

The Politics of Privilege: Discrimination, Monopolized Social Rights, and Reform

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This article analyzes three kinds of privilege—roughly, the monopoly or near-monopoly of a prized social good by a group—in terms of the political barriers facing attempts to reform them. Extending previous work, it distinguishes among discrimination privileges, which are zero-sum and relative, benefiting some groups at others’ expense; monopolized social right privileges, involving goods enjoyed only by some that can and should be extended to all; and differential treatment privileges, involving disagreement over whether a good currently monopolized by some should be extended to all or to none. The political barriers to reforming discrimination privilege involve group interest; those to reforming monopolized social rights include privilege, ignorance, cost, priorities, policy uncertainty, and the psychological wage. Differential treatment privilege is complicated. An exercise in applied political realism, this article treats normative categories as political inputs rather than philosophical conclusions and seeks to demonstrate the insights enabled by doing so.

Job applicants whose names on their resumé “sound white” are 50% more likely to receive interviews than those whose names are stereotypically African American (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Residents of “bad” urban neighborhoods live near abandoned buildings and feral animals roaming freely; in better neighborhoods, old buildings are demolished or redeveloped and strays rounded up (Greenberg 1999). In group conversations, men interrupt women more frequently than they do other men and yield the floor more frequently when interrupted by men than by women (Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989).¹

All these might scan as instances of *privilege*, defined for now (more rigorously later) as the monopoly or near-monopoly by a restricted social group over a generally prized social good. And all these instances seem presumptively wrong: few will defend them as fair. Yet, the politics of the three instances—the strategies most likely to yield successful reform, and the kind and intensity of resistance those reforms will likely face—are very different. In the first case, white employees and applicants are likely to deny that the phenomenon even exists and to resist attempts to eradicate it, since reform would directly implicate their own advantages. In the second case, objections to

reform will often focus on costs, priorities, or implementation: people in nice neighborhoods, without defending stray dogs or urban blight or objecting in principle to their removal, will question whether scarce resources are best spent attacking these particular ills or whether a specific program to clear vacant buildings is well designed. In the final case, unlike the second, few will defend the disparity, but disagreement will be fierce over which way to resolve it. Some like a “vigorous” conversational style and would welcome a world in which everyone interrupted everyone freely and without negative consequences; others feel that interruption is rude and that the natural, fair, and equal solution is for all to wait their turn.

This article calls for distinguishing among three different kinds of privilege—*discrimination* privilege, *monopolized social right* privilege, and *differential treatment* privilege—corresponding to the three kinds of privilege in the examples above. Doing so will illuminate (1) that each is associated with a different type of social phenomenon (and the social power or advantage that perpetuates it) and, more crucially, (2) that combatting privilege across the three cases will require three different strategies of political reform.

This three-fold distinction adapts and develops the analysis of McKinnon and Sennet (2017), the most thorough treatment to date of privilege as a general concept (as opposed to works that assimilate privilege to oppression, inequality, etc.).² Discrimination

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¹ These empirical claims, whose generality has been disputed, are used as examples. Nothing here depends on precisely how valid and generalizable these claims were when and where they were made, much less whether the same privileges appear in a particular place today.

² Despite its title, McKinnon and Sennet (2017) is no “survey article”; it deploys dense original argument. Its closest competitor in rigor is Brännmark (2021), which analyzes privilege as an unequal distribution of societal constraints. In my view, however, Brännmark’s framework omits many instances of privilege—especially those involving discrimination, which involve no *constraint* in the usual sense.

privileges correspond to what those authors call “advantage” privileges: these are relative and zero-sum and involve members of some groups enjoying an unjustifiable leg up over others in access to goods that not everyone can enjoy. Monopolized social right privileges correspond to what those authors call “entitlement” privileges: things that everyone ought to have but only some currently enjoy. Finally, differential treatment privileges correspond to what McKinnon and Sennet (2017, 491) call “benefit” privileges: “forms of privilege that aid in promoting human flourishing, and aren’t inherently problematic (as advantage privileges tend to be), but are problematic only if one group has it but another doesn’t.” That some groups are portrayed more positively than others in mass media, to use one of their examples, is clearly unfair, but the proper direction of reform is unclear: we could aim for more positive portrayals of everyone, or no one, or a middle ground.³

My focus differs sharply from McKinnon and Sennet’s. When they discuss the “political” responses to privilege, they mean normative *policy* conclusions regarding how privileges of each kind ought to be altered. I am interested in political differences among the three cases in the more everyday sense of the *politics* involved: the barriers to reform that each kind of privilege systematically tends to embody and the strategies for achieving reform that the nature of these barriers in each case suggests.

Political theory’s contributions to such questions must be hypothetical. Theory cannot claim to capture everything about the world but only to say that *if* a given case of privilege can be properly described as one case or the other, the barriers likely to be present and the strategies that may be deployed will resemble those described here (compare Hobbes [1651] 1994, chapter V). As a rough contrapositive of this, the conceptual classifications will always be tentative: if the posited barriers are absent, perhaps one was wrong about the kind of privilege involved.

When it comes to discrimination privilege, the problem is, essentially, group self-interest: those enjoying

³ While McKinnon and Sennet’s analysis is pathbreaking, their labels seem likely to mislead given current usage. “Advantage,” meant to designate clear cases of discrimination—the authors intend the word comparatively, to designate some enjoying an advantage *over* others—commonly connotes something universally desirable and not particularly zero-sum. One seeks for one’s own children “every possible advantage,” every means towards success, and reformers promise to everyone the “advantages currently enjoyed by the few.” “Entitlement,” which McKinnon and Sennet use to mean something to which everyone is in fact entitled, now mostly means a *false* sense of desert. People have a “sense of entitlement” if they smugly but wrongly think they deserve something for which everyone must struggle, and people are called “entitled” when they have such a sense—not, usually, when something is actually due to them. (Current popular usage roughly corresponds to psychologists’ use of “entitlement” as a personality trait [Campbell et al. 2004].) “Social rights” is a term of art from the welfare state literature (Marshall 1950). But even if that specialized meaning is missed, the everyday meaning seems less misleading than “entitlement.” Finally, “benefit” as a noun is hardly in everyday use at all, except to designate non-wage compensation—not the authors’ intended meaning. I regard my terms as clearer and more descriptive.

relative advantages over others want to keep it. There are three basic ways of overcoming this resistance: (1) by increasing the absolute size of the pie so that loss of a relative advantage hurts less, (2) by illuminating discrimination’s high social costs to as to inspire a large political coalition to prefer common action and generous public services to social division and the politics of relative status, and (3) through coercion, from above (the state) and/or below (social movements).

