



**THE
PROMISES
AND
PITFALLS
OF
PRIVILEGE
POLITICS**

This zine was compiled for the 2012 NYC Anarchist Bookfair, as a contribution to debates about the use of “privilege politics” within revolutionary movements and organizations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The White Skin Privilege Concept: From Margin to Center of Revolutionary Politics

By Michael Staudenmeier

.....pg. 1

Privilege Politics is Reformism

By Will

.....pg. 9

Be Careful With Each Other, So We Can Be Dangerous Together

By Invisible Man

.....pg. 22

Response to Privilege Politics Is Reformism

By Suzy X

.....pg. 33

Notes

*Now, outside of an organization, trolling cis men or white people by poking at their privilege is something I like to call a confrontational tactic (and at best, for the lolz), only in that the value is just in purely making them uncomfortable. But that's a different story altogether, and a phenomenon that's usually encountered/more easily executed on the internet, which I have my own raves/grievances about.

Given all this, I will acknowledge that there are problems with identifying as the monolithic “oppressed,” as though our experiences are the same. This is definitely not the case, and should never be construed as such. **Privilege and identity exist as a complex, fluid network of relationships, not as static forms (which is why identity politics is a bad thing). There is a critique to identity politics and the Black Orchid piece here, but I think it’s only good for liberal-baiting and saying almost the same thing as the Black Orchid piece but from a really disembodied, holistic point of view. I think that as long as people are systematically experiencing violence and oppression from whichever place they come from (whether they’re black or queers or women), I respect those who resist from the site of identity. Whether you’re smashing a bank or reinventing social relationships, do what you gotta do.

THE WHITE SKIN PRIVILEGE CONCEPT: FROM MARGIN TO CENTER OF REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

By Michael Staudenmeier
Renewing the Anarchist Tradition Conference
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When I was eighteen, my older brother Peter gave me some essays to read on feminist philosophy. Those essays contributed to me becoming a philosophy major in college, and they contributed to me identifying radical feminism as one of the most important political influences on me during my college years. In preparing for this talk, I've been re-reading some older feminist writings that speak to questions of privilege. The work of bell hooks (whose early book *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* was the source for my title this morning) and Marilyn Frye have been getting my attention these last few weeks. Frye in particular is one of my favorite philosophers, and her book *The Politics of Reality* is one of my all-time favorite books of philosophy. The sharpness and clarity of her writing, in essays like “Oppression” and “On Being White” hold up quite well 25 years later, and I will come back to these writings periodically during this talk.

But I'm not a philosopher anymore, now I'm a historian. And as a historian, I've spent much of the past several years researching the history of a small, mostly white revolutionary group based largely in Chicago during the 1970's and 80's: the Sojourner Truth Organization. STO, as it was often known, was never very large, and it is largely forgotten today, even within the revolutionary left. During its existence, the group was frankly notorious for its attachment to the white skin privilege analysis. It was never the only group to adopt this understanding of white supremacy, but it was one of the most vocal. This talk isn't strictly speaking about STO, but my research informs the core of my trajectory today.

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But before we get to the seventies, we have to go a few steps back. The roots of the white skin privilege analysis lie in the work of WEB DuBois, a black Marxist historian whose most important book was *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (published in 1935). Here, DuBois used a provocative phrase “the public and psychological wage” in order to explain the pervasiveness of white racism during the period after the Civil War. In his words:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely

with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.

For three decades, the white left was supremely unconcerned with this idea of the “wages of whiteness” (to use the historian David Roediger’s phrasing). But in the 1960’s, a handful of white radicals began to explore the broader implications of DuBois’ analysis, expanding its application beyond Reconstruction and turning it into a general theory of US History. Foremost among this small number were Noel Ignatin (now Ignatiev), who, not coincidentally, helped found STO at the end of 1969, and Ted Allen, later the author of *The Invention of the White Race*. (In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that Allen and Ignatin met initially through their membership in a small Stalinist sect, and that both men remained attached to a version of Stalinism throughout the 1960’s. It is a central premise of my talk that the white skin privilege concept can and should be assessed independent of its founders’ Stalinist background.)

According to Ignatin, Allen coined the term “white skin privilege,” in a 1965 speech commemorating John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry. Throughout the late 60’s and early 70’s, these two men produced a flurry of essays detailing the philosophical, political, and historical aspects of their emerging theory. Allen and Ignatin never built their argument around moralistic sermonizing of the sort that some radicals now associate with the term “white skin privilege.” Instead, they made what amounted to a strategic argument concerning the prospects for revolution in the United States, maintaining that white skin privilege kept white people from uniting with people of color in anti-capitalist struggle. In the earliest elaboration of their theory, the pamphlet “The White Blindspot” (another DuBois reference, naturally), Ignatin argued that:

As long as white supremacy is permitted to divide the working class, so long will the struggle of the working class remain on two separate planes, one [whites] concerned with their ‘own’ class demands and the other [blacks], on a more elementary plane (but with a much higher degree of class consciousness) fighting first for the ordinary bourgeois rights which were won long ago for the rest of the workers. As soon as white supremacy is eliminated as a force within the working class, the decks will be cleared for action by the entire class against its enemy.

As the building block for this analysis, it is essential to understand what white skin privileges are, and what they are not. In Ignatin and Allen’s

be an end in itself. Of course it isn’t. But it is a way that people can negotiate space, and figure out who they can work with, much less feel trusting enough to organize any of the high-risk “revolutionary actions” the author talks about. Being honest with each other about how much space we take up is a strategic decision that many organizers, including myself, sometimes have to make. We have every right to pick and choose who our comrades are, and establish conditions under which we can work with them. If you are not willing to part with what power you may have, how can I trust you not to take advantage of it in a way that detriments me and my cause?

I admit that I have felt that successive call outs for the sake of catharsis or for the sake of establishing power** CAN and DOES facilitate a stasis in an organization. Some people also misunderstand privilege—for example, a teenager at an action once tried to say everyone there had queer privilege because we (queers) outnumbered the straight people. Naw-aw. **It’s not supposed to be a point system, but it’s a way to gauge one’s relationship to a space under heteropatriarchy/white supremacy**.** The conversation should not start nor end with “You’re white, you’re not allowed to talk.” It should be a process of deep analysis and accountability; like if you’re a white person working in an organization against the prison-industrial complex, be conscious of what experiences you CANNOT speak to, but also offer support where you see fit. **People who organize together don’t show up with color-coded cards listing what privileges they have, so instead of resting on the topic of privilege, they need to sit down and have honest discussions about the work they plan to do and offer a variety of contributions.**

In short, I do not think calling out privilege excludes any kind of “revolutionary” action, but instead should be done with the intent of better understanding and developing a space in which people can better realize their revolutionary potential. **It’s not about you personally, but about the space you inhabit and the relationship you have to it, as shaped by institutional and cultural norms and practices.** (And also, seriously, let’s talk about how to disrupt the relationships we have to such spaces and how we go about reinventing new ones. It’s still kind of vague, but instead of getting mired in static identities we need to step it up!)

forms of resistance are without discussing the current chokehold the state currently has on mass movements of any kind. Meaning, we need to get creative.

He tends to focus on a somewhat dated notion of what “militant” and “violent” struggle (note: arrestable actions) constitute. He also overlooks the potential of any action that is not [at least immediately] arrestable. **My issue is that in centering such actions in his analysis, in the context of the piece they read as the only legit forms of revolutionary resistance.** Meanwhile, there are plenty of non-arrestable actions that constitute resistance— i.e. organizing autonomous communities, teaching people how to read, isolating abusers, taking care of each other out of good will instead of doing it for capital— in a state that benefits from the latter. These all constitute actions which the Black Panthers, the author’s model for revolutionary struggle, actually did. Other examples include feminists who emphasized bodily autonomy by writing guides to reproductive health, introducing herbs and other techniques to safely terminate pregnancy, those who chose to raise children with their friends.

In the article, these actions are eclipsed by armed struggle, which in the ’70s, couldn’t hold a candle to the threat these activists made by helping each other. As if to say to the state, “You won’t give us the support we need? You wanna keep our communities in the gutter? All right then. We’re gonna stop relying on YOU, or paying YOU to do this shit, and we’re gonna do it ourselves.” **This is more or less why OWS was so much of a threat that the NYPD had to put it out. This country hasn’t seen such communistic mutual aid on that large of a scale in years.** (Aside from the fact that OWS basically morphed into a non-profit by the time Zuccotti Park was shut down, but I digress.)

