhaps it's the privilege my grandfather and his brother had to flee their home as teenagers when the Nazis invaded Poland, leaving their mother and five younger siblings behind, running and running until they reached a Displaced Persons camp in Siberia, where they would do years of hard labor in the bitter cold until World War II ended. Maybe it was the privilege my grandfather had of taking on the local Rabbi's work in that DP camp, telling him that the spiritual leader shouldn't do hard work, but should save his energy to pass Jewish tradition along to those who might survive. Perhaps it was the privilege my great-grandmother and those five great-aunts and uncles I never knew had of being shot into an open grave outside their hometown. Maybe that's my privilege.

Or maybe it's the privilege my grandmother had of spending weeks upon weeks on a death march through Polish forests in subzero temperatures, one of just a handful to survive, only to be put in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she would have died but for the Allied forces who liberated her and helped her regain her health when her weight dwindled to barely 80 pounds.

Perhaps my privilege is that those two resilient individuals came to America with no money and no English, obtained citizenship, learned the language and met each other; that my grandfather started a humble wicker basket business with nothing but long hours, an idea, and an iron will—to paraphrase the man I never met: “I escaped Hitler. Some business troubles are going to ruin me?” Maybe my privilege is that they worked hard enough to raise four children, and to send them to Jewish day school and eventually City College.

Perhaps it was my privilege that my own father worked hard enough in City College to earn a spot at a top graduate school, got a good job, and for 25 years got up well before the crack of dawn, sacrificing precious time he wanted to spend with those he valued most—his wife and kids—to earn that living. I can say with certainty there was no legacy involved in any of his accomplishments. The wicker business just isn't that influential. Now would you say that we've been really privileged? That our success has been gift-wrapped?

That's the problem with calling someone out for the “privilege” which you assume has defined their narrative. You don't know what their struggles have been, what they may have gone through to be where they are. Assuming they've benefitted from “power systems” or other conspiratorial imaginary institutions denies them credit for all they've done, things of which you may not even conceive. You don't know whose father died defending your freedom. You don't know whose mother escaped oppression. You don't know who conquered their demons, or may still be conquering them now.

The truth is, though, that I have been exceptionally privileged in my life, albeit not in the way any detractors would have it.

It has been my distinct privilege that my grandparents came to America. First, that there was a place at all that would take them from the ruins of Europe. And second, that such a place was one where they could legally enter, learn the language, and acclimate to a society that ultimately allowed them to flourish.

It was their privilege to come to a country that grants equal protection under the law to its citizens, that cares not about religion or race, but the content of your character.

It was my privilege that my grandfather was blessed with resolve and an entrepreneurial spirit, and that he was lucky enough to come to the place where he could realize the dream of giving his children a better life than he had.

But far more important for me than his attributes was the legacy he sought to pass along, which forms the basis of what detractors call my “privilege,” but which actually should be praised as one of altruism and self-sacrifice. Those who came before us suffered for the sake of giving us a better life. When we similarly sacrifice for our descendents by caring for the planet, it's called

“environmentalism,” and is applauded. But when we do it by passing along property and a set of values, it’s called “privilege.” (And when we do it by raising questions about our crippling national debt, we’re called Tea Party radicals.) Such sacrifice of any form shouldn’t be scorned, but admired.

My exploration did yield some results. I recognize that it was my parents’ privilege and now my own that there is such a thing as an American dream which is attainable even for a penniless Jewish immigrant.

I am privileged that values like faith and education were passed along to me. My grandparents played an active role in my parents’ education, and some of my earliest memories included learning the Hebrew alphabet with my Dad. It’s been made clear to me that education begins in the home, and the importance of parents’ involvement with their kids’ education—from mathematics to morality—cannot be overstated. It’s not a matter of white or black, male or female or any other division which we seek, but a matter of the values we pass along, the legacy we leave, that perpetuates “privilege.” And there’s nothing wrong with that.

Behind every success, large or small, there is a story, and it isn’t always told by sex or skin color. My appearance certainly doesn’t tell the whole story, and to assume that it does and that I should apologize for it is insulting. While I haven’t done everything for myself up to this point in my life, someone sacrificed themselves so that I can lead a better life. But that is a legacy I am proud of.

I have checked my privilege. And I apologize for nothing.

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“Those People” Response to Princeton Student

<https://thsppl.com/you-dont-have-to-apologize-for-being-white-12a3018d5abc#.xtfl7tker>

Tal. Hey bro.

I want to talk to you for a minute.

I read your article, ‘[Why I’ll Never Apologize For My White Male Privilege](#)’. First off, congrats on landing an article on *Time*. That’s huge.

And I get it, dude. You’re annoyed with the ‘check your privilege’ line. Hey, I am too. I think it’s overused, and it’s basically turned into a meme at this point.

I read your piece. You’re Jewish. Your family, or at least your family a couple generations ago, had it pretty damn rough. And your dad worked his ass off so that you could have the opportunities that he didn’t. That’s great.

But, I want to talk about this line right here:

It was [my grandparents’] privilege to come to a country that grants equal protection under the law to its citizens, that cares not about religion or race, but the content of your character.

This is where you messed up, bro.

This country actually does care about your race. A lot.

You brought up some of the horrors of the Holocaust. That’s a pretty heavy card to play off the bat, but it’s not going to work on me.

I forgot to tell you: I’m black. And I bet you can already guess where I’m going with this. You want to tell me about the systematic extermination of six million? I see that and [raise you to ten million](#). You want to talk about a few years of forced labor? Let’s try for a few hundred. You seem to be able to trace your family’s history back pretty far. That’s awesome. I can’t, because they didn’t really keep records for property like that back then.

