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privileges, wokeness, and identity politics*

Markus Rieger-Ladich

The discussion of privileges is nothing new within educational science. The term 'educational privilege' was already used in the 1960s and 70s to point out how societal elites instrumentalised educational institutions. What is a relatively new phenomenon are the conversations in German-speaking countries about other privileges – such as masculinity, Whiteness and heterosexuality. The term of privilege is being reinterpreted in the context of emancipatory identity politics, and turned into a slogan in political debates. This opens up new possibilities for the pedagogical discourse. The essay does not only try to outline those but to point out the dangers of a conversation about privileges which is dominated by moralisation, and where the much needed social criticism is being pushed into the background.

Keywords: critique, emancipation, identity politics, privilege, wokeness

In April 1977, the Combahee River Collective, an association of Black feminist lesbian women who had gathered in Boston, published a political manifesto. In their *Black Feminist Statement*, they declared their specific social positioning as the starting point of their commitment to their own emancipation. Their specific situation, as people affected by racist as well as by patriarchal structures, might have suggested the cultivating of relationships of solidarity with the two social groups with whom they had shared experiences of discrimination. But the division proved not to be resilient. Worse still, these Black feminist lesbian women were abandoned by both sides; they felt like they had been betrayed *twice*. They could neither trust their Black 'brothers' in the Civil Right Movement to support them in their fight against sexism, nor could they count on the White feminist 'sisters' to be companions in the fight against racism. Thus, as they set out in their statement, "We realise that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us" (Combahee River Collective, 2018, p. 272).

Today, the militant manifesto is considered a key text for emancipatory identity politics (see Alcoff et al., 2006; Feddersen & Gessler, 2021; Susemichel & Kastner, 2020). The authors' collective forced White feminists to react; it called on them to stop closing their eyes to their own entanglement in relations of domination and to finally come to terms with them: "As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, colour, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do" (Combahee River Collective, 2018, p. 276).

Evening Work Sessions

One of the women who felt addressed by the statement was the feminist social scientist Peggy McIntosh. She had moved to Wellesley College, a private college for women not far from Boston, only a few years after the publication of the polemic. Like many other female companions, she had initially rejected the accusation of profiting from racist structures. Eventually, however, she gave way to her doubts and undertook to track down the alleged complicity. In the evenings, after the preparations for the next day were done – homework corrected, seminars prepared – she was drawn to her desk again. When this happened, she was asked by her husband what she was still working on so late. The answer was as succinct as it was perplexing: she was writing down what she had never wanted to know.

This incident took place in the mid-1980s, as McIntosh recounted in an interview in 2020 (McIntosh, 2020). Her look back on that time was devoid of embellishment and heroism and, when asked what followed from the in-depth examination, she explained: "A gruelling period. I realised for the first time that I was living in – and benefiting from – a white knowledge system." Until then, she had attributed the fact that her research proposals were approved far more often than those of her Black colleagues to their special quality. She simply thought she was *better* than her colleagues. That time was over now: "It was and is white people who run the best universities in the country, who sit in all the important key positions. This White system also made me an oppressor, as I had to painfully admit to myself" (McIntosh, 2020, n.p.).

In her nightly reflections, McIntosh came up with more than forty situations in which she benefited from being perceived as White. This list formed the framework of a short working paper that she presented for discussion in both activist and educational contexts. What she had not expected was the overwhelming response with which it was met. The article, only a few pages long, soon passed from hand to hand and was read millions of times. Its impact on social movements and emancipatory identity politics can hardly be overestimated.

One reason for this was the long list of concrete examples she gave. Hardly less important, was the conceptual approach McIntosh chose and the memorable metaphor she introduced in her paper. An early version circulated under the title *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh, 2017). Within this phrase, 'White Privilege', the social scientist drew on a term that originated in the legal sphere (Mohnhaupt & Dölemeyer, 1997/1999) and hardly anyone would have predicted a special career for it. There were sociologists who resorted to the concept of privilege to explore the instrumentalisation of educational institutions, but beyond such specialised discourses, hardly anyone used the legal term at the time. On both sides of the Atlantic, social disputes were orchestrated by social science terms.

Peculiar Blindness

Peggy McIntosh had a keen sense that this term – White privilege – was not only suitable for identifying forms of unlawful favouritism, but also for problematising them. The reason is obvious: the arbitrary and systematic favouring of individuals or social groups blatantly violates the self-image of U.S. society. It is therefore unacceptable if the suspicion that the principle of merit is continually being undermined is substantiated (Sandel, 2021).