The main barriers to reforming monopolized social right privilege are *ignorance* of a privilege’s existence or seriousness in a particular case, aversion to the *cost* of extending the monopolized social right to everyone, disagreement about the relative *priority* to be given to extending one monopolized social right as opposed to others, *uncertainty* regarding the effectiveness of policy interventions, and the *psychological wage* whereby monopolized social rights come to be seen as worth less if everyone enjoys them.⁴

Differential treatment privilege, which remains a complicated case, faces two kinds of barriers. The first involves honest disagreement: faced with a clearly unfair situation of privilege in which some groups receive treatment A, while others get B, people differ regarding whether the best solution is to universalize A or B (or something in between). The second results from privilege itself: some, especially in the privileged group, fool themselves into *thinking* that they would prefer to universalize a less forgiving treatment because they have never experienced such treatment themselves. Because these two cases are hard to distinguish, the result is often deep misunderstanding and claims of bad faith.

This article proceeds in seven sections. The first discusses the article’s theoretical approach—political realism—and its implications for the article’s analysis. The second explains the three basic classifications and proposes a list of common privileges that fall under them. The next three explore the three kinds of privilege and the political problems that reforming them entails in each case. The sixth discusses some objections and complications. The concluding section suggests some more general ways in which the distinctions among types of privilege can cast crucial light on political, social, and methodological debates.

POLITICAL REALISM AND NORMATIVE ANALYSIS: POLITICAL CONTEXTUALISM AND NORMATIVE PURCHASE

This article both employs and illustrates the mode of political theory sometimes called political realism. (Classic accounts and surveys include Galston 2010; Geuss 2005; 2008; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Sagar and Sabl 2018; Sleat 2018; Williams 2005.) My treatment is realist in at least three respects.

First, in its *political contextualism*: realists do not regard normative claims as “valid” or “warranted” in

⁴ I mean this list to be fairly comprehensive as a general matter. Obviously, in particular cases, other barriers may be present, e.g., a local shortage of building materials or of trained personnel.

some disembodied sense, as involving arguments that rest solely on other arguments (and ultimately on moral intuitions regarded as universal and reliable guides). Rather, a normative truth is something regarded as valid “now and around here,” as a “product of historical conditions” (Williams 2005, 8, 13). Extreme versions of the claim would render normative claims so deeply particular that we would have to reject theory together and treat ethical judgment as a matter of ineffable wisdom in discrete situations. This article’s stance, like Williams’s, is more moderate. Certain normative claims *are* generally regarded as valid now and around here, such that almost everyone must accept them (or at least pretend to do so), and relatively predictable consequences follow from that. I accordingly take as given—fully acknowledging, without discussing, its social and political history and preconditions—a certain stage of moral and political near-consensus: for example that race and gender discrimination are morally unjustifiable and that certain public services, such as safe streets and decent schools, should be available to all.⁵ (The last section before the conclusion will defend this assumption.) That is, starting from the assumption that most of us, now and around here, will deplore all the privileges discussed here and would favor doing something about them, I will explore how the normative differences among the three kinds affect what might be done and the barriers to doing it.

The second way political realism is deployed in this article is by exploring what might be called *normative purchase*: the way in which normative claims affect political judgments and, through those, political outcomes. The situation discussed in this article—a special case, but one with very wide application—is one in which certain institutions, practices, or states of affairs are *widely regarded as indefensible but persist anyway*. (Many injustices are like this: think of wage theft.) This can be due to power, to self-interest, or to permanent disagreement, among people who are subjectively trying to do the right thing, about where the most acute priority lies, which policy interventions will be most effective, or which of many possible states of affairs should be universally and equally in force. Political realists generally take such considerations to lie at the heart of political theory rather than outside it.

That is: unlike modes of political theory that put forth normative claims and deplore reality’s failure to live up to them, a political realist approach seeks to systematically explore the ways in which normative claims influence the empirical realm. It is therefore interested in inquiries like moral psychology, comparative and historical political culture, the design and deployment of constitutions, political rhetoric, and political ethics in the widest sense (Sabl 2011). In the current case, the purchase of normative claims involves the interplay of moral psychology and strategy. Understanding this

interplay involves asking what those possessing privilege are afraid of losing and what in the currency of interest or status (Mendelberg 2022) they would no longer possess if their privilege were to be successfully challenged. The answer reveals the likely driver of resistance *to* the normative claim. We can then ask either what might lessen this fear or else, to stress a common political realist theme, how (appropriate) political compulsion can overpower resistance without employing dehumanizing rhetoric or tactics or violating liberal constraints on how people may be treated (Sleat 2013; Stears 2007).

The final, related, realist claim is that assertions concerning privilege, like those concerning other normative categories (equality, liberty, justice), play a substantial role in politics but not an overriding and triumphal role. Unlike the crudest forms of Marxism on the one hand and rational choice theory on the other, political realism does not claim that normative argument does not matter in politics or that political analysis can skip past it to study what allegedly really matters, that is, raw power and calculations of interest. Politics takes place through calls to action and disputes about how things should go, not mere grunts or battle-cries. And normative arguments are essential both on the level of practice (affecting what people support or oppose) and that of analysis (understanding who is likely to find a proposal exciting, commonsensical, outrageous, ridiculous, anxiety-provoking, or terrifying, and why). Normative claims, however, occur *as part of politics* and not always the most fundamental part. They do not automatically trump, either empirically or normatively, nonmoral values, for example self-preservation, cost, custom, and the need to keep on living in a diverse society alongside people whose social values one thoroughly despises (Farrelly 2007; Geuss 2005, 14–6; 2008, esp. 99–101; Williams 2005, 12–3). Accordingly, the acts of identifying privilege and distinguishing among kinds of privilege are the start of a political story, not the story itself.

THREE KINDS OF PRIVILEGE: DISCRIMINATION, MONOPOLIZED SOCIAL RIGHTS, AND DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT

Privilege here means an unjustifiable (now and around here) monopoly or near-monopoly of something considered desirable, in a given time and place, by a more or less closed group.⁶ The three kinds of privilege mentioned above correspond to the kind of thing monopolized and whether we think it is something that everyone can and should have.

⁵ How and when practices and states of affairs that were once widely accepted come over time to be criticized and condemned is an endlessly fascinating subject but not that of this article, which aspires to no grand theory of ethical change or moral progress.

⁶ For McKinnon and Sennet (2017, 496), a group has a privilege with respect to something in a given social setting, if and only if (1) that thing is generally desirable in that setting; (2) most outgroup members lack it; (3) group members enjoy it because of how social and political institutions treat their group membership; (4) group members do not in fact deserve the thing simply because of their group membership. This is to summarize the more formal definition on that page.

Discrimination privilege involves having *zero-sum* advantages on the basis of group membership.⁷ These privileges involve scarce goods that not everyone can have (e.g., jobs, slots in demanding education programs). These goods are not, and could not be, recognized social rights: not everyone can have *this* coveted job, enter *this* course of study. More to the point, it would be logically impossible to universalize discrimination *privileges*, since they involve some groups being favored *over others*: not everyone can enjoy “favorable treatment” in hiring or work evaluations. The only way to reform this kind of privilege is to abolish it (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 490).