I’m sure that if you wanted, you could come up with some ways that somewhere in history, Jewish people had it rougher than black people. Or maybe even now. And we could go back and forth about this, endlessly.

But realistically, in the court of general opinion on historical victimhood, you’re not going to win. I will. Black people always do.

But really, is this a game that you want to *win*? Would you like to be at the bottom rung of the social ladder? Is pity what you want?

Probably not. And right there—that annoyed feeling that you probably had when I asked if you wanted people to be sorry for you—that’s the same feeling that a lot of people probably have when you accuse them of coming up with ‘imaginary institutions’.

It's not imaginary, bro. It's real.

It's good that you've put effort into understanding your past. But we also need to understand everyone's present.

What I'm trying to get at here is that bringing up various ways that your ancestors' lives sucked isn't a good defense for racism.

I'm not saying that you're racist (but it's okay if you are). I'm saying that you are, probably unwittingly, defending the racism that exists in society.

But, let's stop talking about the past.

Tal, have you ever had a gun pointed at you?

I have, but only by police. The most recent time was when I was driving home and my car broke down, so I walked up to a highway police station for help. As I knocked on the door, two officers came up from behind me out of the bushes, guns drawn, and shouted at me to freeze. It turns out they thought I was trying to rob them. That wouldn't have happened if I was white.

I bet you worry about your grades, or how you're going to finish that last paper before the deadline. All college students deal with that. But you've probably never had to worry about whether or not you might die at a routine traffic stop. White people don't have to deal with that. Because you don't fit the 'profile' of a criminal.

That's part of what people mean when they talk about 'privilege'.

The 'equal protection under the law' you mentioned—it doesn't quite work that way for people that look like me.

And again, I'm not trying to 'win' a comparison game here. I don't feel sorry for myself, and I don't want you to either. I could hit you with a ton of scenes from my life that would be hard to imagine for a dude like yourself. On the flip side, you talked a lot about your family, but I bet you've personally dealt with some stuff yourself that I couldn't imagine.

But I can *try to understand*, which is what I also ask of you.

Tal, I am upset, but I'm not upset at you.

I want you to know that. I'm not upset at you. I'm upset at *Time*.

I'm upset at *Time* for publishing your essay. I'm upset at them for taking advantage of you.

I'm a graduate student, Tal, which means I sometimes teach college classes. Next year, I'll be teaching a writing course. If you'd handed that essay in to me, you'd get, maybe, a C. Your claims just don't hold water. You're good at arguing, but not good at thinking (yet).

Your essay isn't even particularly well written. There are grammatical and spelling errors all over the place. And that overwrought first paragraph, full of bizarre metaphors and SAT

vocabulary, is pretty typical of a kid that still thinks that big words make you sound smarter. (Protip: this only works on dumb people.)

But you seem like a bright kid. I'm pretty sure that with a bit more life experience, some patient friends, and some guidance from a dedicated teacher or two, you'll start to figure things out.

That's why I'm so upset that *Time* would let you make a fool out of yourself on the Internet. It's precisely *because* you're such a smart kid. Because in a couple of years, you're going to look back and feel horribly embarrassed.

I can't understand why *Time* would give a kid that hasn't even decided on his major, that can't even use a spellcheck, and that can't formulate a coherent argument, a national platform.

Actually, no. Tal, I think I know why *Time* did this. I think somebody over there wanted an article that would stir things up, and put the 'privilege'-shouters in their place. They had a frankly racist agenda, but nobody had the guts to put their name on something so asinine. So somebody found your piece on the [Princeton Tory](#), and scooped it up.

They needed a front. Someone with some credibility. You're not perfect, but you're a pretty good fit. You're young, you're at an Ivy League, and you've got the whole historical victim/rags to riches/American Dream backstory thing going on. Trust me, if some black or Asian or more interestingly ethnic kid had offered to write a similar article, you would have been dropped like a bad habit, for reasons we've already discussed. But they took what they could get.

So, *Time*, you're not fooling anyone. And that's really cowardly of you to use a kid who can't even drink yet to do your dirty work.

But back to you, though, Tal.

Or more specifically, back to us.

You said that you won't apologize for your privilege. That's fine, man. I don't think anyone actually wants you to apologize for anything. Really, all we can ask of you, especially at this early stage in your development of thinking about the world, is that you give it some thought. It's hard, I know. If it was easy, all the bad stuff we have today—racism, sexism, homophobia, wars, all that—would be gone. But it's not easy. These are hard problems.

I said earlier that it's okay if you're racist. It is. As long as you're working at it, as long as you're trying your best to listen, and to understand, and to not be racist, or sexist, or whatever, that's all anyone can ask. It's a hard battle, man. I'm racist and sexist too, but I'm doing my best not to be.

I'll be honest, man. I don't have an easy solution for you. But I do know that shutting down and rejecting what your friends are saying isn't going to help, and really, it's not an option. Your friends aren't asking for pity, they're asking you to understand them and work with them.

One last thing.

I can tell that you read a lot. I know you're probably going to be busy hanging out and discovering life this summer, but I want to recommend a book. It's called [The Fire Next Time](#), by

a really smart dude named James Baldwin. It's short, but heavy. Read it slowly. I think you'll like it.

I know it's rough being a college student, so if funds are tight, hit me up and I'll be happy to mail you a copy. I just landed a pretty lucrative fellowship, so I'm in a position of relative financial privilege.

And if you ever want to talk, my twitter is [@dexdigi](#).

Have a good summer, Tal.

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