

# Oppression, Intersectionality and Privilege Theory

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Many people today under capitalism are faced with oppression. Some people are more oppressed than others and people are oppressed for many different reasons. Generally people face oppression on the basis of their sexuality, race, class, gender, gender identity etc. and this oppression has a real and often disabling impact on people's lives and how they interact with others, work and learn. It also has an overall impact on how society functions as a whole. In the process of coming to grips with and understanding this oppression, social theorists have come up with many different analyses. Two analyses which are often linked are 'Intersectionality' and what is broadly referred to as 'Privilege Theory'. These are the two concepts which I will be dealing with in this piece and outlining what I think Marxists might have to say on the matter.

Proponents of Privilege Theory (PT) can be very different and range from the anarchist left to the liberal-dominated NGO sector. For the purpose of this piece I will be dealing with as many aspects of PT as possible in an overall analysis of the general concept. Referring to PT as a 'theory' is sometimes challenged by its proponents however this is something I do for ease of discussion. The concepts defined within PT were written by authors in books and when this has been discussed in universities these authors are referred to as theorists - so 'theory' is not meant to be a pejorative label.

You may have come across PT when hearing someone say 'check your privilege' in response to a form of prejudice. PT is the idea that we all have various levels of privilege which comes from our personal experiences in life based on our identity. Those with most privilege are considered to be white, straight and wealthy men so the closer you are to the race, sexuality, class and gender with most power and dominance in society the more privilege you have. According to privi-

lege theory, because we all have unearned advantages that we are often unaware of, people need to examine their own level of privilege before they can express solidarity with more oppressed people in society and if you are not constantly 'checking your privilege' you are part of the problem and de facto an oppressor. The premise of this is that white people benefit from racism, straight people benefit from homophobia, men benefit from sexism and so on.

This is a particular view of how oppression works. In this view people are oppressed by other people who have not had the same experiences in life, that is, experiences of prejudice. For example, unchecked gender privilege means you are complicit in sexism; or unchecked race privilege means you are racist by definition.

In one sense, the fact that so many people have come to this view is a huge step forward. People have very good reasons to point out racism, sexism etc. and encourage people to reflect on their reactionary ideas. However the questions we need to ask are: will personal reflections alone defeat oppression? Is this the best method for tackling homophobia? Can we beat Youth Defence and the Iona Institute by encouraging them to reflect on their own positions in society? Where does this oppression come from and how can we go about wiping it out once and for all?

Socialists should be on the side of people who agree with PT and Intersectionality and we should work together to tackle oppression and bigotry. However it should be the job of Marxists within all movements to argue with people in a constructive and comradely manner and put across a Marxist analysis of oppression.

The beginning of PT can be traced back to its development in 1960s America where it was predominately referred to as 'White Skin Privilege' and used by some writing during the civil rights and black liberation move-

ment. In 1967 the Students for Democratic Society published a book by Noel Ignatiev and Theodore Allen which included two articles; *White Blindspot* and *Can White Radicals be Radicalized?* These pieces argued that white activists tended to put much less emphasis on racism when examining American labour history and when organising current struggles. They also argued that the biggest block to building class struggle and revolution in America was the chauvinism of white workers.

This approach made a resurgence in the early 1990s. In 1990 Peggy McIntosh wrote a book called *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. In this book McIntosh argued that white people have a full knapsack of privilege due to the fact they live in a world tailored to their needs and that this knapsack weighs you down - so the more privileged you are the more weighed down you are. You must carry this knapsack around with you and never forget its weight when talking to a person of colour - hence 'check your privilege'.<sup>1</sup>

Recently this concept has resurfaced within the Occupy movement and in US and British sociology schools in universities. Often the notion that we all have various levels of privilege that you must check is taught as a given fact in sociology books and lectures.

At the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement a very important document was doing the rounds and being discussed at open assemblies. This document was called *Checking Your Privilege 101* and it came from the Transformative Justice Law Project of (TJLP) in Chicago. This group is made up of different academic activists who stand for prison abolition, gender self-determination and what they call transformative justice. In *Checking Your Privilege 101* they list twelve forms of privilege. These vary from 'Life on the outside privilege' to what they call 'passing privilege'. Life on the outside privilege is explained as being the privilege of not being in prison, as prisoners do not have the same access to certain things as non-prisoners

do. Passing privilege is 'The privilege to be able to 'pass' as a more privileged group, such as a light-skinned person of color passing as white, a transperson passing as non-trans, a disabled person passing as able-bodied, etc'. Other privileges include, Body Size Privilege, Religious Privilege, Educational Privilege and of course Race, Class and Gender privilege.