The punchline of her contribution was the thesis that those who benefit from the practices of unlawful privilege are mostly unaware of it. To illustrate this point, McIntosh developed the metaphor of the backpack:

> I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on and cash in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks (McIntosh, 2017, p. 29).

Thus, McIntosh put into perspective why individuals or groups of people who benefit from conforming to notions of normality – White, male, middle-class, educated, heterosexual, etc. – usually don't have to make any special displacement efforts at all. Those who belong to the 'dominant society' (Rommelspacher) believe themselves to be *unmarked*; they benefit from embodying the norm and are usually only slightly receptive to the power-shaped negotiation processes.

The privileged are thus aware of the hegemonic struggles that are being waged over the social order but perceive them from a supposedly uninvolved observer position and believe themselves to be neutral observers. McIntosh only came to realise that White, middle-class women occupy a privileged position in a society marked by racism when she began to look at the interplay of different forms of discrimination. She suffered within a patriarchal society that denied women equal access to demanding education, coveted jobs, influential positions and fair pay; she disapproved of everyday sexism – and yet she had been blind to the fact that she simultaneously benefited from racist structures as a White woman.

Looking back at McIntosh's article from today's perspective, it is not so much her reference to the interplay of different axes of power that is surprising, but the fact that the call was formulated at the time by someone who profited from the status quo itself. This must be considered a demanding learning process insofar as the "rulers" do not usually notice "that their world only corresponds to a particular, situated truth" that "a white person is not aware of his whiteness and a heterosexual is not aware of his heterosexuality" (Eribon, 2013, p. 127).

Social Self-Descriptions

In the past, privilege has mostly been made the subject of those who have had their life chances curtailed, who have been denied opportunities for development. Toni Morrison, for example, has written about what it means to grow up as a Black woman in a racist society (Morrison, 2017). The recently deceased author bell hooks exposed classist structures and reminded us that the category of class has lost none of its explosive power even in the present (hooks, 2000). Didier Eribon, in his *Reflections on the gay question,* documented the violent nature of heterosexual orders and analysed the practices of stigmatisation, degradation and exclusion (Eribon, 2013; Eribon, 2004). All of them – and many others like Audre Lorde and Angela Davis, but also Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis, Tove Ditlevsen and Christian Baron – have contributed with their literary testimonies, political analyses and scientific studies (see Spoerhase, 2017; Blome, Lammers & Seidel, 2022; Jaquet, 2023) to making visible the regime of normality that punishes those who are perceived as 'deviant'. In other words, they have treated social self-descriptions as what they actually are – that is, social *self-descriptions*.

However, it would be a strategic mistake to regard these self-descriptions as naked ideology and – after 'disenchanting' them – to put them to rest. This would be fatal because the narratives that

organise the self-thematisation are normatively impregnated. It is not a matter of ideological illusionary work that was invented specifically to conceal the bad present. Sophisticated debates about values, principles and ideals have found expression in political concepts. And this is not only true of the United States, France or the United Kingdom; it also applies to the Federal Republic of Germany. About fifty years ago, on November 5th, 1975, the Federal Constitutional Court dealt with the matter and stated in a judgement: "The democracy of the Basic Law is a democracy that is fundamentally hostile to privileges" (BVerfGE 40 (1976), p. 317).

Now here, too, it depends on a precise reading. The rejection of privileges does not mean that they have been overcome. The ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court articulates a claim, it formulates a self-understanding – and indirectly points out that the existence of privileges can certainly still be expected. It is precisely this agreement that privileges cannot be considered acceptable that can now be used politically. In the light of Hegel's philosophy, the social order is to be measured against its own claims. The 'hostility to privilege' confirmed by the supreme court can become the foil of immanent critique, the motor of a continuous social self-questioning.

This is precisely what can be observed at present. The concept of privilege is increasingly being used beyond legal studies and the sociology of education and is currently conquering more and more new social fields. Its origins lie in research on the education system. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of privilege gained a certain prominence through the work of Ralf Dahrendorf and Pierre Bourdieu. In his widely discussed study *Bildung ist Bürgerrecht (Education is a Civil Right),* Dahrendorf used the legal term to criticise an education system that prizes social origin and shows little interest in opening up to all social groups (see Dahrendorf, 1965). Bourdieu, referring to the French education system, spoke of privilege in a related way: he too castigated the outdated class structures of educational institutions and exposed the practices through which cultural capital is passed on to the next generation (Bourdieu, 2018). Both strongly advocated ending the continued structural discrimination against large groups in society. They plead in favour of establishing procedural forms that guarantee fair competition for credentials and educational titles (Friedmann & Laurison, 2020).

