

ANDREW J. PIERCE



**BEYOND WHITE
PRIVILEGE**

**How the Politics of Privilege
Hijacked Anti-Racism**

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN RACE AND ETHNICITY



“In a moment when public discussions of antiracism are more salient than ever before, Pierce offers a rigorous and poignant philosophical clarification of what racial equality entails and demands. Masterfully blending historical evidence with normative critique, Pierce identifies the limitations of liberal antiracism, centered on privilege-talk, and defends a capacious vision based in “interest convergence,” that highlights racial and economic justice.”

– **Alex Zamalin**, Rutgers University, author of *Antiracism: An Introduction*.

“This book is a must read for educators at all levels, especially for those teaching the topic of racial inequality. Pierce shows how merely asking white students to acknowledge their racial privilege is inadequate, and offers the kind of new approach needed for a nation increasingly roiled by racial division and injustice.”

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BEYOND WHITE PRIVILEGE

In the world of academic anti-racism, the idea of white privilege has become the dominant paradigm for understanding racial inequality. Its roots can be traced to radical critiques of racial capitalism, however its contemporary employment tends to be class-blind, ignoring the rifts that separate educated, socially mobile elites from struggling working-class communities.

How did this come to be? *Beyond White Privilege* traces the path by which an idea with radical potential got ‘hijacked’ by a liberal anti-racism that sees individual prejudice as racism’s primary manifestation, and white moral transformation as its appropriate remedy. This ‘politics of privilege’ proves woefully inadequate to the enduring forms of racial and economic injustice shaping the world today. For educated white elites, privilege recognition has become a ritual of purification distinguishing them from their working-class counterparts. For the white working class, whose privileges have eroded, but not disappeared, the politics of privilege often looks like class scapegoating – a process that has helped to drive increasing numbers of alienated whites into the arms of white nationalist movements.

This book offers an alternative path: an ‘interest convergence’ approach that recaptures the radical potential of white privilege discourse by emphasizing converging, cross-racial interests – in education, housing, climate justice, and others – that reveal that the ‘racial bribe’ of whiteness is ultimately contrary to the interests of working-class whites. It will therefore appeal to readers across the social sciences and humanities with interests in issues of racial inequality and social justice.

Andrew J. Pierce is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Director of Justice Studies at Saint Mary’s College in Notre Dame, IN. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Loyola University Chicago, specializing in social and political philosophy broadly conceived, with interests in critical theory and the philosophy of race. He is the author of several articles in these areas, as well as the book *Collective Identity, Oppression, and the Right to Self-Ascription*.

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Beyond White Privilege:

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INTRODUCTION

The Walk of Shame

Picture a typical classroom. The desks have been dragged away, leaving only the twenty-by-twenty-foot space, filled with about twenty college students standing in a side-by-side line stretching from one wall to another. The students are a diverse group, roughly half from a two-year college in a mid-sized Rust Belt city, the other half from a selective liberal arts college in the same region. Both groups are racially diverse, though the two-year college students tend to be more diverse in age and less economically diverse than the other group. Almost all of them describe themselves as working class. The liberal arts students include a couple of international students. Both groups include several first- and second-generation immigrants, mostly from Central America.

The line of students divides the front and back half of the room, like an equator. Once everyone is settled (a bit anxiously, having not yet received any indication of the purpose of the exercise), the game begins. A facilitator asks the students a number of questions:

If your ancestors were forced to come to the U.S., not by choice, take a step back.

If your relatives or ancestors' land was forcibly made part of the U.S., take a step back.

If you had a parent who inherited wealth, take a step forward.

If at least one parent earned a master's or Ph.D., take a step forward.

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The questions continue, becoming increasingly personal:

If you've ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food, step back.

If you were raised in a two-parent household, step forward.

If you were ever afraid or were the victim of violence because of your race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, step back.

At this point, the facilitator notices some students becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Their slight, unconscious bodily movements, followed by hesitation to move in one direction or the other, lead the instructor to suspect that some of them may be withholding painful personal experiences. Still, a pattern is emerging, with most students of color, along with a disproportionate number of the two-year college students, falling toward the back of the room, and most of the white students moving toward the front.