While the notion that we must go around constantly checking people who are flaunting their 'Passing Privilege' may seem almost laughable, to some there is, however, a very important argument here. You can see the importance of taking this line of thinking seriously when you read how the TJLP define 'Class Privilege'.

Class Privilege: The privilege of being a person raised with financial stability and access to financial safety nets through family or other assets. Class privilege can also apply to someone who has accrued wealth over time. In our society, class privilege often dictates 'opportunities', 'freedom', access to 'legal rights' and the power to influence political systems and the media. In our experience, class privilege has been one of the privileges most devastating to radical organizing when gone unchecked by those who have it.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly this definition of class is a problem. While obviously it is true that the family you were born into can be an advantage or disadvantage to you, can we really justify a discussion of class in terms of privilege? Obviously activists with a decent income should always keep in mind that not everyone can afford to eat in that restaurant or travel to that protest or conference. But this doesn't mean that all those with secure, or relatively well-paid jobs are of a different class or part of the problem. If we apply the general thesis of PT, that we all have various levels of

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<sup>1</sup>Bill Mullen - 'Is there a White Skin Privilege?' 2013 [Socialistworker.org](http://Socialistworker.org)

<sup>2</sup> Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois, *Checking Your Privilege 101*

privilege, this line of thinking becomes very similar to the notion that society is made up of many different classes and this is a notion often used by the right to divide people.

Marxists argue that in capitalist society there are two main classes; the working class and the capitalist class. Now while many people may not self-identify as either one of these, for Marxists, class is an objective relationship based on one's position in the process of production. The days when the vast majority of people worked in manual production in factories may have passed, but the fundamental division between those who own and control capital and those who don't - between exploiter and exploited - remains. Under capitalism today you can work for Google on 70K a year or you can own your own small business, employ 2 or 3 people and earn 50K a year or less. However the person who works for Google is selling their labour power to the company and having a profit made out of it, whereas the person who owns their own business is directly profiting off the labour of the people they employ. Also the person who owns their own business has far more control over their own life than the person who is under the thumb of a manager and CEO in Google (no matter how nice their offices are). We need to acknowledge that a huge number of people today work in call-centres, the service industry, self-employment, shop floors, restaurants, the entertainment industry, IT etc. and that traditional factory workers are now, for various reasons, the minority (although they remain an important factor). Again this does not change the fact that a call-centre worker, for example, creates a profit for their firm and therefore is a member of the working class.

There are of course some people who are 'middle class' and these people fall into two main categories: first, those who own small businesses or are self-employed; second those who, while working for a salary, play a managerial role, i.e. they are paid not for their labour power alone but also to manage the labour (and exploitation) of others. However, many self-employed people such as taxi

drivers, trades people, gardeners etc.. live and work in working-class communities, live with working-class people and make their living without benefiting from the work of others.

What is involved here is not just an argument about definitions or labels but an analysis of the way society is structured and how it can be changed. Socialists think that this is a useful way of looking at society as it has the potential to empower and unite people. Making this broad definition of working class, rather than individual identity or particular occupations or lifestyles, the point of departure for the struggle means identifying a social force that actually has the potential power to defeat the system. However if we take the *Checking Your Privilege 101* definition of class we are into potentially dangerous territory as it can only serve to divide people who are essentially members of the same class. Also, the notion that telling members of the ruling class to 'check your class privilege' will actually achieve anything is farcical. The only thing that will make a capitalist think twice about their actions is if there is a threat to their profits, not appealing to their good will. However, the *Checking Your Privilege 101* document is widely accepted as representing the liberal wing of the concept.

There are other places on the left and within activism where PT can be found, for example within Anarchism. There is a debate within the anarchist movement internationally between what are referred to as 'class struggle anarchists' who have a near-Marxist analysis of capitalism, and take the view that there are class roots to all oppression, and other anarchists who turn to the postmodern social theorist Michel Foucault to explain oppression. Foucault argued that power exists everywhere in society and is not just concentrated in the state; applying this theory to oppression you can see clearly how PT comes into it. If power exists everywhere, in every relationship in society (as opposed to power being overwhelmingly concentrated at the top and having an influence at the bottom) then it is easy to see how PT can be applied here,

that men benefit from sexism etc.