Emancipatory Identity Politics

Owing to the further development of advanced theoretical projects, the critique of the systematic overreaching of social groups is consistently developing new areas. The reception of topics such as *post-structuralism*, *gender studies*, *critical Whiteness studies* as well as *critical race studies* have led to everyday practices being looked at in a new way in the German-speaking world, organisations and institutions being observed for processes of social closure and the production and distribution of scientific knowledge being critically observed. Increasingly, this is happening with recourse to the concept of privilege. As a result, there has already been talk not only of educational privilege, but also of class privilege, of the privilege of being White or of being heterosexual. Privilege proves to be a highly flexible fighting word, which – like few others – is suitable for marking a social grievance and scandalising it in a way that attracts public attention (Kimmel & Ferber, 2017; Rieger-Ladich, 2022).

Today's emancipatory identity politics no longer focus solely on the criticism of the highly unequal distribution of resources and capital, and the widening gap between rich and poor. Its declared goal is a society that not only spells out equality and justice in economic terms, but also takes into account the symbolic dimension – i.e., appreciates the plurality of life plans, gender identities and

forms of desire: “It is not a matter of the majority graciously granting rights to minorities, but of seeing them as equals” (Vogel 2021, p. 100).

When German journalist Mohamed Amjahid presents a book titled *Unter Weißen (Among Whites)* and invites his readers to reflect on their own social positioning and the perks that come with it, this too is done by recourse to the notion of privilege (Amjahid, 2017). Instead of trusting the rhetoric of equal opportunity and meritocracy, Amjahid reminds us that while diversity and plurality adorn the websites of broadcasters, government agencies and companies, and the mission statements of schools, universities and cultural institutions, these noble goals are still awaiting realisation in people’s everyday lives.

The representatives of post-migrant, feminist and queer communities are thus, to a certain extent, looking behind the façade of the terms – and are finally receiving the publicity for their statements that they were denied for a long time. It is striking that the vast majority of those who are now being heard are not so intent upon the ideology-critical demystification of the semantics of participation and sharing but rather are insisting on their realisation.

The discussions about *wokeness*, which are particularly intense at schools and universities, are therefore less about the particular sensitivities of a ‘spoilt generation’ that is wary of exposing itself to the hardships of the labour market than dissenters would like to suggest. Instead, they point to the fact that social relations of dominance are negotiated in educational institutions. Pointedly formulated, their reproach is that: instead of engaging in the redistribution of resources and the energetic dismantling of privileges, instead of working for more equality, justice and diversity, schools and universities turn out to be merely a relay station of contemporary power relations. What is new about this generation is that they are very aware of their entanglements in the dominance games and many no longer want to close their eyes to it. They are concerned with clarifying their own participation in practices of exclusion, shaming and discrimination (Rieger-Goertz & Rieger-Ladich, 2021).

Problematic Admissions of Guilt

The discussion about privilege, however, is currently threatening to take a turn that puts some achievements at risk. This can also be seen in Amjahid’s book, which invites readers to undergo a privilege check. The questions, which range from the danger of becoming a victim of *racial profiling*, to the provision of travel documents, to access to the labour market, are meant to facilitate the awareness of one’s own social positioning, which is particularly weak among people with multiple privileges. However, this invitation to critical self-assurance is paired with a moralisation of the debate. Amjahid uses the example of the “welcome culture” of 2015 to explain the “paternalism trap of the white saviour complex” and asks: “Is it even possible to act properly as a white helper? Doesn’t the blatant privilege gap between the white person who helps and the non-white person who is helped devalue any aid action from the outset?” (Amjahid, 2017, p. 88).

Questions of this kind are currently booming. They can expect to find resonance in student milieus as well as in activist circles. Here, where social conflicts are increasingly being “culturally coded” and social disputes are readily reformulated in terms of recognition theory (Koschorke, 2022, p. 473), where individual attitudes are brought to the fore and questions of material inequality are dominated by discussions about the power of symbolic orders, such questions are met with great receptivity.