A few more questions move beyond personal experience to solicit judgments about American culture:

If your school textbooks positively reflected your racial or ethnic identity, step forward.

If you saw your racial or ethnic group portrayed in degrading roles on television, step back.

After a few more questions of this nature, it becomes clear that the facilitator should have chosen a bigger room. The white students at the front of the classroom have run out of space to move forward, taking small, uncomfortable steps in response to questions that apply to them. They take advantage of the exercise's geography to avoid looking backward at their less advantaged classmates.

Similarly, the mostly Black and brown students at the rear of the classroom have found themselves with their backs pressed firmly against the wall.¹ Yet they can clearly see the patterns that have emerged in front of their eyes. An older Black woman is visibly holding back tears and abruptly leaves the room.

The exercise ends, and now it's time for reflection. The students are reluctant at first, but eventually have much to say. One of the few white students near the back, a corrections officer in a local prison, takes his position in the classroom as evidence that class, rather than race, determines one's place in American society. This prompts one of the few students of color who ended up near the front, a Nigerian-American woman who stepped forward when the group was asked whether they grew up in a home with servants, to admit that she doesn't really understand claims about systemic racism. She suspects that many of the racial inequalities in the U.S. have more to do with the attitudes of Black Americans than with racism and offers her own immigrant family's success as evidence for this view. An expensively dressed Latina

student from the back of the room echoes this view, and two students of color voicing this perspective leads several white students to chime in and agree. One adds that Black people can be racist too, prompting nods of agreement from several other students, including the older Black woman who left the classroom and has returned apologetic and a bit embarrassed. The corrections officer shares some of the colorful racial epithets directed at him by inmates: honkey, cracker, and so on. The facilitator carefully redirects, avoiding any further cataloging of racial slurs, and presses gently but critically on the responses thus far, seeking to push the students' reactions beyond kneejerk and into the rarefied realm of "difficult conversations," the navigation of which might be extolled in tenure files and grant applications.

A Black student near the back has been quiet up to now, but his face reveals a simmering mixture of frustration and sadness, with the exercise itself or the reality it reflects or both. Now he speaks up. Black attitudes, he explains, are not responsible for the fact that the average white family controls nearly ten times the wealth of the average Black family and is twice as likely to own their own home; nor that Black folks are three times as likely to be killed by police compared with whites and five times as likely to be incarcerated; nor that Covid-19 hospitalization and death rates are significantly higher for Black Americans than for white Americans; nor that American schools and neighborhoods continue to be segregated by race half a century after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. This is a student who appears to be acutely aware of the current realities of racial inequality in the U.S., even if his focus on Black–white inequality conceals the experiences of non-Black people of color to some degree.

A purple-haired white student wearing a shirt that reads "abolition is the future" eagerly agrees with the Black student's presentation of these facts, nodding her head vigorously and adding a few more statistics of her own. But beyond this, the introduction of statistics into the conversation sends a chill through the room. The facilitator tries to revive the discussion, reliably, by asking how the exercise made the students feel. The group offers a complex mix of emotions: guilt, sadness, anger, and helplessness. One white student who ended up near the front shares that she feels grateful for everything her parents did to provide her with these unearned advantages.

The facilitator notices that time is running short, and brings the discussion to a close by thanking students for their vulnerability and acknowledging the elusiveness of racial equality while assuring the group that their efforts today represent a step in the right direction.

* * *

Most of us who have been involved in anti-racist work in educational, activist, or other contexts have encountered some version of this exercise, usually called a "privilege walk." I myself have facilitated or participated in close to

a dozen such exercises. The above account is pieced together from a number of real, and in my experience typical, reactions.

There is almost always at least one participant of color who is brought to tears, as the traumas of racial inequality are manifested in a highly visible form. There is always some defensiveness and frequently some anger among white students, who resent the implication of racial privilege and deflect by insisting on the struggles their own ancestors overcame or by redirecting the conversation toward the prejudices of people of color. There are usually a few white students eager to announce their privilege and, to my initial surprise, often one or two who express a kind of gratitude for it, utterly misunderstanding the point of the exercise. There are usually a few class-based exceptions to the pattern of racial inequality that emerges, which can provide another opportunity for deflection though occasionally lead to interesting discussions about the connections between race and class.