However, no matter how radical a spin is put on this concept the central problem with the theory remains, namely that other working class people, and not the ruling class, are seen as benefiting from identity-based oppression. It is no use saying you support liberation and socialism and then disregarding all class analysis in order to cry ‘Check your privilege!’ at working-class people. What proponents of PT need to keep in mind is what exactly oppression is, and how it works. How does oppression reproduce itself? Where does oppression come from? And ultimately how can we get rid of it? In essence what PT comes down to is a view of oppression as the personal choice or decision of the oppressor.

Also within PT there is a fundamental confusion between privileges and rights. Calling something a privilege makes it almost sound dirty, like something you shouldn’t have or like something you should feel bad about because someone else doesn’t have it. Obviously, it is far better to extend rights to all than it is to restrict rights to some. LGBTQ people do not have access to marriage - do we make straight people feel bad about getting married because of this or do we fight for everyone’s right to marry?

PT seems to be limited to recognising inequality and oppression on an individual level; more about urging people to make individual confessions than about fighting the root cause of oppression. In this context, prejudice is normalised as just a part of society and the ability to change it is diminished. Oppression itself does capitalism’s work by dividing us and individualising us and PT does nothing to challenge this either.

What PT also does is ignore the connections people have in society; we are not all individual, independent actors in the game of life. We have friends, family, neighbours, colleagues etc. and we are influenced by the different oppressions they face as well as the ones we ourselves are subject to. It is said that men benefit from sexism but it is not said often enough that men also have sisters, mothers and partners who are victims of sexism. Men

live with women so the fact that women earn less due to sexism is not a case for demanding men feel bad about this - it’s a case for women (and men) organising to demand equal pay, and not by lowering men’s income. The only person who benefits from paying women less is the person who pays them in the first place - the capitalist.

Because the amount of privilege you have is based on your past experiences in life owing to your identity it means your privilege is an unchanging status. So no matter how much solidarity you express, or how many years you spend fighting for the rights of more oppressed people, you are still an oppressive scum bag if you do not acknowledge the fact that you are privileged because you are a man, or you are white, straight etc. Altogether PT paints an absolutely hopeless scenario where society is dominated by oppressive working class people and we can’t really do anything about it.

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a method of analysis often used by some people on the Left to discuss the different forms of oppression that people face in their daily lives or lived experiences. It is used to look at how these different oppressions intersect and how they impact on people. Intersectionality emerged from the black feminist movement because of a very important analysis of how black women faced both racism and sexism and even the latter in different ways to white women. Proponents of Intersectionality focused on the oppression of women as defined by racism.



In 1974 a new organisation of black lesbian feminists was born in Boston, Massachusetts

in America called The Combahee River Collective. In April 1977 (three years before they disbanded) they wrote their official statement to explain their politics. The concepts defined in this statement are widely quoted by proponents of Intersectionality today even though the term 'Intersectionality' isn't used in it. In fact the term itself only began to be used widely in the early 1990s.

The formation of the Combahee River Collective comes from a really positive perspective. This was a group of some of the most oppressed women in America coming together, discussing ideas and figuring out their own liberation. This was in direct response to the sexism of the male-dominated civil rights and black nationalist movements and the often-implicit racism of the white-dominated women's movement. While they did not necessarily feel that they were completely cast aside by these movements they did think that often their own issues were not taken up and other issues were prioritised.

They say in their statement:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression..We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.<sup>3</sup>

This is a good starting point. The fact that, in a deeply racist and sexist society, they bravely demand an end to sexism within their

movement is fantastic. However while it is important for us to recognise that this group and others like them came a very good place, Marxists should have some clear criticisms of this document. Clearly their oppression is real and clearly they are victims of both racism and sexism (as well as capitalism) but does their analysis advance their position? Can their emphasis assist in their struggle against oppression?

First of all, while they identify as socialists and discuss economic inequality, there seems to be no real class analysis. Instead they opt for discussing things in terms of privilege:

We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.

Secondly there is this statement:

We are not convinced however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist revolution and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.

This is a good principle as long as it is not a condition for taking part in a revolution. Before we have a revolution must we guarantee that each and every worker is consciously both a feminist and an anti-racist? Do we ask the working class to wait and not revolt on the basis that there is still sexism and racism in society?

Understanding the development of class consciousness is fundamental to Marxism and to how exactly we beat oppression. A revolution is a process. A revolution starting from very basic economic and political demands can turn into a socialist revolution. A socialist revolution includes not just large street protests and college occupations but also mass strikes and general strikes where the entire working class down tools and withdraw their labour. In this process everything gets thrown

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<sup>3</sup>*The Combahee River Collective Statement - 1977*

up in the air and everything ends up landing in different places, everything changes, including people's ideas.