Monopolized social rights involve things that “every group ought to have” but only “particular groups enjoy.”⁸ The right kind of reform in such cases involves giving to all what is now enjoyed only by some (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 490). In realist fashion, I take this “ought” to mean to mean things that are generally *thought*, now and around here, to be things every group ought to have.⁹ McKinnon and Sennet’s example is marriage. Now and in many places “around here,” it is available to any two unmarried adults, but a few decades ago it was available only to couples whose members had different ascribed genders; such couples thus enjoyed privilege. This example is vivid but, I shall argue, atypical and misleading regarding the political barriers to attacking such privileges.

Differential treatment privileges also involve one group’s enjoying things that are unavailable to those outside the group. They differ from discrimination privileges in not being *zero-sum*; everyone could, in theory, enjoy the desirable thing. They differ from monopolized social right privileges in that the good things involved are not recognized social rights. Examples include being positively mentioned in mass media (already mentioned above) or getting the benefit of the doubt in student course evaluations, generally a privilege enjoyed by men (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 491, 492).¹⁰ As noted, in such cases, the question is not whether a disparity ought to be rectified but which direction the reform should take.

All three types of privilege, along with the idea of privilege generally, are here moralized, normative, all the way down. Something called privilege is always *undeserved*. This largely corresponds to current usage. Privilege is, nowadays, a moral label with negative valence. If something enjoyed exclusively by a group is legitimately enjoyed—for example medical providers’ unique prerogative to practice medicine based on extensive education and training in otherwise dangerous medical and surgical interventions—we do not describe it as “privilege” in the

first place.¹¹ Similarly, while the distinction between discrimination privilege and monopolized social right privilege could conceivably be glossed as value-neutral, based on the logical impossibility of universalizing the former,¹² the distinction between monopolized social right and differential treatment privilege has to do solely with whether, in the moral judgment of most people in society, the good enjoyed by the privileged is something that everyone clearly deserves to have or whether matters are more controversial.

Moralized categories are clearly necessary if one aims at normative judgments about policy. Whether society ought to spend money to provide everyone with healthcare depends on whether access to healthcare seems to us an ordinary consumer good or a social right that everyone ought to enjoy. However, employing political theory as *political* analysis, using it to illuminate how things stand and what strategies are possible, requires treating normative categories in a somewhat second-order way. For political purposes, it matters less how the individual reader of an article or treatise judges things than how people in our society generally—or, drilling down, powerful individuals and groups within society—judge things. That is why I have used categories that describe, at least are intended to describe, *widespread* normative-cum-empirical judgments of this kind. A monopolized social right privilege means, for political purposes, something that is *generally regarded*, now and around here, as something that all deserve to have but not all now enjoy. Discrimination privilege is likewise relative to prevailing moral judgments. Many advantages that members of some groups have over others in a social competition may seem unfair to some social critic, but the politics of privilege depends on whether the assessment of unfairness is widespread (as, e.g., almost no one would now defend job discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity—including those who wittingly or unwittingly practice it).

Table 1 displays a preliminary classification of existing social privileges by type.¹³ Some items are included only as examples to illuminate the concepts; others will be treated more fully later.

Some cases, of course, are hard to classify due to either empirical or normative puzzles. Consider access to high culture. Older literature on opportunity often took for granted that enjoyment of difficult books, fine art, classical music, opera, ballet, and theater (and later, high quality films, TV shows, etc.) was an inherent human good to which all citizens should be given access through excellent education, well-stocked libraries, publicly-funded television and film production *cum* public broadcasting, publicly provided or subsidized museums and performing arts facilities, and so forth (for one of the more recent examples I could find, see Anderson 1993, 149). This is to see high culture as a monopolized social

⁷ McKinnon and Sennet (2017, 489, formal definition on 497) call this “advantage” privilege.

⁸ McKinnon and Sennet (2017, 489, formal definition on 498) call this “entitlement” privilege.

⁹ This implies that under conditions of economic and social progress, some things that once seemed luxuries will come to seem like unjustly monopolized social rights. Under regress, the reverse may obtain.

¹⁰ McKinnon and Sennet (2017, 491, formal definition on 498) call this “benefit” privilege.

¹¹ Most remaining uses of “privilege” in a positive sense are vestigial or formulaic, and at most tangentially relevant to discussions of social privilege. Consider “it is my privilege to introduce [famous person].”

¹² I myself would not find this line of reasoning very useful.

¹³ The list includes some examples used by McKinnon and Sennet but goes well beyond them.

TABLE 1. Types of Privilege and Examples

Discrimination: a relative (some over others) and zero-sum disparity among groups where there is social consensus that no such disparity should exist

Discrimination as conventionally understood: priority access by members of group that has high status with respect to normatively proscribed categories (race, sex, religion, sexuality, etc.) to inherently scarce goods, e.g.:

- Particular jobs
- Limited slots in education/training
- Honors and awards

Monopolized social rights: only members of some group or groups enjoy a social good or level of treatment that (society generally believes) should be enjoyed by all

- Clean air and water (in all neighborhoods and areas)
- Universally available, adequate sewage (including in deprived rural areas).
- Adequate public amenities (parks, libraries, green space, etc.)
- High-quality primary and secondary education
- Good neighborhood quality: e.g., low crime, good street lighting, extensive foot traffic, few indications of urban blight (stray animals, abandoned or unmaintained buildings.)
- Adequate medical and hospital care (and dental/eye care where recognized as social rights)
- Adequate old-age pensions
- (In some places) Marriage rights, equal by sexual orientation and identity, and with no legal or social disadvantage attaching to marriage across racial, ethnic, economic, linguistic, or religious lines
- Other goods recognized, in particular times and places, as due to all members of society, by right.

Differential treatment: unequal treatment of some groups, as compared to others, without a generally accepted normative justification but with uncertainty as to what fair treatment would be or whether a uniform standard is desirable

- “Positive” portrayals in popular culture (and literary/high culture, where socially relevant)
- Epistemic or testimonial privilege: assumed competence or credibility
- Ability to act assertively/forcefully in the workplace, without adverse consequences
- Ability to interrupt others in conversation, without adverse consequences
- Ability to dress casually/ignore formal or implicit dress codes, without adverse consequences
- (At universities):
- Lenient course evaluations from students
- Generally having one’s ideas affirmed as interesting/creative (not relentlessly examined for errors)

right. It is now more common, however, to call such tastes “elitist”¹⁴ and to express skepticism that appreciation of such forms is better for civic or human flourishing than a taste for popular art and culture is. From this perspective, elites’ superior access to costly forms of high culture may scan like a discrimination privilege: if high culture is not intrinsically valuable but serves to perpetuate class distinctions (as in some readings of Bourdieu 1984), it might be better if it faded away altogether. Alternatively, it may seem like no privilege at all, if the ever-shrinking subset of elites who systematically prefer high to popular culture do not actually benefit either themselves or society but on the contrary are “missing out” on what normal people rightly appreciate and oblivious to the democratic culture’s wider conversation.