The particular distribution of these responses varies by context. The exercise proceeds differently, for example, in a selective liberal arts college in the Northeast compared with a public university in the American South. It also looks different as part of a corporate diversity training program rather than a college course. But in all of these contexts, white strategies of resistance are visible in varying degrees, and the racial trauma of Black and other people of color is instrumentalized for the sake of the presumed growth and learning of white participants.

These flaws, however, are not unique to the design of this particular exercise. Sociologist Leslie Margolin describes similar, if less creative, exercises, including one where facilitators “seat white students in circles ... and ask them to write down how membership in the majority race makes their lives easier, then, one by one, read those privileges out loud to one another and the group as a whole.”² Another exercise has participants rotate among different stations, each containing a number of statements associated with a particular kind of privilege (race privilege, gender privilege, ability privilege, and so on). The participants then attach beads to a string for each description that applies to them, creating a physical representation of their accumulated privileges.

These practices and exercises instantiate a particular approach to anti-racism, an approach I call “privilege politics” (or, in its specifically educational uses, “privilege pedagogy”). At bottom, privilege politics and pedagogy aim to increase awareness of racial inequality by encouraging white people to recognize the various ways that their racial status provides them with unearned advantages relative to people of color. In this respect, it is essentially a theory of racial inequality, well grounded in empirical evidence, as we shall see. But one of the main shortcomings of the approach, as I will strive to demonstrate, is that despite its popularity, privilege politics provides no real path to action or change. That is, it is often unclear what its subjects are supposed to do with their newly unearthed awareness of their privilege. The

purveyors of privilege politics speak of “dismantling,” “betraying,” or “relinquishing” privilege, of using it for good, or simply of working for racial equality, committing to racial justice, and so on. But these vague prescriptions inevitably lack detail, and because the step from privilege awareness to racial justice is often obscure, the recognition of privilege tends to become an end in itself – an exercise in individual moral purification rather than social transformation. As a result, while the exercise often leaves a strong impression on its participants, its effectiveness as a tool for racial justice is extremely limited.

In spite of this ineffectiveness (or perhaps, on a more cynical view, because of it), privilege politics has become widely influential in educational settings, in corporate diversity programming and public relations, in celebrity “activism” and more. The approach has been so successful that in certain domains, the acknowledgement of one’s privilege has effectively become a precondition for engaging in discussions of racial justice, akin, perhaps, to the role of admitting you have a problem in various twelve-step programs. It has also developed an unearned reputation for being a radical or progressive alternative to moderate, liberal approaches to anti-racism, ignoring the enthusiasm with which much of corporate America has adopted its language and rituals.

In fact, by equating anti-racism with white self-reflection and psychological transformation, contemporary privilege politics reveals itself as the descendent of a liberal anti-racism that sees individual prejudice as racism’s primary manifestation, and white moral conversion as its appropriate remedy. Whether or not this was an effective approach to anti-racism in the pre-civil rights era, it is surely inadequate in the present, when racism is more likely to manifest in race-neutral policies and institutions with disparate impact than in prejudice-driven acts of racial discrimination.

Thus, the task of this book is twofold, having both a critical and a constructive component. The critical component presents an indictment of privilege politics, based on both historical and psychological evidence. I argue that, while privilege politics originated in radical analyses of racial capitalism, it is eventually co-opted and neutralized by liberal discourses in a process the philosopher Olufemi Taiwo calls “elite capture.” The result is a sanitized, class-blind concept that fails to understand or effectively challenge racial injustice.

In addition to this historical analysis, I provide a critical analysis grounded in social psychology, one which identifies the ways in which the privilege-based approach flies in the face of powerful cognitive biases and patterns of thinking. Asking white Americans to acknowledge their racial privilege requires them to concede that their successes and accomplishments (and those of their families) are largely the result of luck and unjust favoritism while recognizing that the obstacles and challenges faced by people of color