The Perils of “Privilege”: Why Injustice Can’t Be Solved by Accusing Others of Advantage

Phoebe Maltz Bovy

(review by Wendy Elisheva Somerson
illustration by Aimee Flom)

Just one day after the recent Ghost Ship fire in an Oakland warehouse that killed 36 people, an acquaintance who lives in the Bay Area posted on Facebook that she was disappointed about how much money was being raised for the survivors of the fire when no money had been raised for families of people who died on the streets that same week. We didn’t even know the names of those who had died in the fire at that point, but she was already pointing out the “privilege” surrounding this tragedy that made it worthy of our money and attention. While it’s certainly worth noticing whose deaths matter in our culture, I wondered whose privilege was being called out—those who died in the fire? The insensitive timing and “more-radical-than-thou” tone of this post exemplify the dangers of critiquing privilege as an end in and of itself as Phoebe Maltz Bovy points out in her new book, The Perils of “Privilege.” She makes a compelling argument that many of us on the left end up using accusations of “privilege” to discredit, silence, and tear each other down.

Maltz Bovy traces the concept of privilege back to Women’s Studies professor Peggy McIntosh’s well-known 1988 essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in which she used the metaphor of the invisible “knapsack” of white privilege to describe the unearned advantages some of us accrue because of systemic inequality—in this case structural racism. According to McIntosh, becoming aware of our privilege is the first step on the road to challenging structural oppression, but Maltz Bovy argues that privilege accusations currently function as part of a destructive culture of calling people out, which is particularly prevalent in social media. Once we accuse someone of unacknowledged privilege, Maltz

RATINGS:

❤❤❤ Buy it
❤❤ Borrow from a friend
❤ Skim it
❤ Skip it
Bovy argues, we turn the conversation away from larger issues of inequality into a critique of that person’s individual inner life.

Maltz Bovy creates a compelling argument about the damaging potential of privilege accusations, especially on social media and in critiques of popular culture, but I disagree with her overarching argument that we should toss out the very concept of privilege because it stigmatizes good luck, reinforces existing inequalities, and distracts us from taking action. Instead, her examples of privilege accusations gone wrong demonstrate that we need a more nuanced understanding of privilege as a shifting and contextual category.

For example, Maltz Bovy devotes a chapter to what she calls “Bizarre Privilege” wherein she challenges the usefulness of the terms “Jewish privilege” and “Asian privilege.” Her point is that calling Jews and Asians privileged causes harm by reinforcing anti-Semitic tropes that all Jews are rich and powerful and racist tropes that all Asians are model minorities. However, she overlooks the fact that most of us occupy positions of both privilege and oppression, which shift depending on the context. Jews are vulnerable to rising anti-Semitism, but in the context of Israel/Palestine, Jewish voices are often privileged over Palestinian voices. Asian Americans experience racism but may also experience privilege in a context where anti-Black racism positions them as less threatening than Black folks.

Her strongest chapter, “Problematic Fave,” which demonstrates the way the privilege critique flattens our approaches to mass culture, illustrates this need for a more nuanced approach to cultural criticism about privilege. Maltz Bovy points out that when we look at mass media through the privilege lens, “the question ceases to be whether a work is good, new, interesting, enlightening,” but becomes instead “one of how it falls according to various preordained privilege categories.” While I don’t agree with her defense of various films (for instance, I do think we needed to critique the whitewashing of Stonewall), she is right that the privilege critique “tends to fall with the heaviest thud on artists and works with a progressive mission.” I agree with her thinking that we end up being much harder on work that addresses issues of inequity and we tend to spare cultural work, especially by and about white men, which reinforces the same old same old.

This seems particularly apt when I think about how many people dismiss the ground-breaking show Transparent because its characters are “privileged,” as though they simply can’t relate to the mostly Jewish, trans, queer, and genderqueer characters because they are wealthy. It’s far less common to hear people saying they can’t relate to the characters on a show such as Nashville, who also appear to be quite wealthy, but perhaps that’s because Transparent purports to take on issues of transphobia, gender, feminism, Jewish historical trauma, and queer politics. The closer we get to representations of ourselves as people who have previously been marginalized or invisibilized by mass culture, the harsher we are in our critiques. I certainly don’t love everything about Transparent, but I wonder if we can acknowledge that many of the characters have class privilege and still appreciate other aspects of the show? Or might we consider that there’s an artistic choice in making the wealthy characters oblivious to their own class privileges?

Maltz Bovy succeeds in exposing some of the hypocritical and destructive tendencies around privilege accusations on the Left, even as she puts too much weight on the concept of privilege when she concludes that the only question worth asking about it is “Has it helped? Has the introduction of this framework brought about a more just society?” The concept of privilege by itself was never intended to single handedly bring about justice; it is simply one piece of a much bigger puzzle of social activism. Maltz Bovy’s conclusion that we should abandon the concept ignores the many social justice movements that have leveraged privilege awareness to move in the direction of justice.

Two immediate examples include Resource Generation, which mobilizes young people with wealth and class privilege to work toward an equitable distribution of money and resources, and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), which organizes white people to work against structural racism. Both organizations rely on their members first acknowledging class and race privilege, but they don’t get stuck there. Resource Generation is actively working to redistribute wealth through tax justice organizing, philanthropy, and funding social justice projects; SURJ is promoting direct actions, education, and conversations that challenge white supremacy.

Maltz Bovy insightfully describes how we turn against each other and engage in contests over who appears to be the most (or least) privileged, but she incorrectly identifies the fundamental issue as the term “privilege” itself. The source of the problem is actually capitalism, which encourages us to get bogged down in attacking each other’s identities so that we never challenge the very system that perpetuates inequity. The way out of this quagmire is not to abandon the concept of privilege but to stop using it as a silencing technique and start using our privileges to fight for a more just world. — W.E.S.

Rating: ❤❤

The Crunk Feminist Collection

edited by Brittny C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn
(The Feminist Press at CUNY)

The Crunk Feminist Collection is a printed best-of anthology of the Crunk Feminist Collective’s blog that also operates as a guidebook for navigating how to care for yourself, your sisters, and world more or less in that order. The Crunk Feminist Collective defines itself as brown-skinned girls “writing and riding for freedom...rooted in the foundational texts of Black feminism.” As such, the collective has led the charge online for intersectionality that includes hip hop generation feminists who don’t bifurcate their identities to appease either white feminists or Black men wedded to the privileges of patriarchy or respectability politics. The main contributors to the site and the book are also the editors of this collection: Crunk academics and writers Brittny Cooper, Susana Morris and Robin Boylorn, but they include the voices of others in this collection as well.

This collection expands their universe of Crunk feminists from the hip hop generation to anyone who can relate to their adventures (or misadventures) in daily life, whether that’s the challenge of finding a partner secure enough to date a woman with a doctorate or the alienation of being the only woman of color in the room. Moving real feminist talk from the ephemeral, attention-span—deprived internet to the take-your-time space of the printed page is not an easy feat or translation. But in this anthology, the risk yields great rewards in a book that centers young Black feminists without excluding their elders.

There is welcome candor about the necessary work that needs to be done to help