DISCRIMINATION PRIVILEGE: THE POLITICS OF GROUP SELF-INTEREST

When it comes to discrimination privilege, in which some groups enjoy a relative advantage over others that even the privileged cannot defend, the barrier to reform is simple, though it goes by various names: self-interest, group interest, grudgingness, selfishness, or “collective egotism” (Niebuhr 1932). When it comes to discrimination privileges, there is no question of “leveling up”: to eliminate the privilege will entail the privileged having to give up real—relative—advantages (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 502).¹⁵ We might add: because the privilege is (now) generally regarded as having always been unfair, the formerly privileged are unlikely to be paid compensation. A melancholy corollary, however, is that the most clearly unfair instances of discrimination

¹⁴ The term “elitist” often slips between, and confuses, three different meanings: “currently available only to elites,” “currently or historically used as markers of elite status,” and “not actually worth much except in the opinion of elites.” Depending on which is intended, the claim “high culture is elitist” has very different implications for the analysis of privilege.

¹⁵ Compare James Baldwin in 1968: “If the American Negro, the American black man, is going to become a free person in this country, the people of this country have to *give up* something. If they don’t *give it up*, it will be taken from them” (cited in Ikuta 2022, 453; italics in Ikuta, tracking the original).

privilege will be those *most* resistant to reform, and least likely to yield to a mere normative argument, since—unlike in the case of monopolized social rights below—the privileged have direct and obvious interest-based reasons to mount such resistance.

One could, of course, posit that the privileged will voluntarily give up their privileges, in practice as well as in theory, when faced with moral and rational arguments against them. The evidence for such hypotheses has always been slim. Beyond such wishful nonstrategies, there are three broad strategies of reform when discrimination privilege is at stake: (1) increasing resources so that absolute gains palliate the pain of relative losses; (2) stressing a “solidarity dividend” whereby the political coalition that stands to gain by common action cutting across lines of former privilege swamps the smaller coalition that stands to lose from it; (3) “realist” coercion, whether from the top (state action) or the bottom (social movements).¹⁶ That is, one may strive to *overwhelm* discrimination privilege through growth in resources, *overcome* it through political coalition building, or *overawe* it through coercion—or some combination of the three.

Resource Growth

The first strategy for addressing discrimination privilege involves expanding the overall set of resources so that those suffering a loss of relative advantage are mollified by the achievement, or prospect, of absolute gains. This is the logic of Friedman’s *Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (2005). Friedman’s argument, with plausible empirical evidence, that a growing society is conducive to “openness,” “tolerance,” and so forth can be translated into the proposition that a steady and predictable increase in overall resources allows societies, in effect, to buy off discrimination privileges rather than confronting them.

The advantage of this strategy is that it requires little coordination and conscious effort. A rising tide lifts all boats without anyone having to muster human effort to lift them. The main disadvantage mirrors this. Those who enjoy discrimination privileges never have to come to terms with abandoning them (as opposed to noticing their erosion somewhat less than they would have under lower growth). Meanwhile, those who resented such privileges may never have needed to build a social consensus around ending them. Thus, any gains may be vulnerable to reversal once resources—above all economic output, but also, potentially, technological improvement, easily accessible living space, and so forth—are no longer increasing rapidly.

Solidarity Dividends

The second logic involves the idea that discrimination privilege involves high general costs. In order to maintain their relative position, those enjoying privileged status end up slighting public goods and services—schools, recreation, roads, etc.—that would otherwise

benefit the whole society and whose presence would leave even most of those in the discrimination-privileged group better off in absolute terms. (The privileged are reluctant to fund those goods and services precisely *because* they would benefit the whole society—as opposed to exclusively themselves.) This is the logic of McGhee’s well-known book (2021). She stresses the case of public swimming pools in the United States, especially but not only in the South: after court decisions and federal legislation banned their being segregated, many white residents voted to fill them in rather than sharing them with their Black neighbors. As a result, white Americans who cannot afford private pools—the vast majority—have nowhere to swim in hot summers. Calling the overall payoff from ending discrimination privilege the “solidarity dividend,” McGhee advocates a political movement that would stress such dividends’ existence and reach and that would explicitly highlight how racial division leaves most people worse off.

The advantage of this solution (to go beyond McGhee’s argument) is its durability. Once a supermajority political coalition emerges that prefers widespread overall gains to status inequality based on group selfishness, and that is able to outvote a dwindling minority that still prefers the latter, it may prove extremely resilient in the face of social and economic change—as in the Nordic welfare states that are McGhee’s repeated example of getting things right. The disadvantage is that such a coalition may be extremely difficult to assemble. It may require a degree of consensus on the nature and proper level of public services and a willingness to pay the price of those services—in high taxes and low private consumption—that are much rarer and more elusive than McGhee portrays them as being. There is a reason that Nordic-style welfare states, though often portrayed by social democrats as a kind of natural default condition, are actually uncommon among rich countries and arise only in very specific social, cultural, and political circumstances.

Perhaps for this reason, while McGhee applies her proposed strategy and rhetoric to all kinds of discrimination privilege, without drawing fine distinctions, its logic applies most straightforwardly to what I call below psychological discrimination privileges: monopolized social rights that only *seem* to resist being distributed universally because one group has been convinced, in the absence of physical or objective reasons, that these goods will lose their worth if shared with others. Consider the swimming pool example more closely. In this case, the presence of Black swimmers in (extremely large, uncrowded) pools rendered the tangible good in question, a refreshing swim, essentially no lower in quality than before. The *only* cost to whites was the perceived indignity, even perceived moral contamination, of a swim that was not racially exclusive. In this case, it indeed seems achievable, in a less virulently and explicitly racist age, to convince whites that this (purely psychological, tangibly zero) cost is worth incurring. In addition, whites in the age of segregation had shown with their public policy choices that they already

¹⁶ Compare Huntington (1968, 384f) on land reform.

considered pools a crucial public good in hot summer climates. In other words, they regarded pools as a social right—for whites only, of course—that had high priority and were worth the monetary cost. Most discrimination privileges, however, are not like this. For the privileged group to give them up would make their lives worse, compared to that of the less privileged group, in some tangible way. If competition for the best jobs, housing, and educational opportunities became fair for all, it really would become, comparatively and at least in the short term, fiercer for the privileged.