Meanwhile, the author assumes that this vague group of privilege theorists are only theorists and not actual organizers who might possibly value and engage in any or all actions that 1) actively resist the status-quo and 2) foster trust and safety among comrades, who may not want to take part in high-risk arrestable actions otherwise. **This hierarchy of actions should not exist.** **If there are people in your action who can’t get arrested, make sure there are other ways in which they can contribute. Make sure they are as respected as those who can. Make sure you don’t make martyrs out of those who are arrested, lest you shape the meaning of credibility to those who do have the privilege to do so. Calling it out isn’t always done for the sake of calling out, but for the sake of expanding our ideas about action and expanding each person’s potential to resist. If I call you out, it’s because you’re undermining my/someone else’s ability to resist.**

Now, I can agree with him in that **privilege theory isn’t supposed to**

view, the privileges covered a wide terrain, including the opportunity to be first hired and last fired in an employment context, access to preferential treatment at the hands of police and government bureaucrats, and in general the same sort of deference and courtesy that had been described in Black Reconstruction. These privileges were relative rather than absolute: first hired and last fired, for instance, meant that whites could expect that they would always get jobs more easily than blacks, not that there were always jobs available for any whites that wanted them.

While rejecting the notion that racist ideas and attitudes were hardwired into white people, Ignatin and Allen refused to accept the liberal position that racism could be eliminated simply by changing people’s minds. Further, despite the use of the word “skin” in white skin privilege, Allen, Ignatin, and others, argued strenuously that “whiteness” itself was a political rather than biological category. This fluidity allowed groups of people, such as various immigrant communities, eventual access to “whiteness” and its privileges, contingent upon their willingness to reject any solidarity with black people. This was a dynamic historical process, not some abstract permanent feature of genetics. Thus, according to Ignatin and Allen, what could be done could also be undone. White skin privileges could be repudiated in struggle, and this created the possibility of a reunified proletariat capable of overthrowing capitalism. One more passage from “The White Blindspot” can illuminate this point, despite the Leninist overtones of its rhetoric:

Communists (individually this is the task primarily of white communists, although collectively it is the responsibility of the whole party) must go to the white workers and say frankly: you must renounce the privileges you now hold, must join the Negro, Puerto Rican and other colored workers in fighting white supremacy, must make this the first, immediate and most urgent task of the entire working class, in exchange for which you, together with the rest of the workers will receive all the benefits which are sure to come from one working class (of several colors) fighting together. (“White Blindspot”)

* * *

STO was by no means the only group to take the white skin privilege concept seriously. As early as 1969, the initial statement by the Weather faction of SDS (later the Weather Underground) made extensive use of the idea that white workers were “privileged.” In contrast to STO, however, this version of the white skin privilege analysis was often interpreted as a basis for writing off the revolutionary potential of the white working class and focusing the efforts of white revolutionaries on solidarity work with revolutionary nationalists both domestically and internationally. When the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee was initiated in 1974, it also adopted this

version of the theory.

Ignatin and Allen both challenged this particular form of the analysis, because both men were strongly committed to organizing within the white working class as a part of a comprehensive strategy for revolution. But these differences were minor compared to the differences both STO and WUO/PFOC had with the vast bulk of the white left during the first half of the 1970s. Maoists, Trotskyists, and anarchists were never more united than in their dismissal of the white skin privilege concept. It was denounced as moralistic, guilt-tripping, counter-productive and impractical. In retrospect, we can see the kernel of truth in these criticisms when looking at the more extreme articulations of the WUO/PFOC version of the analysis. But in the form developed by Allen and Ignatin, and by STO organizationally throughout the 1970's, this criticism seems to miss the point.

Despite the best efforts of its detractors, there was a slow but steady diffusion of the white skin privilege idea over the course of the 1970's, aided somewhat by the shrill attacks on the theory that were advanced in movement publications like the *Guardian* newspaper. A growing number of young radicals were drawn to the analysis, including many white women (and especially lesbians) who saw parallels between their experiences under patriarchy with those of black people under white supremacy. In fact, one could argue that the adoption of the white skin privilege concept by a segment of the white feminist movement was the catalyst for the general diffusion of the idea within the white left over the course of the 1980's. The relative openness to feminism of groups like Prairie Fire, and the often dismissive attitude taken by STO, meant that some versions of the analysis were more widely disseminated than others, much (I would argue) to the long-term detriment of the theory and of the white left.

In the early 1980's, the emerging feminist and lesbian presence within the academy further contributed to the good fortune of the white skin privilege analysis. The pioneering work of lesbian philosopher Marilyn Frye (who I mentioned earlier) represents the best elements of this work, grounded in a real-world analysis of oppression and resistance. For instance, in the essay "Oppression," she articulates quite clearly the every-day stakes involved in patriarchy, using the framework of (but not the term) privilege:

Being a woman is a major factor in my not having a better job than I do; being a woman selects me as a likely victim of sexual assault or harassment; it is my being a woman that reduces the power of my anger to a proof of my insanity. If a woman has little or no economic or political power, or achieves little of what she wants to achieve, a major causal factor in this is that she is a woman. For any woman of any race or economic class, being a woman is significantly attached to whatever disadvantages and deprivations she suffers, be they great or small.

RESPONSE TO PRIVILEGE POLITICS IS REFORMISM

By Suzy X

According to its arguments, the most oppressed should not struggle in the most militant ways because they do not have the privileged access to bail money, good lawyers and not to mention their racial status which will surely guarantee extra punishment. This leaves only one group of people who can possibly resist: those with a set of privileges who have access to lawyers, have the spare time to struggle, etc. This is in sharp contrast to the revolutionary tradition which has argued that the defeat of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism etc are the responsibilities of billions of oppressed people. This is exactly the group of people Privilege theory tends claims has so much to risk.

No doubt huge gaps exist in speaking, writing, confidence etc amongst movement activists based on race, class, and gender. Privilege theorists are at the forefront of acknowledging this reality. However, where the task is to make sure that everyone in the movement has roughly the same skills, privilege theorists are rarely clear on how to address this, other than reminding the privileged of their privilege. Privilege theorists so far have not demonstrated how this can be dealt with.

Privilege theory in a partially correct way grasps that people of color do not participate in many of the militant actions precisely because they face greater risk of arrest and more punishment. But instead of finding ways to get around this problem, privilege theorists fetishize this problem into a practice of demobilization and reformism.

This was a piece written by a comrade of a comrade's. His grievances seem to be explicitly with the discourse on privilege within organizing structures (and completely on point in the way he describes the immobilization it can cause). However, he also makes a lot of assumptions about "privilege theorists," how much Hegel or Fanon they might have read, where they come from and their intentions. A couple of days ago I wrote a long and annoyed response to this but I want to take my cue from the author and start thinking about this more constructively.

He says that "privilege theorists are a generation who have never known mass and militant struggle." Okay, let's stop romanticizing what "mass struggle looks like" and face the facts. Now, seeing as it's much harder to attain guns nowadays, when communities of PoC are largely under surveillance, and when non-profit industrial complex has taken over the task of community building FOR these communities [albeit from a distant, even colonialist position]—is it hard to see why? We cannot discuss what proper, more "revolutionary"

felt the revolutionary urge: the war to occupy Algeria cost many French workers their lives, holding down a country for the bosses' profits. French workers could be and were won over to social revolution by the independent anti-colonial struggle and the self-organization of Algerian workers.

So it is that the “Arab Spring” – a response to pro-American regimes in the Middle East – is the progenitor of the North American Occupy movement. However, North American activists did nothing to start the Arab Spring, and can do little to help it reach its goals. Here in our own countries, it is the shared experience of all people of colour within the movement of the White middle class that we have not been treated as equals, have been denied the respect due our intellects and organizational abilities, and seen as objects to condescend to or tokens to use and manipulate for White political objectives. The struggle for recognition will not be achieved by begging and pleading to convince our White allies within the movement. Our job is to organize independently of them so that, when it does become possible to build a united movement, they have no choice but to recognize and respect us as a force to be reckoned with.

I salute my comrade Will’s statement that “human life is meant to be lived in freedom or not at all.” It is precisely this knowledge - that in the end, we all die, and so life is too precious in every moment to waste in humiliation - that motivates the revolutionary impulse. This requires, on the individual level, the courage and dignity to maintain full self-respect against all odds. Such psychological development is an intensely personal odyssey of self-discovery and self-creation, but it is forged through daily acts of self-assertion within this society. It goes hand in hand with the material struggle to destroy oppressive structures and build structures of community power.

The solutions are not cut-and-dried, and will often not involve 100% racial separation. Genuinely implementing these ideas requires flexibility and adaptation to particular circumstances. But for us within the movement, rediscovering how to implement these traditions is just the starting point. Achieving our goals will be much harder.

None of this is the case with respect to a person’s being a man. Simply being a man is not what stands between him and a better job; whatever assaults and harassments he is subject to, being male is not what selects him for victimization; being male is not what would make his anger impotent – quite the opposite. If a man has little or no material or political power, or achieves little of what he wants to achieve, his being male is no part of the explanation. Being male is something he has going for him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him.