People's ideas are developed and based on real, material objective conditions and during a revolutionary period these conditions change radically. Even in the smallest of struggles today we can witness a shift in people's ideas as people learn rapidly when they are forced into fighting the system. During the Egyptian revolution in 2011 we witnessed Muslims, some of whom may at some stage have held prejudice views about Christians, form a protective ring around those Christians (Copts) while they prayed and vice versa. We have seen people concerned about the property tax end up coming on protests for abortion rights. When people are engaged in their own battles they become more ready to express solidarity with others who are engaged in other battles. People's consciousness shifts radically in a revolutionary process.

As Marx said in the *German Ideology* in 1845

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary; an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution. This revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>4</sup>

We don't only beat oppression by beating capitalism, we also beat oppression in the process of beating capitalism. If a revolution throws off the muck of ages (like racism and

sexism) then a revolution can open the way to everyone's liberation. Arguments will still have to be had and socialists and feminists will have to argue against sexism and racism and every other expression of oppression we meet in a revolution - but we can still say that men, women, black and white, gay and lesbian working together against capitalism in and of itself is a major blow to oppression.

While the ideas behind Intersectionality initially emerged in the 1960s/70s it came back into being with the rise of postmodernism. In 1983, postmodern theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote an essay entitled *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity and Violence against Women of Color*. In this essay she made a clear link between intersecting or overlapping oppressions and postmodernism: 'I consider Intersectionality to be a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory'.<sup>5</sup> Further to this in 1995 Caroline Andrews wrote a paper called *Ethnicities, Citizenship, and Feminisms: Theorizing the Political Practices of Intersectionality*. In this she wrote:

Postmodernism has given visibility to fragmentation, marginalization, and multiple identities. The question of how to theorize the intersection of feminism and ethnicity partially reflects postmodern sensibilities. Postmodernism is certainly an important intellectual step towards the reconceptualising of difference. The idea of multiple, fluid identities, of things being both what they are and what they are not, of the end of metanarrative all these open up the debate for the better understanding of difference<sup>6</sup>

However this connection with postmodernism is nowhere to be seen in the circles

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<sup>4</sup>Marx, *German Ideology*, 1984

<sup>5</sup>Crenshaw, 1983 - quoted in the [charnellhouse.org](http://charnellhouse.org)

<sup>6</sup>Andrews, 1995 - quoted in the [charnellhouse.org](http://charnellhouse.org)

where it is discussed today. I want to argue that the core concept of what is now called 'Intersectionality' is nothing new. For generations the left have discussed, in various ways, how different people are victims of oppression in different ways. Trotsky and Kollontai in early 20th Century Russia discussed what is called 'the double burden of women' to refer to how women were both wage workers and homemakers and men were not. Marx talked about how the working-class Irish emigrants in England had it worse than most of the English working class and the European left through the 20th century resisted anti-Semitism and recognised how working-class Jews were oppressed in a different way to the rest of the class and so on.

Marxists must recognise that it is vital to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia etc. and not simply concentrate on economic struggles or say certain things can wait until after the revolution. While people are being oppressed nothing can wait. However, this necessary struggle is not helped by complicated, often abstract, academic terms or concepts which can be used by the knowledgeable activist to berate working class people who may hold some reactionary ideas. We need to disagree with people and patiently argue why racism and all other prejudice is bad.

Also, Marxists should keep the concept of class central to our analysis. It is because we live in a class society that oppression exists in the first place. All oppression arises from the class division in society. So the ability to wipe away oppression depends on having a class analysis and acting on it. Class cannot be viewed as just another way in which humans are divided, but as a key division in society that gives rise to prejudices between other real human differences. All struggles are intrinsically linked but revolutionaries need to work to connect struggles through solidarity and broad alliances that bring different groups together. Socialists should see themselves as 'tribunes of the oppressed' and use every space they occupy to highlight the plight of the most oppressed people in society. It is not good enough to just say you are against racism if you do not demand that non-Irish people also have a right to a home, education, job and health in this country and make this demand at every turn and opportunity. Lastly we need an organisation that can do all this. But this organisation needs to reflect and represent the class. The revolutionary party should be a multi-racial, multi-gendered, multi-identity international working-class organisation that challenges the capitalist and class roots of oppression.