Coercion

Finally, a third solution involves coercion. The political theorist who most directly addresses the political problem of overcoming unfair status advantages—what are here called discrimination privileges—is probably Niebuhr, who made this problem the central topic of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Niebuhr, whose position came to be called “Christian realism,” argues forcefully that groups will almost never give up their privileges voluntarily. Although individual persons have the capacity for good, when humans constitute privileged groups, they are bound to practice “group egotism” and will fight ferociously to keep their relative advantage. The only remedy, therefore, is coercion. Niebuhr considers seriously, before ultimately rejecting, two forms of coercion that were more salient in his age than today: communist revolution, which he judges both more unlikely in industrialized societies and more morally and politically fraught than radicals in his time admitted; and “evolutionary and parliamentary socialism,” which he assesses as too tricky to bring off in terms of both policy and political coalition-building. He prefers the path of Gandhian nonviolence, which he considers coercive but morally disciplined, suited to eventually reconciling the coerced with their opponents as open violence is unlikely to do (cf. Mantena 2012).

The problem with this solution is that it works best when those engaging in nonviolence are an immense majority and their adversaries have an easy road out of discrimination privilege into relative comfort—in the case of the British in India, by simply leaving and returning to the metropole. While Niebuhr’s work, not to mention Gandhi’s, deeply influenced Martin Luther King, nonviolence arguably stopped working well once the question turned from swimming-pool type discrimination (social segregation) to discrimination that had more pervasive and tangible effects and involved real costs (housing, education). When the disadvantaged group is a permanent minority and a jarring but relatively painless solution such as settler withdrawal is not available, we might not expect sustained campaigns of nonviolence to work all that well.

These approaches all take one observation seriously: that discrimination privilege has real beneficiaries who will resist reform out of a *tangible interest* in their relative advantage. In this respect, the case of discrimination differs in kind from that of monopolized social rights. The common saying, “to those accustomed to

privilege, equality feels like oppression,” applies to discrimination privilege but not to monopolized social rights. When it comes to the latter, equality mostly just feels expensive.

MONOPOLIZED SOCIAL RIGHTS: RESOURCE COSTS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WAGES

When a good is perceived as a social right, the politics of reform would *seem* relatively easy. The normative payoff seems clear, and the currently privileged have no direct interest in preventing others from enjoying the nice things they enjoy, since that change will not lessen their own enjoyment. Marriage equality is probably the most salient approximation of this logic working as just described—and hence may strictly lie beyond this article’s scope, since reform, unusually, occurred in relatively short order as soon as heterosexuals’ unfair privilege was noted. Over the past generation or so, public opinion on same-sex marriage has changed from clear majority opposition to supermajority support at blinding speed compared to opinion shifts on other controversial issues (Garretson 2018, chapter 1). Nor has progress on gay and lesbian rights issues given rise to public-opinion backlash among the mass electorate (Bishin et al. 2021), though those who do oppose change have become newly vocal and very well organized. The current analysis helps explain these findings. Progress on the most salient gay and lesbian rights issues, for example same-sex marriage and nondiscrimination laws, has been relatively steady—this does not mean easy!—because resistance to reform derived solely from prejudice and learned disgust. It did not reflect any tangible and material interest of the previously privileged, that is, cis-heterosexuals, who stood to lose very little from equality.¹⁷ (That progress might affect straight people psychically or in terms of cultural status I concede: that is, an instance of a psychological wage covered below.)

If things were always this easy, however, monopolized social right privilege would always be short-lived. As soon as most people came to think that restricting a good to a group was morally wrong, the same majority would support ending those restrictions and extending those goods universally—and those who once monopolized them, having little to lose by this extension, would acquiesce. There are five main reasons that this does not happen: (1) ignorance, (2) cost, (3) disagreement on priorities, (4) policy complexity, and (5) the “psychological wage” whereby things that could be made universally available as social rights come to seem *as if* they were zero-sum discrimination privileges, that is, come to seem like goods that cannot be made

¹⁷ For the same reason, Bishin et al.’s larger claim that fears of backlash in response to social change are *generally* overblown (see 192f) seems too quick. It may well depend greatly on what kind of change is at stake, that is, what kind of privilege is endangered.

universally available because sharing them would destroy their value. Treating these in order:

(1) Unlike in the case of same-sex marriage, those monopolizing social rights may be *ignorant* of the extent that they do monopolize them in the particular case at hand. While perhaps not literally imagining that everyone enjoys the nice things they have, they may be aware that others have less while lacking a vivid picture of “how the other half lives,” what it would be like not to enjoy what they take for granted.¹⁸

To take a somewhat different case, ignorance may take the shape of an ideology whereby one does not consider members of an excluded group the kind of people to which the monopolized right might *possibly* be extended. A monopoly of something does not feel like monopoly to those convinced that the only people who can enjoy that thing are, by definition or the nature of things, those like themselves. Take those who have opposed marriage equality on the grounds that a real, genuine marriage is necessarily between a man and a woman. They have not considered straight people’s monopoly of marriage to be an (unfair) privilege since they have believed that all those capable of real marriage already had access to it. Marriage by same-sex couples has seemed to them something different from “real” marriage. The question of extending local voting rights to noncitizens is similar and perhaps more illuminating for being less palpably offensive. While some opponents of such extension make a reasoned case, arguing (for instance) from the superior civic commitment demonstrated by the act of seeking citizenship, others simply assert, mistakenly, that voting is, necessarily or conceptually, something that only citizens do.

(2) It is not the case, however—as those who study ignorance among the privileged sometimes imply—that lack of action on monopolized social rights always or only reflects ignorance (as if it would be “impossible” for the privileged to justify, or practice, inaction if not for willful ignorance).¹⁹ A second reason for inaction is *cost*. Most monopolized social rights differ greatly from same-sex marriage in that providing them universally would involve substantial tangible costs in terms of money or other scarce goods (e.g., time, land). To the extent that privileged groups alone enjoy unfettered access to smooth roads, safe and well-lit streets, excellent hospitals, well-maintained parks, unpolluted air and water, and so forth, extending to everyone the quality of public services²⁰ to which those groups are

accustomed would cost a great deal. It therefore meets opposition not because the privileged resent others having what they have in principle but because they do not want to pay the cost of leveling things out—even if, in at least some cases, they would benefit in the long run from it. As V.O. Key put it in 1949, using the respectful racial label for the time:

Sustained effort to improve the Negro’s economic and political status costs money, and upper-class southerners, like upper-class nonsoutherners, dislike to part with cash, although the only possible long-run outcome of increasing the productivity of the Negro would be to make rich whites richer and more whites rich. The almost overwhelming temptation, especially in areas with many Negroes, is to take advantage of the short-run opportunity to maintain the status quo by using, or tolerating the use of, the race issue to blot up the discontents of the lesser whites (Key 1949, 662).

Cost concerns may even drive those whose currently *lack* certain privileges but pay taxes. With full knowledge (though contestable judgment), they may prefer less adequate public services to higher taxes because while gaining the social right would stand to benefit them more than it benefits those who already enjoy it, even the slight cost to them in higher taxes would also hurt more.