Too often, however, popular trends in academic theory converged with the jargon potential inherent in a formulation like “white skin privilege” to generate a range of “privilege”-based analyses. Many of these, such as male privilege, heterosexual privilege, middle class privilege, able-bodied privilege, and others, make sense on an elementary level as a description of reality, but have proven highly problematic when they have been incorporated into elaborate theories, convoluted analysis of popular culture and daily life, or under-examined resistance strategies.

Among anarchists, however, even an enthusiasm for radical feminism during the 1980’s didn’t result in a quick embrace of the white skin privilege analysis. Most anarchists of the 1980’s adopted a sort of flattened view of oppression, in which all forms of hierarchy were basically interchangeable and only a sort of under-theorized anti-statism really defined what anarchism meant. There were rumblings of a different approach in magazines like *Kick it Over* and *Open Road*, (why are the Canadians always so ahead of the curve like that?) but the sea change really began with the formation of Love and Rage at the end of 1989. Initially conceived as a continental anarchist newspaper, Love and Rage eventually became a “Revolutionary Anarchist Federation.” By the time of L&R’s demise nine years later, the anarchist movement in North America had changed dramatically in its assessment of capitalism, of oppression, and of resistance. Love and Rage consistently challenged the old orthodoxies of anarchism, and in particular focused less attention on “class” as it had previously been understood, and more attention on forms of oppression like white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, among others. In this context, the adoption of privilege-based theories of oppression was unsurprising.

In the decade since Love and Rage disbanded, privilege-speak has become commonplace throughout the anarchist milieu. Publications as divergent as the *Northeastern Anarchist* and *Green Anarchy* have run pieces that incorporate the language of privilege. The most important exceptions to this shift are, naturally, older anarchist publications like the *Fifth Estate* and *Anarchy Magazine*, although even these have probably included references on occasion.

* * *

Some of you may have noticed that the published description of this talk used the phrase “for better AND for worse” to describe the impact of the white skin privilege analysis on anarchist politics. By this point it should be clear that I have mixed feelings about the general category of “privilege” and the current manifestations of the white skin privilege analysis in particular. In essence, I endorse the basic outline of white skin privilege as a framework for understanding how white supremacy operates on a day-to-day basis. The same is true, generally speaking, for male privilege, heterosexual privilege, and other conceptualizations built on the same model. I know that in my personal life I have benefited from these three sets of privilege, among others.

Beyond simple accuracy as a narrative of oppression, the various privilege-based theories have another major advantage over other understandings of oppression: they provide a helpful challenge to traditional top-down approaches that focus exclusively – sometimes even conspiratorially – on the actions of the ruling class. By emphasizing the participation of everyday people in the continuing experience of oppression, privilege narratives provide at least the opportunity to place human agency at the center of strategies for revolution. Once again, what has been done can be undone. And again, Frye sheds some light on this in her essay “On Being White: Thinking Toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy.”

There is a correct line on the matter of white racism which is, in fact, quite correct, to the effect that as a white person one must never claim not to be racist, but only to be anti-racist. The reasoning is that racism is so systematic and white privilege so impossible to escape, that one is, simply, trapped. On one level this is perfectly true and must always be taken into account. Taken as the whole and final truth, it is also unbearably and dangerously dismal. It would place us in the hopeless moral position of one who believes in original sin but in no mechanism of redemption. But white supremacy is not a law of nature, nor is any individual's complicity in it. ... I do not suggest for a moment that I can disaffiliate by a private act of will, or by any personal strategy. [More on this point in a moment.] Nor, certainly, is it accomplished simply by thinking it possible. To think it thinkable shortcuts no work and shields one from no responsibility. Quite the contrary, it may be a necessary prerequisite to assuming responsibility, and it invites the honorable work of radical imagination. (“On Being White”)

Most of my concerns with regard to the white skin privilege analysis (and with the other theories modeled on it) arise when the analysis is incorporated too easily into particular strategies for social change. I will close my talk by briefly outlining four different problems that plague present-day versions of the white skin privilege concept. I will call them: 1) the substitution problem; 2) the voluntarism problem; 3) the liberalism problem; and 4) the avoidance problem.

of a country or the aggregate of Western countries. Race is incidental to the deliberately-created social fractures that capitalism rests on. As Fanon pointed out in *Wretched of the Earth*, Africanization of the top posts after decolonization eliminated visible White political control; but new social divisions based on tribe, region, and language became the tools of the new African capitalist classes. This led to interneccine struggle and ultimately genocide in many ex-colonial countries. While we must begin to build the structures of racial power within the shell of the capitalist society, if they remain on a capitalist foundation they form the basis of a new oppression. (The class politics of oppressed communities is a site of struggle that we as militants will have to contend with. But that is an internal struggle, and not the business of outsiders.)

I'll return now from the general to the particular. Anti-racist struggle means independent social development of oppressed ethnic and national groups within Western societies, who self-organize to find their niche within the economy, maintain ties with their homelands, and strategically use these strengths to leverage social and political power. In their early stages, such movements will adapt themselves to capitalist economics and bourgeois politics: but the basic demand for racial equality undermines the economic and social basis of Western society as a whole. “Equality” is not a demand that can be satisfied on capitalist grounds, for all wealth-generation under capitalism is premised on hierarchy. It can only be satisfied by working-class self-organization within the community.

Building independent racial power will destroy the construct of Whiteness and thus make class unity possible. As CLR James pointed out in a 1967 speech, referencing Stokely Carmichael and the thesis of *Black Power* as the fruition of his own theoretical observations in 1939,

the independent struggle of the Negro people for their democratic rights and equality with the rest of the American nation not only had to be defended and advocated by the Marxist movement. The Marxist movement had to understand that such independent struggles were a contributory factor to the socialist revolution. Let me restate that as crudely as possible: the American Negroes in fighting for their democratic rights were making an indispensable addition to the struggle for socialism in the US.

Perhaps May 1968 in France best illustrates what James was talking about. Seven years after Fanon's death, the Algerian revolution provided a spark to Algerian workers in France. These workers, oppressed by both race and class, became the catalyst for a revolution that drew in – not only the workers of their own nationality, not only the racially-oppressed workers – but the whole working class of France, in one of the most dramatic European revolutions since the end of World War II. It was not only these Algerian workers who

dynamic applies in our own struggle, today, for racial liberation. Even if we do succeed in overthrowing capitalist racism by united struggle, what is to prevent a socialist or anarchist racism from superseding it?

Only independent power of our own, built on our own, keeping our allies at a proper distance from our struggles.

The scope of the problem is larger than even this society as a whole. Race politics cannot be abstracted from the international political context. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon predicted the enormous effect of the establishment of the State of Israel on the political power of the international Jewish Diaspora. It even allowed Jews to join the White race. It's the most recent instance of colonialism and genocide to establish national power.

But while taking care to avoid these pitfalls, racialized communities today need such bases of national territory to assert themselves and consolidate their position within other societies. As we can find in the compilation “Toward the African Revolution,” this is why Fanon joined the Algerian liberation struggle: as a Caribbean Black man, he recognized that liberating the African continent from colonialism would have a direct influence on the status of Black people abroad. In a military and strategic sense, he saw that Arab Algeria was actually the best place to direct his efforts toward that goal.

White power in our societies was historically premised on the European domination of the world order; that geographical domination is fading today. The self-assertion and equality of racialized groups within North America rests on the independent political and economic development of what Fanon called the “Third World.” It means the internationalist unity of African, Latin American, and Asian countries, against national-capitalist divisions and toward their cohesion as supra-national revolutionary societies.

Just as the anti-colonial movement of the 1950s and 1960s (revolutions in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam in particular) had a dialectical relationship with the Black Power movement in the United States, so today the decline of the West (both in Europe and North America) and the rise of India and China have already had a dramatic effect on race relations within Western societies. Powerful immigrant voting blocs, and the international economic and political ties they bring, give their communities a certain breathing space in an asphyxiating racial environment. It should be clear enough to all readers, but I want to make clear where I stand on this. The international balance of power is a temporary and uneasy détente; it will likely lead to imperialist war in our lifetime. It is not a substitute for organized working-class power; but today we witness massive strikes in India and a staggering wave of demonstrations in China. These, too, will have their effect on the immigrant communities in Canada and the USA.

As I've stated, there is an important pitfall here. “Divide and conquer” is simply a tactic of minority rule, whether that minority is the capitalist class

The substitution problem was one that afflicted STO almost from its inception. Put simply, the issue was that STO behaved as if the black revolution was the proletarian revolution. A classic example of this confused logic can be seen in an early STO pamphlet titled “The United Front Against Imperialism?,” where the group argued that

If, in regard to education, equality for blacks required that children be bused, then we support busing; if it requires that they not be bused, then we are against busing. If equality in housing requires open-occupancy laws, then we are for open-occupancy laws. If it requires black control of black communities, we are for that. If it requires both open-occupancy laws and black control of black communities, then we are for both. If equality in employment means that the seniority system must be destroyed, then we are for scuttling it. If it requires the preservation of the seniority system, then we defend it. Organizations, whatever their defects, that fight for equality for black people are worthy of support, in our eyes. Organizations that reinforce white supremacy, whatever their virtues, we regard as reactionary. And so forth. (“United Front?”)