As such, it is not that structural contexts, questions of distribution and social relations are so often discussed; nor are the privileges of *others* or their lack of privilege so frequently called into question, but rather one*'s own* privileges. These are usually experienced as individual guilt that needs to be confessed. And of course, not alone, but in front of witnesses, peers and companions.

This practice, reminiscent of the Catholic sacrament of confession, is problematic in several respects. First of all, moralisation favours a narrow view of action theory. Individuals then appear to be primarily responsible for social misery. As holders of privileges, they are symbolically in the dock: they lacked the right attitude; their actions were guided by the wrong motives. The way out can only be found in critical consciousness-raising. What is overlooked is that power relations cannot be overcome through acts of awareness alone. To be sure, reflection on personal scope for action is necessary, as is discussion of individual responsibility, but these alone are *not sufficient.* They must be complemented by the dismantling of institutional discrimination and the critique of those "patterns of thought and representation" that contribute to the stabilisation of ideologies of inequality (Kerner, 2013, p. 290).

It is also noticeable that the privilege check can easily take on the form of a tribunal and thereby degenerate into an elite project. Admitting one's own guilt and demonstrating personal failure *coram publico* is no small matter. Sincere contrition is not enough. Those who are not familiar with the semantic codes, those who lack the necessary eloquence and – even worse – the right attitude, quickly find themselves relegated to the sidelines. This has not escaped Walter Benn Michaels, a literary scholar at the University of Chicago: "True, the only thing educated whites with college degrees like better than apologising for their own racism (the technical term is 'checking privilege') is to accuse uneducated whites without college degrees of being racists" (Michaels, 2021, p. 11). The crucial line of conflict, then, is between those who have university degrees and those who do not. Thus, checking privilege easily turns into its opposite – it becomes a mark of distinction, a stake in the competition for prestige and recognition.

Finally, the fact that the moralising discussion of privileges conceals glaring theoretical deficits and threatens to block the ability to act is hardly less problematic. If the privilege check degenerates into a confession-like ritual, it is politically defused and loses its explosive power. This can be observed at elite universities in the US, where it is sometimes good manners within the *humanities* to name one's own privileged position at the beginning of a seminar discussion. Often, the "self-centred desire to free oneself from guilt" takes the place of "desires for social change" (Lotter, 2019, p. 67).

Checking privileges, however, only leads to the establishment of inequalities and the identification of groups that are being over-advantaged; it does not contribute to overcoming the structures that are responsible for this. This requires sophisticated theoretical work – i.e., the analysis of the complicated interplay of hegemonic discourses, symbolic orders, economic structures, legal provisions, and coagulated patterns of action (Choonara & Prasad, 2020).

Bizarre Arithmetic Games

Peggy McIntosh's much-cited working paper was not narrowly focused on individuals and their actions. From the beginning, she also focused on forms of discrimination that are typical for organisations and institutions. Moreover, she had the epistemic dimension in mind. For example, she called for school teaching materials to be examined to see how population groups are represented and who could expect to see representatives of their own ethnic group portrayed in an

appreciative way. As a lecturer at the Wellesley Center for Women, McIntosh knew that privileges can only be fought successfully if individualisation and moralisation of distributional struggles are avoided, and social conflicts are considered in all their complexity.

It would therefore be worthwhile to revisit the early documents of the critique of privilege. Then the "checking" of privileges would only be the beginning of a political practice that considers the material as well as the symbolic dimension of social conflicts and counters the danger of marginalised groups being played off against each other. New contributions to debates on privilege are certainly hopeful: there is now increasing talk of "unlearning", "redistributing" and "fighting" privilege (Rieger-Ladich, 2022, pp. 144–174).

One of the most interesting voices is that of Black feminist author Roxanne Gay. She not only warns against playing the "privilege police" in the seminar room and meeting others with a super-teacher-like attitude; she also advises against weighing up different forms of discrimination against each other. Instead of indulging in such bizarre arithmetic games, it is much more productive to use one's own privileges in a targeted way: "You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good – to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised" (Gay, 2014, p. 17). If *wokeness* is interpreted in this way, as a process of critical consciousness-raising, it would become a fuel for emancipatory political practice.

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Markus Rieger-Ladich holds the chair for Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education, University of Tübingen. He is currently interested in the analysis and critique of privilege. The focus is on educational privilege, but also on class and gender, whiteness and heteronormativity. First results were published as *Das Privileg. Kampfvokabel und Erkenntnisinstrument* (2022).