(3) Even taxpayers willing to pay quite a bit for leveling up currently monopolized social rights may differ in their *priorities* as to which public services are most important. Most people believe that everyone should enjoy adequate street lighting, decent schools, clean air and water, and prompt renovation or demolition of abandoned buildings near them and admit that some lack these things. Reasonable people disagree, however, on which of these problems should be tackled first.²¹ Sometimes, though not always, these disagreements track predictable lines of self-interest. Those who lack a direct interest in a social right (e.g., the elderly or childless with respect to schools) give its status as a social right only theoretical affirmation while opposing moves to devote resources to it.

That people differ in their *relative* preference for what are uncontroversially considered social rights—public services that all should enjoy—is the subject of a whole economic theory, with substantial empirical support, positing that people move residence so as to find a

¹⁸ Discrimination privilege has a mutually reinforcing relationship with a *different* kind of ignorance: not mere cluelessness, the ignorance of the privileged regarding others’ living conditions, but a deeper, more or less willed ignorance by those who benefit from current or past discrimination regarding why they keep succeeding to a greater degree than those in the outgroup: an ignorance of long histories of mistreatment and the accumulated advantages and disadvantages that go with them (Mills 2017).

¹⁹ Here Ikuta’s (2022) argument seems correct, though much of her analysis applies more to the kind of ignorance that maintains discrimination privilege (see the previous note) rather than monopolized social rights.

²⁰ “Public services” is more accurate than “public goods.” The hallmark of a monopolized social right is precisely that the good involved

is *excludable*: it is possible for some to enjoy it while others do not. “Clean air,” for instance, is often glossed as a public good that necessarily accrues to everyone or no one. But as the environmental justice movement has argued, that is often not the case: some live far closer than others to air pollution sources and suffer more. Similarly, clean water is very much excludable—even if the reservoirs and water works are common—if some neighborhoods are further than others from polluted canals or have newer pipes leading from water mains to their homes. In reality, there may be few genuine public goods except for national defense. Even then, residents of border zones may bear higher risks from foreign invasion.

²¹ Public safety involves special problems. No one defends high levels of street crime, but its causes and solutions are the subject of fervent, and famously ideological, disagreement.

city or town that prioritizes the same public services that they do (Tiebout 1956). Problems of cost and prioritization imply that we would always have *some* monopolized social right privileges even where ignorance did not play a large role. Eliminating all monopolized social rights would require perfect consensus on who should pay how much to fund all public services, at which location, and at what precise level.

(4) *Policy uncertainty* provides another source of resistance. Not all social rights involve mere redistribution. Some necessarily require collective policy decisions on which informed opinion is divided regarding the best course to take. There are, of course, forms of this worry that constitute excuses, masking a desire to avoid higher taxes (cost) or to confront a “distant” problem (ignorance). But public services also involve real, unavoidable complexities: for example where to build roads or transit alternatives to roads, which water sources to tap and how to hedge against flooding, how to trade affordable housing’s price against its quality and the time needed to build it. This is not even to mention policy areas in which everyone thinks a service should be universally “adequate,” but ideology yields sharp disagreements as to what adequacy entails (e.g., regarding education or child care). In all these areas, coordination problems, limits in knowledge, and granular value differences lead many to sincerely support taking some action while opposing the concrete one currently proposed.

(5) Finally, there is what Du Bois ([1935] 1992, 700, emphasis added) called the “public and *psychological wage*” whereby some—or many—among the privileged may draw intense gratification from feelings of superiority to those who lack something that they have. For current purposes, admittedly oversimplifying Du Bois’s sociologically sophisticated treatment, the relevant effect of such a “wage” is that it induces the privileged to regard a monopolized social right privilege *as if it were* a discrimination privilege. The privileged come to feel that goods that could be made available to everyone can only be savored to the extent that they are monopolized by people like themselves, placing their own group above others.²² One might call this *psychological discrimination privilege* to emphasize how it is persistent but also subjective. The privileged, in such

cases, perceive it as necessary to hold on to a good whose enjoyment only seems zero-sum but could in fact be made a universally enjoyed social right. Politically speaking, such privileges may operate much as discrimination privileges do, until they do not. A sudden *Gestalt* switch, driven by political and social change, may cause them to be seen as the monopolized social right privileges, fully capable of being more widely extended, that they really were all along.

DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT PRIVILEGE: DISAGREEMENT AND DISTRUST

As noted above, differential treatment privilege exists when general consensus on the unfairness of a privilege coexists with fierce disagreement over whether what is now the privilege of some should be given to everyone, to no one, or something in between. In one sense, this uncertainty makes this kind of privilege seem “between” monopolized social right privilege and discrimination privilege (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 491). But the *politics* deriving from the fact that the remedy could go either way is not a stable or moderate middle but a contentious either-or. Differential treatment privileges give rise to disputes that track both cultural values and prepolitical, personality-based preferences. And in the face of such disputes, these kind of privileges may go unaddressed because each of several groups that deplore them may prefer the unfair status quo to a reform in what they take to be the wrong direction.

Start with McKinnon and Sennet’s main examples of this kind of privilege: (1) among university instructors, men do better than equally qualified women on course evaluations; (2) whites in majority-white societies are more likely than people of color to be positively represented in popular culture. The hard question (here I start from these authors’ speculations but flesh them out considerably) is what to do about these things. In the first case, should we assume that men deserve their current teaching ratings and that the process must be corrected so that women do just as well—or, alternatively and incompatibly, that men do *not* deserve high ratings and we must correct the process to make sure their students are as tough on them as female instructors’ students are on women? In the second case, should we aim for more uplifting stories starring people of color, on the theory that “most people are good” and fiction should reflect that, or for more cynical, gimlet-eyed stories starring white people, on the opposite theory? To complete McKinnon and Sennet’s cases, if (3) men have “testimonial” privilege so that their expertise and opinions earn a “credibility excess” while those of women “suffer a credibility deficit” (McKinnon and Sennet 2017, 493, citing Fricker 2007 and McKinnon 2016), should we strive to solve this by universalizing greater trust, or greater skepticism?²³ Other examples might include the following:

²² One widely noted mechanism through which this works in the US is that things regarded in other countries as social rights, especially health insurance and public pensions, are in the US glossed as (a) ordinary consumer goods, a reward for hard work, or (b) social rights owed not to all but only to the “deserving”—most or all people of color being assumed to lack desert. The first phenomenon might be called “ad hoc social right deflation.” The normative logic that would otherwise, and elsewhere, make it seem imperative to extend a social good universally—making it a right—is sidestepped for reasons that are hard to explain (except as psychological privilege). The second may be called “privileged group redefinition,” whereby privilege is denied by saying that the group that enjoys, or ought to enjoy, the good in question is not “citizens” but “deserving [that is white] citizens” (The racial bias built into many U.S. government programs was systematic and present from the start [Katznelson 2005], making it seem quasi-natural to the privileged.) This redefinition, if accepted, would entail that *no* privilege, in the normative sense, is present. There is just a morally unproblematic divide in which each group receives its just deserts.