When the black movement increasingly turned toward reformism, entrepreneurship models and electoralism, the flaws inherent in this line of argument became crystal clear. Nonetheless, many white leftists today use a similar litmus test to assess social movements, believing that the repudiation of white skin privilege can be completed via the knee-jerk endorsement of movements of color. In some ways this is akin to the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic so common among those who identify as anti-imperialists today.

The idea of “repudiation” is also the core of the voluntarism problem, which too often applies even to those white radicals smart enough to avoid the substitution problem. *Race Traitor*, for instance, approaches white skin privileges as if they can single-handedly be cast off by people who have previously been identified as white. Unfortunately, however, privileges of this sort are granted by others, not affirmatively chosen by individuals. As Frye noted, it is not possible to volunteer oneself out of the white race, no matter how much we might wish to do so. Rather, the destruction of white supremacy will necessarily involve an overhaul of society, or it will not come to pass at all.

The nature of this overhaul is at the heart of the liberalism problem, which I have argued previously is exemplified by the work of the Catalyst Project, despite the best intentions of its participants. To the extent that white skin privilege is understood to be an impediment to “racial justice” and “liberation,” the strategy for ending white supremacy is reduced to a process of ameliorating of social inequality, apparently within the confines of capital and the state. Revolution is reduced to a transformation in consciousness

and what the situationists called “everyday life,” rather than indicating a comprehensive process for re-working all social relations, whether economic, political, or cultural.

Finally, there's the avoidance problem, which has been highlighted quite effectively in a thoughtful essay by the Philadelphia based activist Michelle O'Brien, “Whose Ally? Thinking Critically About Anti-Oppression Ally Organizing.” O'Brien argues that the rhetoric of white skin privilege provides a convenient way for white radicals to exempt ourselves from the substantive work of combating white supremacy while feeling good about ourselves because we have a sophisticated analysis and speak in a sort of jargon or code that other white radicals will be impressed by. She offers the following example from her personal experience:

On my way to moving to Philly, I stopped at an anarchist bookfair in western Mass. One discussion there was particularly revealing. It was a mostly white group. A few people of color in the room started talking. What the people of color said was fairly complex and subtle, and included a few criticisms. All the white people in the room start freaking out inside. None of us know what to say. Then a white person, clearly remembering some antiracism workshop of some sort, starts bringing up how we should focus on our white privilege, dealing with the racism in our movements. A few other white people perked up, recognizing the language involved, and launch into a lengthy discussion that seems straight out of a white-ally meeting. The statements of the people of color in the room got boxed into the narrow confines of this workshop rhetoric, and the people of color get erased completely. A dozen utterances of ‘our racism’ later and all the white people started actually believing the room had only white people in it. The people of color got totally ignored, now totally excluded from the discussion. Whatever challenge or threat they might have posed to white people’s arrogance was thoroughly contained, managed and diffused. They were reduced to just the crude caricature of workshop rhetoric. And all the white people, clearly, were feeling great about being so on the ball about racism.
(Whose Ally?)

I will admit that as I re-read the text of this talk last night, this description hit dangerously close to home; I will leave it to others to determine whether I am myself engaged in a process of avoidance. Anecdotes like this don't necessarily invalidate the conceptual framework provided by the white skin privilege concept, but they do call into question its frequent, sometimes all-purpose usage among white anarchists and other white radicals. The question then becomes: does the analysis help us make sense of society and oppression in the new millennium? And if it does, can it still be saved at this late date from its problems?

turnabout... “The white people dare not revolt so long as they can be intimidated by the Negro vote,’ he explained. Once the ‘bugaboo’ of Negro domination was removed, however, ‘every white man would act according to his own conscience and judgement in how he should vote.’”

...the building of an independent force is necessary...Black Power is necessary. If we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it, and that is precisely the lesson of the Reconstruction era. Black people were allowed to vote, to register, and to participate in politics, because it was to the advantage of powerful white “allies” to permit this. But at all times such advances flowed from white decisions. That era of black participation in politics was ended by another set of white decisions. There was no powerful independent political base in the southern black community to challenge the curtailment of civil rights.

Power is complex. It involves sociological, economic, political, military and cultural dimensions. They are all interrelated. But ideology is not propagated by the word: it is premised on the deed. Before the racist ideology caught on with White American workers and farmers, Black American workers and farmers had first to be enslaved and, during the backlash against Reconstruction, killed en masse, for the proper social context to be established. Similarly, anti-racist ideology will not be propagated by well-intentioned efforts (not even the piece of writing that you are reading right now); it will be established by organized force that utilizes all of the sociological, economic, political, military, and cultural weapons that its White antithesis has used. This is what the arguments of Fanon, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael really mean, and it is this tradition that we must rediscover as anti-racist non-White militants.

While Will explicitly states his approval of the proposition that militant action, and not conversation, will do the job of convincing, he prescribes organizational solutions to the difficulties he faced as a member of the POC working group during Occupy Wall Street. He recognizes that resolutions are not worth the paper they are printed on unless they can be enforced. But how can organizational procedures solve socially-rooted problems? The same problems he faced in New York came up repeatedly at Occupy Toronto. Drafting better constitutions and voting for better-worded resolutions does not alter the social balance of forces. These constant racial humiliations are not just part of the job or part of living in the neighbourhood, they are also part of remaining within a White middle-class movement.

During the American Civil War, Black Americans allied with Northern Whites against the Southern slave-owners to gain their freedom. This made perfect sense. But, as Stokely Carmichael pointed out, this merely resulted in exchanging the domination of one group of Whites for another. The same

rather than challenge the weight of an activist social grouping that denies its constant connection to the broader society that produced it.

It is quite easy for the White militant to retreat into the comfort of his or her society and dismiss comradely criticism as irrelevant: for to do otherwise is to challenge the influence of centuries on his or her psyche. And, in any case, non-Whites who have internalized the same power dynamics can always be called upon to soothe the White ego. But for both these Whites and these non-Whites, this is “doublethink,” a psychological contradiction within a single mind, reflecting the material contradictions of a society that both professes opposition to, and materially upholds, racism. White militants only differ from overt White supremacists in that they are psychologically conflicted, but both are products of the same reality. Non-White militants, like all non-Whites, live in a constant state of psychological tension which can only be resolved by struggle against the oppressor.

Here we get into the territory of guilt. This is the most hypocritical and annoying aspect of race politics today: the overcompensating and insincere attitudes of White militants who attempt to mask their internalized racism by public denials of racist opinions and token associations with non-Whites. Often, these White militants will refrain from openly criticizing non-White perspectives on racial issues, but will use their in-group social status to undermine such perspectives with subtle and appropriately anti-oppressive jargon. (Much of the time, it's not even that refined.) What is the point of engaging in such games? When someone pretends to back down, but is not actually convinced, no productive conversation has occurred. This is the behaviour of patronage, not comradeship.

It is precisely for this reason that Malcolm X's, Fanon's, and Carmichael's perspective of separate organization towards racial power is necessary. Consider these assorted quotes from *Black Power*:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks.... The point is obvious: Black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea – and it is a revolutionary idea – that black people are able to do things themselves....

...In the past, white allies have often furthered white supremacy without the whites involved realizing it, or even wanting to do so...

...Black people cannot afford to assume that what is good for white America is automatically good for black people...Take the case of Tom Watson. This populist from Georgia was at one time a staunch advocate of a united front between Negro and white farmers....But this is the same Tom Watson who, only a few years later, and because the political tide was flowing against such an alliance [the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow], did a complete

PRIVILEGE POLITICS IS REFORMISM

By Will
March 12, 2012

Notes on Privilege Theory

Introduction: White Supremacy Lives on

It is crystal clear that white supremacy exists. It seeps through every pore in our society. It infects every social relationship. It obviously affects Occupy Wall Street.

Everyone knows the wealth divide, the incarceration numbers, gentrification, the education gap and more are part of the class and racial oppression of the United States. All this is obvious. A more politically contentious matter are the social interactions, which are racialized in negative ways in society and specifically OWS. It is always painful, because at best we hope movement spaces are places where people can finally engage with one another on universal-human terms. However, it is not a surprise that even in movement spaces people experience white supremacy. Our society is saturated with it, so to expect non-racialized human relations in the movement would be utopian.

The combination of structural oppression based on race and class, the history of white supremacy and capitalism, and how that effects people's interactions with one another has led to a school of thought called Privilege theory. Privilege theory recognizes structural and historical oppression, but has an undue focus on individual behavior and thoughts as a major way of addressing white supremacy (and other oppressions, but I will tend to focus on white supremacy and class). Privilege theory has a set of basic principles:

- a. Privilege theory argues that movement spaces should be safe for all oppressed groups. One way to make such a space safe is by negotiating one another's actions in non-oppressive ways. For example, this means straight white men should talk less or think about the privileges they have when discussing an action or political question.
- b. Privilege theory justifies that militancy and political sophistication is the domain of a privileged elite based on class, gender and racial privileges.
- c. Privilege theory roots political and strategic mistakes in the personal privileges that people bring into the movement.
- d. Privilege theory seeks to deal with these issues primarily through education, teach-ins and conversations. This piece will point out key failures in all four principles of Privilege theory. It will tentatively lay

out some ways forward, while recognizing more research, and more importantly, struggle is needed to resolve some of the outstanding problems facing the movement.

There is certainly a long history of people of color facing white supremacy inside the movement. However they have tended to focus around programmatic and organizational critiques. Areas where deficiencies could be more easily seen and addressed. For example, if a group does not organize around Black prisoners, it can be addressed by having political discussions, changing the program of the group, and making an organizing orientation towards Black prisoners. Privilege theory addresses this by claiming that someone's privilege creates a blind spot to the reality of incarceration of Black men.

Another aspect of oppression Privilege theorists tackle are social interactions. However, it becomes much harder to objectively assess if a white man's glance objectifies a person because the color of their skin; if a white man yelling at a person of color is due to race or if it is a non-racialized-gendered reaction to political differences; or if a white man is taking up a lot of space because of his privilege or because he needs to speak because he simply has something valid/ important to say.

There is no doubt that in any organization or movement, where this is common behavior, people of color will not join or leave after some time. But at the same time, any movement/ organization which spends tons of time on this will no longer be a fighting organization/ movement and eventually people of color will leave. It will become talk shops or consciousness raising circles. In a period when the NYPD are killing Black and Latino men with impunity, schools are being closed in POC neighborhoods, anti-Muslim propaganda is rampant, and immigrants are deported every day, few will join a group which only focuses on inter-personal relationships. The key is to understand the tension and get the balance right.

At the same time it is undeniable that many POC believe this to be a serious way to deal with white supremacy. That many believe a movement can be built from Privilege Theory's political and strategic claims. Privilege Theory has come to be the dominant trend under specific historical circumstances, which I will briefly address. I believe this to be a false strategy, ultimately failing to actually solve the problems Privilege Theory wishes to address.

Probably every person of color has experienced some variety of interaction described above. First, let's discuss the complexities: when this happens, even amongst people of color there is disagreement over the perception of what the interactions meant. Understanding the seriousness of the charge is tied up with the white militants' past behavior or track record. People of color are also coming in with their own experiences with white supremacy. This certainly effects how they see social relationships. Lastly, some agreement

grabbing hold of some Negroes and talking about "I just want you to know you're just as good as I am – " And then they got back in their taxicabs and black limousines and went back downtown to the places where they lived and worked, where no blacks except servants had better be caught."

It is exactly the case, as Will points out, that White militants are incapable of perceiving themselves and their actions as individually racist. This is because of a basic psychological defence mechanism. As Black American militants Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton pointed out (quoting French philosopher Camus) in the 1967 manifesto *Black Power*, people do not and cannot condemn themselves. They inevitably rationalize and justify their personal actions even when such acts fit into a larger sociological pattern of oppression and injustice. There are any number of demonstrations of this fact (I would recommend the film *Glory* as one of them), but the point is that there is no way to convince someone of the incorrectness of their actions by conversation.

Where non-Whites challenge such dynamics, they are first ignored, and after escalation, considered "aggressive" and "reverse racists" by both Whites and fellow non-Whites. White supremacy (and all other forms of domination) is, in fact, as subtle as comrade Will says it is. That is why our entire society – both the half-hearted bourgeois-liberal campaigns and the revolutionary struggles against capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia etc. – is infected by all the problems it claims to fight against.

Contrary to what Will says, these factors do, in fact, breach the boundaries of friendship, love, and comradeship. Consider this analogy. Can anyone really say that the Republican/Conservative offensive against women has no reflection in the personal, loving relationships of heterosexual American and Canadian couples? Of course not. Male attitudes (including mine) are affected by the patriarchal social situation that produces them. Such attitudes cannot be changed by mere conversation, but by women actually challenging those power dynamics within the family and within the broader society, rather than internalizing them against themselves. The same is true of any power relation. There is nothing special about race, except its peculiar history in obstructing working-class unity against the common class oppressor.

As Marx pointed out, "material conditions determine consciousness." If criticisms coming from an individual or group of racialized people fail to convince White militants that they are "fucked up," this failure is not an isolated exception; it is rooted in a very solid social and material underpinning. All of North American society is built on the self-image of Whiteness and the assumptions of its superiority. Thus, as Will states, what is perceived as "objectively true" is actually what upholds White supremacy. The non-White movement activist subjects herself or himself to feelings of self-doubt,

shit that happens to them, tend to see the world differently, and are obviously sensitive to racial slights. The lack of recognition usually escalates the situation as the person of color tends to feel, what is “objectively true” falls back on how the white militant defines reality. At such a point, productive conversation usually breaks down.

Lastly things are more complicated today because white supremacy is much more coded today in language and behavior....Exactly how white supremacy works in coded language and behavior in the movement is still something that needs to be investigated.

There are several important considerations in this passage which the author does not take to their logical conclusions.

Why “must” we assume that those we are building a movement with are not White supremacists? Actually, both Whites and non-Whites alike in the movement are products of a racist society. We have all internalized the value system and racist judgements of a culture that systematically de-values non-White lives and intellects, while morally elevating those of Whites beyond all reasonable proportion. This is precisely why conversation does not convince them.

This is perfectly recognizable by observing political groups and social circles where Whites and non-Whites interact. Except when there is a conscious strategy of tokenism, Whites inevitably monopolize leadership roles in official capacity. Where they do not take these roles, they function as “alphas” in unofficial capacity. This plays out in dating patterns and friendship dynamics. Power relations that would otherwise be objectively considered oppressive and racist are rationalized away as “personal choice” and “individual” personality dysfunctions. This is simply dishonest, and it functions to perpetuate oppression on the micro-scale.

Here’s what Malcolm X had to say about working with White allies in his Autobiography.

I have these very deep feelings that white people who want to join black organizations are really just taking the escapist way to salve their consciences. By visibly hovering near us, they are “proving” that they are “with us.” But the hard truth is this isn’t helping to solve America’s racist problem. The Negroes aren’t the racists. Where the really sincere white people have got to do their “proving” of themselves is not among the black victims, but out on the battle lines of where America’s racism really is – and that’s in their own home communities; America’s racism is among their own fellow whites.

...I’ll go so far as to say that I never really trust the kind of white people who are always anxious to hang around Negroes, or who hang around in Negro communities. I don’t know – this may be a throwback to the years when I was hustling in Harlem and all of those red-faced, drunk whites in the afterhours clubs were always

has to be found that as a general rule people who join the movement are not white supremacists. This should be a fundamental assumption, otherwise, we are left with the ridiculous and suicidal political reality that we are building a movement with white supremacists. So that leaves us dealing with racial alienation or white chauvinism by people who we assume are against white supremacy. That seems to be a crucial point that needs to be recognized.

Usually people of color want acknowledgement that something fucked up happened. It is true that generally, most white militants flip out. On one hand the white militants grasp the seriousness of the accusation, but on the other hand, in their defense, they fail to give recognition of how another person of color perceived an event. The white militant usually acts as if the theory of white supremacy infecting everything stops with their mind and body when they are accused of anything. This is understandable, as no serious militant should take such accusations lightly.

This is particularly important as people of color, based on all the shit that happens to them, tend to see the world differently, and are obviously sensitive to racial slights. The lack of recognition usually escalates the situation as the person of color tends to feel, what is “objectively true” falls back on how the white militant defines reality. At such a point, productive conversation usually breaks down.

Lastly things are more complicated today because white supremacy is much more coded today in language and behavior. No one in the movement is going to call anyone nigger. People actually did so in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. No one is going to say that a person of color should not speak because of their color of their skin. Things are not that clear. This is partially a sign that struggles of people of color have forced white-supremacy’s anti-POC language to take a different form. However, white supremacy still exists. In the media for example talk of crime or poverty is code word for lazy Black or Latino people who ruin paradise for the hard working great white citizens of America. Exactly how white supremacy works in coded language and behavior in the movement is still something that needs to be investigated.

While the difficulties of being a person of color militant in movements is difficult as hell, there are certain odd problems of being a white militant in the movement. People of color enter the movement expecting better racial relationships. This is certainly fair. This usually means that white male militants are expected to take up less space, talk less, etc. Every personal interaction while always influenced by the weight of history, cannot be judged solely by that dimension alone. For example, Black people have been slaves in the US and specifically servants to white masters. Extrapolating that historical past to the social interaction when a Black man or woman gets a white friend a cup of water would be ridiculous. There is always agency and freedom in the actions we participate in today. They are always shaped by race, class gender,

sexuality and history; but we are not completely trapped by the crimes of the past either. Otherwise friendship, love, camaraderie would be impossible. The very possibility of any form of human social relationship would be destroyed. We would be parroting the past and dogmatically replicating it in the present.