²³ McKinnon and Sennet treat this case in a different context and do not clearly place it in this third category of privilege, but it seems to belong there.

(4) Professional attire: men and white people can dress more informally in work settings than women and people of color and still be taken seriously, but is the proper solution universal formality, universal informality, or a middle ground?

(5) Norms of class discussion: is the right way to aid student learning for other students (and the instructor) to challenge what students say and ask for justification, or on the contrary to respond to almost all comments and questions with encouragement, praising each as “a great point” and expressing stark disagreement as “putting it a little differently”? It is clearly unfair if either students or instructors treat members of some groups the first way and those in other groups the second way. But whether we think the right solution is universal Socratism or universal niceness tracks disciplinary, pedagogical, and personal taste.

(6) A similar question attaches to presentations by scholarly colleagues. It is clearly unfair if scholars who are women or people of color are treated critically, their every premise and argument interrogated, while white men are treated as creative geniuses. But is the right remedy to interrogate the latter relentlessly or to praise the former uncritically?

These are what might be called the “honest” confusions and ambiguities that undermine attacks on differential treatment privilege. Other barriers are clearly unfair, induced solely by privilege itself. Sometimes the privileged wrongly believe that they want a privilege abolished in the “tough” or demanding direction because they do not realize how extensive their privilege is. Men may think they welcome “high standards” of professional attire because their own attire is always considered adequate if they make a mild effort; their choices are not noted and criticized as minutely as those of women. Or privileged groups wrongly believe they can take harsh criticism as well as dishing it out because they do not regularly face such criticism and fail to realize how unpleasant it can be. If they were regularly the objects of the kinds of treatment they extend to outgroups, they would not praise it so highly.

To add still more complexity, this is sometimes what is going on with respect to *some* members of the privileged group more than others. Some people in all groups really do enjoy being subjected to relentless, critical questioning (to the point of heated argument) much more than others do. And people really do vary, down to the individual level, regarding whether they would prefer their office clothing to be a form of meticulous self-expression or long for something approaching a featureless uniform that would force others to focus on their words and conduct without noting their appearance.

This complexity often leads people to confuse honest barriers to reform for unfair ones and vice versa. It might seem that people with privilege who are calling for “tough, critical debate” merely want to license an unequal state when some, though not all, actually would welcome tough questions being posed to them as well as by them. On the other hand, many of those who claim to welcome either a “tough” or a “relaxed” solution being applied universally would not really welcome such.

One remedy that will not work here, no doubt regrettably, is “diversity” in the literal sense, letting each individual choose the standard that he/she/they prefers. There are several reasons for this (not claiming originality here, I merely note some common observations in a new context):

- individual bias: the professor who says “call me Bob” might actually welcome informality and assumptions of near-equality when practiced by some students, perhaps the more engaged or better prepared, far more than others.
- differential burden: the professor who says “call me Dr. Mambwe,” possibly because she fears not being taken seriously if her title is left out, will be judged as uptight, overly formal, if white male professors do use first names.
- the cognitive costs of rule shifting: mastering simple rules, generally applied, is easier than shifting unpredictably in the face of different evaluators. And those who face fewer social burdens, for example because they are nonimmigrants, neurotypical, or have family in the same profession they are in, will find such rule-shifting cognitively easier and psychologically less burdensome.

To claim that individual diversity is not a good solution to differential treatment privilege is not to deny that different individuals will, in practice, vary in the standards they prefer. But to the extent that they do, they will render it more difficult to attack privilege. As in many realms, the value of equality competes, to this extent, with that of individual choice.²⁴

OBJECTIONS AND COMPLICATIONS

Elusive Consensus and the Problem of Irrelevance

The analysis deployed here has been portrayed as arising in a particular situation, in which privilege persists in the face of widespread consensus about its being unfair. Some would argue that this degree of consensus is a fantasy. They would point to recent politics as laying bare the degree to which many citizens do not find hierarchy and inequality across several social dimensions unfair at all, in fact welcome it.

²⁴ One final possibility, suggested to me by Kristen Zuhone, is a kind of collective “diversity” or cultural Tiebout sorting, whereby some institutions, departments, subcultures, and so forth adopt one kind of solution, whereas others adopt different ones. Then it would be easier to know whether standards reflect bias, as opposed to genuine diversity of expectations, because everyone in the subcultural unit would have the *same* expectations (e.g., suits in the Business School, but casual, even sloppy, attire in the Math department). This solution has its own costs, however. In particular, it may render miserable individuals who find themselves members of a unit whose norms do not suit them, since exit costs may be high. At the extreme, this rather radical and comprehensive solution to differential treatment privilege might effect both the attractions and the well-known costs and burdens of strong *multiculturalism* in a larger society.

I believe this objection goes too far. Though a distressingly large congeries of far-right intellectuals and activists openly avow racism, sexism, or a desire to recriminalize homosexual conduct, it remains quite rare for major political and social elites to avow such ideals openly—to say that they think the races are naturally unequal and should be treated that way, that women do not deserve equal rights with men, or that nonheterosexuals should return to the closet on pain of arrest.²⁵ To be sure, many people claim that they are “not racist,” “not homophobic,” and so forth while still defending, indeed promoting, shocking and severe states of privilege based on those characteristics. Such cases, however, represent not refutations of claims about the politics of privilege but precisely *instances* of such—instances in which those enjoying privilege acknowledge an injustice formally but adduce reasons, or alleged reasons, for maintaining it. I would submit that we often think that people who oppose measures to attack privilege must not “really” deplore the privilege to begin with partly because we fail to perceive and acknowledge the barriers that this article aims to highlight. To the extent that hypocrisy is a “form of homage that vice pays to virtue” (La Rochefoucauld [1678] 2007, 63), acknowledgment of privilege is the virtue, while the politics of privilege represent, along with some common problems of policy and collective action, a moral psychology of social and political vice.

Realism, Rhetoric, and Conceptual Analysis

Self-flagellating talk about privilege has been mocked as itself a characteristic of the privileged, opaque to ordinary people (Bovy 2017). And privilege has recently appeared on one centrist think tank’s list of terms that politicians should avoid on pain of alienating most voters and seeming “extreme, divisive, elitist, and obfuscatory” (Third Way 2025). It might seem, on this account, that talk of privilege is inherently at odds with the political realist goal of suggesting effective political strategy.

But claiming that the analysis of different kinds of privilege illuminates political disputes does not entail claiming that the same words suitable to such analysis should be used in those disputes. No one inserts strategy memos into campaign speeches, or the calculated likelihood of obtaining the votes of various social groups into appeals sent to members of those groups. More fundamentally, however: only some political realists (e.g., Galston 2010) associate realism with a pragmatic desire to bring about practical results; most do not. This article follows those who see political realism as an exercise in *illuminating normative truths* that are revealed by an engagement with social and political reality but that would remain obscure if one engaged in philosophical argument alone (Hall and Sleat 2017). It aims to understand the normative and

empirical world of politics, leaving it for others to figure out the on-the-ground strategies and rhetorics suited to changing it.