Usually, after acknowledgement, things can be left at that. However, sometimes deeper organizational and political issues come up. Especially if a person of color says there is a pattern/ history of such behavior. If this is the case, it should be dealt with in terms of organizational and political dynamics. The limitations of privilege politics in dealing with such situations will be spelt out later.

Fanon, Black Liberation, and Humanity

The most sophisticated traditions in Black liberation have struggled to deal with such problems. Revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin and White Masks (BSWM)* used the philosophical tools of Phenomenology to explore the experience of consciousness/ lived experience of people of color. This tradition in the movement is sadly dead. In light of his investigations of Phenomenology, there is strong evidence in Fanon's writings and practice in his life showing that conversation cannot solve such racialized experiences, only the most militant and violent struggle can cleanse racialized human relations. The United States has not experienced high levels of struggles in over 50 years. Major problems develop because of the lack of militant struggle in the country.

Fanon also left a puzzling legacy by writing *Black Skin, White Masks*, which often is used to justify privilege theory. However, two problems exist with such a treatment of *BSWM*. The first is that this book was part of Fanon's development; his working out of problems he saw and experienced. Second and more importantly, almost all privilege theorists ignore the introduction and conclusion of the work. This is strange considering those two chapters are the theoretical framework of the book. In these two chapters Fanon expresses equality with all of humanity and denies anyone demanding reparations or guilt of any kind for past historical oppressions. What else can Fanon mean by, "I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guild toward the past of my race." The gendered language aside, this stands in stark contrast to privilege theory.

Fanon stands at the heights of attempting to reconcile the experiences of oppression with the need to develop human interactions and the necessity of changing them through militant struggle. There is no doubt that Fanon's

struggle precisely to the degree that the independent struggles of other oppressed groups wane. Rather than establishing themselves within their own constituencies, White middle-class activists appropriate the prefabricated struggles of other classes and racial groups, and often succeed in emerging within these struggles as leaders. This is partly accomplished by the deference they come to expect as their birthright, but where this does not succeed, such opportunists subtly combat and defeat legitimate, established working-class and community leaders – by hijacking community organizations and union bureaucracies. Of course, few actually see it this way. The means and methods of this racial power struggle are never overt: they rely on personal manipulations, gossips and slanders, and playing on individual psychological weaknesses and "hot buttons." I've seen these tactics, not once or twice, but dozens of times, in the decade I've spent as an activist and organizer. I'm not the only one who's seen them put into practice. Some of the best militants I know have burned out and given up because of this brand of activism; I've seen unions destroyed by the same means. I refuse to use these underhanded tactics, but I'll never bend to them either.

Acquiescence to and accommodation of the political and personal power dynamics within movement politics is no more than the internalization of a racial power structure. Thus it is that getting a drink of water (or a bottle of beer) for a White comrade IS in fact a racializing experience. I've been asked to do this more than once by Whites in the movement, but to my recollection, have never asked it of anyone at all. I don't need and don't want anyone to do for me what I can do for myself. It makes me feel weird.

Here I'll quote directly from Will's piece.

...some agreement has to be found that as a general rule people who join the movement are not white supremacists. This should be a fundamental assumption, otherwise, we are left with the ridiculous and suicidal political reality that we are building a movement with white supremacists. So that leaves us dealing with racial alienation or white chauvinism by people who we assume are against white supremacy. That seems to be a crucial point that needs to be recognized.

Usually people of color want acknowledgement that something fucked up happened. It is true that generally, most white militants flip out. On one hand the white militants grasp the seriousness of the accusation, but on the other hand, in their defense, they fail to give recognition of how another person of color perceived an event. The white militant usually acts as if the theory of white supremacy infecting everything stops with their mind and body when they are accused of anything. This is understandable, as no serious militant should take such accusations lightly.

This is particularly important as people of color, based on all the

However, one understands these ideas differently based on one's position in society. Viewing the problem this way exposes the psychological and practical weaknesses and incapacities of the middle class, and in particular the middle class of the ruling White nation.

Privilege politics are reformist, precisely to the degree that they have been taken up and watered down by the White middle-class movement. This movement has worn the various mantles of Abolitionism in the 1860s, Stalinism and Trotskyism in the 1930s-50's, the Hippie/New Communist Movement of the 1960s-70s, the Anti-Globalization Movement of the early 2000s, and Occupy today. Fundamentally, however, it is the same social layer in action throughout, with the same relationship to the means of production, and the same historical and social conditioning shaping both its outlook and its treatment of allies in struggle.

Moving past the present blockage in the movement, reaching actual workers (and particularly racially- oppressed workers) means leaving these folks behind: establishing revolutionary working-class and community organizations that explicitly exclude them. Just as “the liberation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves,” our liberation as racially- oppressed people is our job, and ours alone.

The bourgeoisie of the French and American revolutions sold out their plebeian social bases, establishing new forms of class domination out of struggles that they did not initiate and even feared. In the era of socialist revolutions, the same pattern of hijacking other people's movements led to Lenin's gross error in *What is to be Done?*, which even he later recanted. Lenin stated that the working class by itself could only produce a trade union consciousness and needed the contribution of intellectuals to fully realize itself as a class. But the Russian working class independently developed Soviets and factory committees as organs of working-class power – without the help of Lenin's agile brain. Similarly, Trotsky famously reduced the crisis of capitalism to the “crisis of leadership;” once again, the workers needed proper leaders, inevitably recruited from the middle class, to properly articulate what they actually wanted and meant to say. These middle-class elements were renamed “the proletarian party,” and thus by changing its name, the essence of the thing was magically transubstantiated.

In my debates with comrades around the *Recomposition* blog, I've learned the word “substitutionism” to describe this phenomenon. It's not exactly that simple – I do believe there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice with implications that I'm not going to get into here – but my judgement of this phenomenon should be clear. It doesn't stop with class, though. Race politics works the same way.

As Will points out, but does not elaborate fully, members of the White middle class see themselves as the legitimate leadership of a liberation

attempt to have human interactions with white people constantly clashed with white people's racialized interactions with him. In other words, white people do talk to people of color in condescending ways, dismiss POC issues as secondary, ignore POC etc. The issue is how to address it when it happens and in that realm Privilege theory fails.

Privilege theory puts too much weight on consciousness and education. It ends up creating a politics of guilt by birth. At the same time, there is no doubt that more education is needed on the history of white supremacy in the United States and on a global level. Furthermore, the relationship of white supremacy and its effect on consciousness is vital and a legitimate field of politics and philosophical inquiry. W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Michelle Wallace, Frantz Fanon and others have all made vital contributions in the United States regarding this tradition. Re-framing the debate along such a tradition is vital.

New social relations can only be forged in collective struggle of the most militant character. No amount of conversation and education can form new relationships. It is only the mass involvement and struggle of oppressed people which can ultimately destroy white supremacy, re-establish the humanity of people color, and create social relationships between people as one among humans instead of the racially oppressed and white oppressor.

The Failure of Privilege Theory

Privilege theory seeks to redress and describe the huge inequalities which materially, psychologically, and socially exist in society. While it is often accurate in its sociological analysis of such inequalities, it fails in crucial realms of actual struggle. Privilege theory ends up being a radical sociological analysis. It ends up not being a theory of struggle, but a theory of retreat. Privilege theory's main weakness are a tendency towards reformism, a lack of politics, and a politics of retreat.

Reformism

Privilege theory tends towards reformism or at best the radical politics of a group of people who seek to act above the oppressed. The latter is especially important. We have lived through a century of where people claiming to represent the masses claiming revolutionary politics acting above them: Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, Jawaharlal Nehru, Weather Underground, Josip Broz Tito or Julius Nyerere are just some figures who have fallen in this trap. Today the names are not so grandiose, but things are not so different.

There is no doubt that certain groups are more likely to be targeted by the police during political actions and that the repression they face will be greater, not to mention they might have less resources to call upon in their defense. These are all fairly obvious realities of white supremacy.

These factors certainly hinder greater struggle. At no point should they be underestimated. At the same time, these factors are exactly the forms of oppression which must be defeated. These movements must find ways to deal with these issues politically and organizationally. Who will defeat these forms of oppression and how? If the liberation of oppressed people must be carried out by oppressed people then the tasks of liberation remain in the hands with the people who have the greatest risks. If white supremacy can only be defeated by mass and militant action and not legislation or pithy reforms then the style of struggle is fairly clear as well. What is privilege theory's response to these two fundamental premises? Privilege theory ends up in a dead end.

According to its arguments, the most oppressed should not struggle in the most militant ways because they do not have the privileged access to bail money, good lawyers and not to mention their racial status which will surely guarantee extra punishment. This leaves only one group of people who can possibly resist: those with a set of privileges who have access to lawyers, have the spare time to struggle, etc. This is in sharp contrast to the revolutionary tradition which has argued that the defeat of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism etc are the responsibilities of billions of oppressed people. This is exactly the group of people Privilege theory tends claims has so much to risk.

No doubt huge gaps exist in speaking, writing, confidence etc amongst movement activists based on race, class, and gender. Privilege theorists are at the forefront of acknowledging this reality. However, where the task is to make sure that everyone in the movement has roughly the same skills, privilege theorists are rarely clear on how to address this, other than reminding the privileged of their privilege. Privilege theorists so far have not demonstrated how this can be dealt with.

Privilege theory in a partially correct way grasps that people of color do not participate in many of the militant actions precisely because they face greater risk of arrest and more punishment. But instead of finding ways to get around this problem, privilege theorists fetishize this problem into a practice of demobilization and reformism.

Lastly, Privilege theory has no response to the rich history of oppressed people who struggled in the past. In Privilege theories on words, these were some of the most under-privileged humans and yet their theories and actions were at the front of militancy and revolutionary politics. What makes the situation any different today is not clear.

Lack of Politics

Privilege theory de-politicizes most discussion from their most revolutionary potentials. Privilege theory has no political program other than

psychology and tactics flow from its racial and class foundation, behaving according to clearly identifiable trends and social laws. Fundamentally, we tolerate this movement's mistakes toward us – its subtle oppression of us – because we have no independent movement of our own.

As Marx put it in the 18th Brumaire, “Him whom we must convince we recognize as the master of the situation.” White domination of the anti-capitalist movement’s racial discourse and organizational behaviour is a direct and unavoidable product of White domination of the capitalist social, economic, and political framework. It can only be combated by developing independent sites of economic, political, and cultural power – by rebuilding our own movements, and revolutionizing our existing cultural institutions and racialized workplace associations – where we may articulate our viewpoints without interference. Naturally it is true that race is a social construct invented by the capitalist class to create a social base for itself and forestall working-class revolution. But as comrade Will already understands, long decades of experience should have taught us by now that we do not convince our professed allies in struggle by talking, nor do we gain equality by letting things slide in the name of “unity”: we maintain our dignity by holding power.

In a comradely spirit, therefore, I'll be critiquing Will from this perspective. He's on the right track, but what he says contains a lot more than meets the eye.

First and foremost is this fact: as Will points out, “conversation cannot solve...racialized experiences; only the most militant and violent struggle can cleanse racialized human relations. The United States has not experienced high levels of struggles in over 50 years. Major problems develop because of the lack of militant struggle in the country.” (Canada has not yet had its major racial confrontation, but with the development of the First Nations struggle and the building tension in its urban ghettos, that day of reckoning is coming very soon. I'm not speaking alone in this; I'm practically quoting from recent articles in the *Toronto Star*.)

Fanon was perhaps a famous foundation-stone of “anti-oppression” or “privilege” theorizing, but his work did not emerge from a vacuum and is not without historical parallel. The psychological traits of the racially oppressed that Fanon describes are present in the fiction of Richard Wright and the polemics of CLR James, predating Fanon's earliest work by over a decade. These, in turn, are based in earlier writings by revolutionaries of all kinds.

The present theoretical and organizational impasse in the movement, which is increasingly recognized by all but only addressed by a few (based on what I've seen, I'd put West Coast Occupy organizers in the latter category), is not as simple as a crisis of ideas. The ideas are already there in books for everyone to read; they interpreted a social situation very similar to our own.

BE CAREFUL WITH EACH OTHER, SO WE CAN BE DANGEROUS TOGETHER

By Invisible Man
March 15th, 2012

Comrade Will's piece "Privilege Politics is Reformism," for the Black Orchid Collective blog, is a timely and valuable contribution to understanding how the revolutionary movement of the early 21st century will develop. In essence, what he tries to do is to identify the dynamics of racial oppression within the Occupy movement and identify some tentative ways forward. I fully agree with his premises, but wish to carry them to their logical conclusion.

Will's understanding of how race politics shapes everything in political, social, and organizational relief is a breath of fresh air that's been a long time coming in this movement; but the problems he identifies are not new. Rather, the importance of "Privilege Politics is Reformism" is that it brings the debate back to where it belongs: undoing the reverse political-correctness that has marked non-White contributions to racial debate. I will be frank about my meaning. Far too often, we cut our White allies slack because they are our allies, while at the same time making token, ineffective, and useless complaints about their unconsciously (or consciously) racist attitudes. We tolerate their mistakes because they are "good people" and because we don't want to be perceived as too extreme.

What this really means is that we've been content to work within the racist dynamic of a movement that is White and middle-class to its core. Its outlook is alien to our lived experience. Not only are we not culturally or physically White and thus have had different life experiences; but we are also less likely to hold middle-class occupations because our opportunities in the workforce are circumscribed by racism. It should come as no surprise that the movement we've worked so hard to build has no place for us.

For all its professed ideological diversity, "the movement's" dominant outlook and perspectives belong to a very specific social group which paradoxically sees itself as a mere aggregation of "free individuals." We, the racialized, are perpetual outsiders, exotic curiosities, constant irritants who never quite fit into this movement's prescriptions. (White workers, for all the problems we have with them, can't relate to this social group either. They think these people are weirdos who need to get real jobs. North American "revolutionary" organizations, of whatever stripe, can usually be identified by their lack of appeal to actual workers, of whatever racial status. That should tell us something.)

We plead from the margins for White militants to play fair, be nice, and stop acting like idiots, while neither they nor we acknowledge that this movement's

a sociological analysis of who is more likely to be imprisoned, shot, or beaten in protests, strikes, and rebellions.

The past struggles have been over communism, anarchism, nationalism, Maoism, anti-colonialism, African socialism etc. These struggles have fought for the defeat of capitalism, the state, patriarchy, white supremacy, and homophobia (or at least they should have fought for all their defeats if they failed to do so in actuality). The point is that the greatest struggles of the oppressed rallied around mass struggle, militancy, and revolutionary theory. Privilege theory de-centers all three.

In the United States, generations of militants, since the defeat of the 1968 current, have developed with little revolutionary theory and organization, and even less experience in mass struggle. This has meant extremely underdeveloped politics. And at the university setting, where political theory resides, it has been generally dominated by middle class, academic, and reformist tendencies. There is little thinking through of this dynamic in the movement. At its worst, there is a sloppy linkage between any theory—even revolutionary theory—and academia, which only destroys the past tradition of oppressed people who fought so bravely to acquire the freedom to read, theorize strategies of struggle and liberation on revolutionary terms.

Privilege theory is completely divorced from a revolutionary tradition. I have yet to meet Privilege theorists who hold classes on revolutionary politics with unemployed people, with high school drop outs, with undocumented immigrants etc. Privilege theory's fundamental assumption exposes its proponents class background when they claim that theoretical-political knowledge is for people who come from privileged backgrounds. That is true if the only place you develop that knowledge is in universities. Privilege theorists have not built the schools the Communist Party did in the 1930s or the Panthers did in the late 1960s. These were not official universities, but the educational institutions developed by the oppressed for the oppressed.

They claim that to act in militant ways or to theorize is the luxury of the privileged. This actually leaves no solution for freedom for the oppressed. The theory that the oppressed cannot theorize or struggle militantly is the theory of an elite who see the oppressed as helpless and stupid. It is the oppressed who must theorize and must eventually overthrow capitalism. They actually have the power.

Political mistakes as seen by Privilege theory roots in the privileges a given person has. Usually the person is asked to check their privileges as a way to realize whatever political mistake. This obscures political and organizational conversations, instead diverting the conversation into unmeasurable ways of addressing politics. How do we know this person has checked their "privilege"? By what political and organizational means can we hold this person accountable?

The more important tasks are what is the political program, what organizing does the group actually do, are people of color (or any other oppressed group) developed as revolutionaries and through development they too are leaders of the group/ movement.

The Politics of Retreat

Privilege theory has only come to dominate the movement in the last twenty years or so. In the United States the last forty years has been a period of massive retreat in militancy and revolutionary politics. The rise of privilege theory cannot be separated from the devastation of mass movements. It is in this context that privilege theory has risen.

Privilege theorists are a generation who have never known mass and militant struggle. They are a generation who have never seen the masses as described in Frantz Fanon's *Towards the African Revolution*. They have never met an oppressed people who have simply stated, I will either live like a human or die in struggle. I do not know if they have been in rebellions where very oppressed people choose to fight the police and other oppressors risking imprisonment and much worse. Have they seen such a people? Is there any doubt it is only a people who are willing to go this far who have any chance of defeating white supremacy?