Collapsing Categories

This article maintains that a certain kind of normative analysis can illuminate political barriers and the possibilities for overcoming them. Different categories of privilege will face different barriers to reform and require different logics of change. It might seem, however, that the kind of monopolized social right privilege called here “psychological discrimination privilege” blurs the difference. Conceptually, a privilege that feels like a discrimination privilege to those who benefit from it (and possibly those who are left outside it) would seem hard to distinguish from a “real” discrimination privilege. The theoretical difference between psychological and real discrimination privilege might—directly against this article’s claims—make little *political* difference.²⁶

I would still maintain, however, that the distinction between real and psychological discrimination privilege is both observable and helpful. Observable, because one can note what happens to the politics of a privilege when the usual barriers to reforming it are taken away. If people are against expanding a previously monopolized social right in the easiest possible way (e.g., by expanding an existing program rather than requiring a new one, through a funding mechanism that does not directly burden the currently privileged), barriers like policy uncertainty and cost cannot explain this opposition. There is probably something psychological going on, perhaps attached to perceived group status. This is not a suppositional case: on several accounts, it helps explain opposition to Medicaid expansion under the US’s Affordable Care Act (2009) (see Grogan and Park 2017; Michener 2020). Noting this will help us, in turn, adjust our view of the likely politics involved. When we understand how some monopolized social rights have come to seem like zero-sum privileges, we will start worrying less about “fiscal conservative” resistance involving cost, implementation, and social priorities and more about deeper anxieties involving relative status and caste identity.

CONCLUSIONS

My claims are limited but substantial. The category of privilege, which consists in the monopoly or near-monopoly of a social good by a restricted group, does not cover all forms of unfairness, oppression, or inequality. And the politics of privilege traced here only applies when a given privilege is already recognized and deplored. I have argued, however, that many kinds of inequality with respect to social goods and opportunities can be usefully analyzed through a framework that is quite general through being hypothetical. *If* a given kind

²⁵ The case of transgender people is different: bigotry *is* openly avowed. I would concede that the analysis in this paper does not, now and in the US, apply to that issue.

²⁶ I owe this objection to Tyler Crown.

of privilege can be usefully classified as an instance of discrimination, monopolized social right, or differential treatment, *then* the political problems associated with its reform will be as described. This article's form of political realism, while remaining within the bounds of political theory—not purporting to supply new empirical data or make causal generalizations—enables such linkage between normative description and political analysis-*cum*-strategy.

My main thesis has been one of disaggregation. Different kinds of privilege present different sorts of barriers to those seeking to combat or abolish them. Discrimination privileges involve barriers to reform due to the actual, not imaginary, selfish interests of the privileged—interests that must be either overwhelmed by growth, overcome by political coalition-building, or overawed by coercion. Monopolized social right privileges face barriers of ignorance, cost, policy uncertainty, and priority. They also sometimes embody a “psychological wage” that makes them seem, though they need not be, like discrimination privileges, such that abolishing them would directly threaten the privileged group's interests. Differential treatment privileges face problems of legitimate disagreement as to the remedy, as well as the tendency of the privileged to claim—in fact to believe—that they support a certain remedy when they would not like it in practice.

The argument also suggests some wider lessons.

First, though the language of privilege is often used by theorists to add force to familiar claims of injustice (e.g., race and sex discrimination), it can also illuminate certain goods that are a matter of normative consensus among the public but neglected by social and political theorists. Bad street lighting, poor sewerage, potholed roads, and abandoned buildings, for instance, rarely show up in lists of social injustices; they do not seem “high” or “principled” enough. But they may become more salient once we start making lists of monopolized social rights, things that “everyone takes for granted” as basic hallmarks of a civilized society except those who lack them.

Second, debates regarding particular forms of privilege, and the politics attached to them, may depend more fundamentally than we realize on whether we judge the privileges involved to be monopolized social rights or instances of discrimination involving relative advantage. For instance, Fileborn and O'Neill (2023) note two ways of analyzing street harassment (of women, but also of transgender people and others). The first glosses it essentially as a monopolized social right. Men are far more able than women to be able to enter or traverse public spaces without incident, and as a result, they can do many more things, go many more places, than women can. On this interpretation, there is no indication that men actually enjoy their privilege—as opposed to being oblivious—or would particularly oppose remedies.²⁷ The second

interpretation glosses street harassment, quite differently, as deliberate discrimination. Men, on this view, positively prize being able to exclude women from public spaces, for its own sake (as an expression of power) and/or because doing so gives them superior access to social goods compared to that of women. Without trying to settle the question,²⁸ I would argue that the answer really matters. The politics of the issue will look very different depending on whether street harassment is more like living near multiple boarded-up buildings, which the privileged do not experience but also do not especially wish on anyone else, or more like workplace discrimination.

Third, this analysis highlights that, and why, it is easier to attack privilege when a social right is clearly acknowledged. That is why “Black Lives Matter” is a more viable rallying point than “Black Liberty Matters” (Levy 2017) or “Black Opportunity Matters”: we lack agreement on how much liberty and opportunity, or which forms, all citizens are entitled to.²⁹ That free, or nearly free, doctor and hospital care is considered a social right in most wealthy countries makes it easier to see and combat health care privilege in those countries than it is in the US, where most citizens vaguely believe that health care should be available to all but do not regard it as a social right on the same level as, say, free primary and secondary schooling.

Finally, on the level of method, I hope to have demonstrated some of the strengths of applied political realism. (Not all work that is plausibly called realist is in any way “applied,” meant to provide insight into current political situations and strategies—think of Thucydides, or the book series beginning with *A Game of Thrones* [Szűcs 2017]—but this article is.) While political theory often, and oddly, assumes an audience capable of creating a just society from scratch from moral axioms, realists start by imagining an audience that may actually exist: people in existing societies arguing about what to do (Williams 2005, 12). Normative claims still matter but as the beginning of political disputation and conflict, not as something standing outside politics and meant to authoritatively settle political questions from a moral point of view. At the same time, if realism is to remain a form of *political theory*, it must contain not just pragmatic advice or calls for circumstance-based judgment but systematic argument involving normative categories. This article has sought to provide that and to illustrate, by doing so, the value of this kind of theory.

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²⁷ However, given that some remedies for street harassment, e.g., better street lighting or extensive policing and ticketing of harassers, would require resources, considerations of cost and priority might apply.

²⁸ Perhaps unhelpfully, I assume that the first explanation is valid in some times and places and the second in others. I doubt that theory, as opposed to empirical observation, can settle such matters.

²⁹ On this “bright line” problem facing the contemporary civil rights movement, see Chong (1991).

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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