Privilege theory thrives off the inactivity of the masses and oppressed. They seek only to remind the masses of its weaknesses. Instead of immortalizing fallen sheroes they only lament of the tragedy of the dead. Perhaps it is better to be beaten and killed in struggle then to die on your knees like so many have in the past 50 years. Who does not live on their knees today? Humiliation by the police, humiliation by the boss, humiliation everywhere we go.

Ironically these privilege theorists who claim to be representatives of the underprivileged tokenize and trivialize the struggles of the past. They name drop past struggles only to argue that the conditions are different today. They fail to recognize that "the conditions are not right for struggle" is an old argument going back hundreds of years constantly reminding the oppressed to delay revolution and mass struggle. Who is willing to tell the oppressed, "the system sees you as a dog. Only when you struggle on the terms of life and death will you achieve humanity." Every fighter in the past has known this. The privilege theorists are afraid to accept from where human freedom comes from.

Every struggle for freedom carries the risk of death imposed on the oppressor or the oppressed. It is a universal reality. There was a time when Harriet Tubman simply told all slaves that. Ironically, she is lionized today, but her life and wisdom have no practical political lesson for revolutionaries other then tokenizing this brave Black woman.

Existential Africana by Lewis Gordon

Fanon and the Crisis of European Man by Lewis Gordon

Fanon's Dialectic of Experience by Ato Sekyi-Oto

Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History by Susan Buck-Morss

Caliban's Reason Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy by Paget Henry

Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre

Black Orpheus by Jean-Paul Sartre

Anti-Semite and Jew by Jean-Paul Sartre

The Colonizer and the Colonized by Albert Memmi

Discourse on Colonialism by Aimé Césaire

I am a Martinican Woman and the White Negress by Mayotte Capecia

White Man, Listen by Richard Wright

Black Boy by Richard Wright

Richard Wright by Hazel Rowley

Stirrings in the Jug by Adolph Reed Jr.

Notes of Native Son by James Baldwin

Baldwin's Collected Essays by James Baldwin

German Ideology by Karl Marx

Grundrisse by Karl Marx

Appendix

Our generation has few older revolutionaries to learn from. Their wisdoms are largely being forgotten as they pass away. For this purpose, I paraphrase a conversation I recently had with an ex-Black Panther. I outlined the basic points of this article and his responses were the following. They are brief, but I believe outline some important questions revolutionaries of our generation should think through. At times there are contradictory pieces of advice, but helpful none the less.

First this Panther was against politics of guilt. The Panther felt that privilege theory created such a situation and people who are guilty are not good revolutionaries. The Panther off handedly also mentioned the politics of guilt are the bedrock of the Catholic Church.

Second, the Panther said that you should just “fuck’ em” when negative racial incidents happen. It is about remembering people who make you feel that way do not deserve your respect and attention—so “fuck’em”. This could also be read as simply having thick skin.

Third, the Panther said that one should not focus on the little things. That the goal of politics is to achieve big things: general strikes, smashing the state, getting rid of the police, ending patriarchy etc. Perhaps the Panther was also saying out organize such people. Make them irrelevant by your organizing skills.

Fourth, the Panther said that there has been a rightward shift in all aspects in the United States for over thirty years. Such interactions are bound to happen. People are a part of this society.

Last, the Panther went on to explain the importance of keeping your dignity. It was not clear why the Panther brought up this point. The Panther said if someone is ignoring you because of your gender, class, or race; clear your throat, or directly go up to them and say, “excuse me, but I believe we have the following things to talk about.” But keeping your dignity seemed important.

The following works influenced the writing of this piece:

Black Skin, White Masks by Frantz Fanon

Towards an African Revolution by Frantz Fanon

Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon

A Dying Colonialism by Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon by David Macey

Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression by Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan

Fanon In Search of the African Revolution by L. Adele Jinadu

Frantz Fanon Colonialism and Alienation by Renate Zahar

I simply state: those who speak of privilege are reformists. Their only task is to remind oppressed people of what it cannot do and what it has to lose. The privilege theorists have not lived in an era of rebellions and revolutions. They are far removed from the days when Black and Brown worker-unemployed militants shook 1968. Such privilege theorists cover their own tracks by hiding behind the risks which the proletariat must take. No doubt, deportation, imprisonment, and certainly death are at stake. Is the price of freedom and human recognition be any else?

When any militant action or militant politics is proposed in a meeting, privilege theorists are the first to stand up and remind those at the meetings that only those with such and such privilege can participate in such and such militant action. That the oppressed has no such luxury in participating in militant actions.

Gone are the days when revolutionaries such as Harriet Tubman simply stated that human live was meant to be lived in freedom or not at all. That existential proclamation of humanity has been lost to fear and political degeneration. Those are the stakes. There is no denying that militancy and revolution are a grave risk for the oppressed. The struggles of the past are littered with corpses and destroyed lives.

If capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, ableism, homo and transphobia can only be destroyed by the most violent, militant, and revolutionary means, what other option then all out struggle do oppressed people have. What say the Privilege theorists? Is there any other strategy? Voting for the Democrats?

My experiences in the POC Space

The People of Color Working Group at Occupy Wall Street in New York City was certainly a testing ground for the effectiveness of Privilege theory. One of the most contentious issues was the question of Queer politics where some members of the working group argued that being Queer had nothing to do with being a person of color. The argument tended then to dissolve in people saying those members did not recognize their straight or male privilege. This ignored the reality that not all straight men of color agreed with the anti-Queer politics put forward, but more importantly that there should be a discussion of program and organization.

In terms of program, the working group could have struggled to put out a document which stated that the POC Working Group is against anti-Queer politics. That seems simple enough. And in fact, if memory serves me correct this was eventually done. However politics must always be enforced or otherwise they are just empty words on a piece of paper.

This brings us to the organizational dimensions of the discussion which as far as I am aware of were never discussed. Once a group of people agree

to something, what are the repercussions when someone violates that set upon agreement? This is a question which has no easy solutions. In a tightly knight organization, the person could be kicked out. But OWS has a very open and fluid organizational structure. Hell, it cannot even be called an organization in sensible way. This poses serious problems. At the same time it seems OWS can ban people from the space as seen in the discussion around the Spokes Council and the decision to ban folks who are violent.

Another problem in the POC Working Group was that few if any people had a revolutionary pedagogy in teaching others about the relationship of Queer oppression to POC oppression. Attempts to address the question were left to accusations that some were not recognizing their straight privilege, or informal discussions with little historical or theoretical discussion of the questions. It simply was not enough to bridge the political differences. The inability to come to terms with such questions seems to have alienated many people, further hampering whatever possibilities of unity in the POC Working Group.

A Concrete Example and a Possible Alternative

There is no denying that if Graduate students from Columbia or NYU demanded that workers at a McDonald's go on strike for the upcoming May 1st meeting it would be a preposterous politics. Grad students at these two institutions have huge autonomy. If they are not teaching or if they have class on May 1st, missing it is going to be of little or no consequence. If they teach, cancelling class is also an option with much less consequences for going on strike. It is absolutely correct that the stakes are different for workers at McDonalds. At best they can request the day off, but that is hardly in the spirit of going on a one day strike. If they do not go into work that day and they were on schedule, they could risk losing their job in an already poor economy.

Privilege theorists would focus on the privilege the Grad Students have which blocks them from recognizing the political or organizational problems. It is almost as if the Privilege theorists are divorced from concretely thinking through the organizational and political tasks required to ultimately have McDonald workers going on a general strike. That is the point of organizing isn't it? So, yes the dangers of going on strike are huge for McDonald workers. How do we make it so that the McDonald workers can enforce their class power on the boss and the company? That is something you never hear the Privilege theorists discuss.

I am not a full expert on the rise of Privilege theory in academia. But one can wonder if people like Peggy McIntosh or Tim Wise have ever had to organize. Obviously many organizers today are major Privilege theorists. Instead of finding militant and political solutions to problems of the most

oppressed, I see them pointing out sociological realities as I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, organizing is not a Grad School sociology class. Organizing means class struggle—with all its different subjectivities—and revolution.

Conclusion

The implications of Privilege theory run much deeper than what has been addressed in this small essay. While they have not been addressed, some of the best readings regarding this are the works of Frantz Fanon. He sharply dealt with the very question of being a human being in light of the color of his skin, in relationship to the anti-colonial struggle, and the desire to forge a common human-bond.

The purpose of this essay has been to challenge the framework of Privilege theory. This theory fails in its ability as a theory of struggle and actual emancipation of oppressed people. In fact, it locks in people in the very categories capitalism assigns them by only focusing on their oppressed category: whether it be Black, woman, Queer, worker or student. It fails to develop actual politics, organizations and strategies of liberation, because it was never meant to do that. Privilege theory is the politics of radical sociology attempting to struggle.

Privilege theory forces serious discussion of revolutionary politics, organization and strategy out. Forms of oppression obviously mean different risks depending on who you are, but what solutions does Privilege theory offer? It is only the revolutionary tradition which offers a way forward so oppressed people, through their own militancy and politics, can destroy all the things which oppress them.