

**Critical Privilege Studies:
Making visible the reproduction of racism in the everyday and IR**

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Abstract

Entrenched structural inequalities – of race, gender, class, nationality – and their corresponding systems of privilege constitute dominant-subordinate social relations and variously fuel the myriad crises that security and international relations (IR) scholars struggle to address. My Forum contribution takes systemic racism as its starting point and foregrounds how the everyday and everywhere power relations of *white privilege* make the reproduction of racism ‘not only possible but also invisible and acceptable’ (Rutazibwa, 2016: 196). Privilege references *unearned* advantages available to dominant groups by being constitutively denied to subordinated groups, with enormous implications for how we understand and address structural inequalities. Yet the power relations and problematic effects of privilege are currently ignored in even critical theories. I provide an overview of ‘critical privilege studies’ (CPS), which identifies key patterns of privilege (invisibilization, normalization, entitlement), reveals the structuring logics of dominate-subordinate relations, and shows how those with privilege everyday and everywhere participate in perpetuating inequalities, even when this is not consciously intended. I conclude that neglecting the power relations of privilege compromises how adequately we understand the reproduction of, and responses to, entrenched inequalities and the violence they generate, and stress the value of CPS for advancing the future of ‘critical’ theorizing.

Introduction

[R]acism is the oil in the system of colonial power that makes a sustained discrimination of and violence against certain people *not only possible but also invisible and acceptable* (Rutazibwa, 2016: 196, emphasis added).

The world is undeniably in trouble. Crises and corollary insecurities are legible everywhere, marked by environmental degradation, healthcare panics, stark inequalities, militarized conflicts and the rise of authoritarian movements and virulent alt-right populisms. That racism figures in producing and structuring these entwined crises is widely recognized and given its disciplinary remit, IR is best positioned to examine ‘the link between race as a structuring principle and the transnational processes of accumulation, dispossession, violence and struggle that emerge in its wake’ (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, 2015: 9). Yet IR’s

problematic engagement with race is now well-documented,¹ including the discipline's 'origin' as an imperial racist project (Vitalis, 2015), the 'willful amnesia' that this encouraged (Krishna, 2001: 401) and the legacy of 'racist epistemological assumptions that inform much of contemporary mainstream and even critical analyses of world politics' (Sajed, 2016: 168; also Grovogui, 1996; Hobson, 2012; Gruffydd Jones, 2016). Revisiting points made in his 1997 book, Charles Mills (2015, 542) concludes that "the racial contract is very much alive and well...and the 'epistemology of ignorance' that now guards it is as active as ever."

But the problem is larger. Despite abundant evidence of institutionalized racism, IR not only persists in habitual neglect and a deeply flawed theorization of race; it also persists in *actively* resisting, marginalizing, depoliticizing and hence *devalorizing* anti-racist research and those who produce it (Chowdhry and Rai, 2009; el-Malik, 2015; Bhambra et al, 2020; Shilliam, 2020; Vitalis. 2015). Given epistemological priorities, we might expect this resistance by conventionally ahistorical, non-reflexive mainstream scholars. But it is unexpected and poses fundamental questions when ardent resistance to critique is practiced by self-identified *critical* scholars, whose objectives presumably extend beyond the production of 'more accurate descriptions' to include the reduction, or at least mitigation, of structural violence. How is it possible for those who claim a critical orientation to be so ill-prepared, and evidently unwilling, to address 'the daily, structural racism that unmistakably continues to plague our societies' (Rutazibwa, 2016: 192)? What taken-for-granted premises and practices reproduce the *invisibility* of racism and the apparent *acceptance* of its harms? What are we failing to 'see' and how does this compromise what Critical Security Studies and IR scholars have to offer, especially in the face of mounting crises and the urgency of developing more adequate analyses?

Taking the social violence of systemic (structural, institutionalized) racism as its starting point, my essay assumes that race 'is a central organizing feature of world politics' (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020: para. 1), that 'epistemic racism is intrinsic to Western knowledge structures' and pervades IR theorizing (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 4; Gruffydd Jones, 2016; Sabaratnam, 2020), and that 'taking the problem of racism seriously in the field of IR means viewing it not merely as an issue of stereotypes or cultural insensitivities, but as a colonial technology of life and premature death built on ideologies of whiteness and white supremacy' (Rutazibwa, 2020: para. 31). My Forum intervention then takes up Olivia Rutazibwa's (2016, 199) call 'to contribute to a radically different, anti- or non-racist IR and everyday' and I do so by examining how the everyday and everywhere power relations of *white privilege* make the reproduction of racism 'not only possible but also invisible and acceptable' (Rutazibwa 2016, 196). While I address the Forum's focus on racism, I note that more adequate critical theorizing is undermined if the reciprocally constructed phenomena of structural inequalities and systems of privilege are treated in isolation.

Why focus on privilege?

Privilege is always at someone else's expense and always exacts a cost. Everything that is done to receive or maintain it - however passive and unconscious - results in suffering and deprivation for someone (Johnson, 2006: 8).

Familiar structural inequalities – of race, gender, class, nationality – and *corresponding systems of privilege* constitute relations of domination and subordination that figure centrally in

¹For summary accounts of this extensive scholarship, which includes forums and special issues on 'race in IR,' see for example *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2013; *Postcolonial Studies*, 2016; Sabaratnam, 2020: 3-9; Peterson, 2020; Shilliam, 2020.

the social violence and multiple crises that IR and security scholars struggle to address. These scholars however rarely engage a critique of privilege when interpreting these processes, which effectively perpetuates the invisibility (naturalization) of power relations and precludes more adequate critical theorizing. Viewed structurally, privilege refers to socially conferred *unearned* advantages available to some by being constitutively *denied* to others. Two corollary points: the privilege enjoyed by dominant groups is literally at the expense of subordinated groups, and systemic inequalities do not only *harm* those who are dominated but significantly *benefit* – everyday and over time, intentionally and unintentionally, directly and indirectly – those who are privileged. Failing to ‘see’ this crucial, consequential and structural relationship – and its affective consequences – has enormous implications for how adequately we understand the reproduction of, and responses to, entrenched inequalities and the social violence they generate. Not least, we need to ‘see’ that conditions generating internalized inferiority in those who are subordinated have the effect of naturalizing *internalized superiority* in those who can, and typically do, assume that the advantages of privilege and their practices of domination are ‘just the way things are.’

Given the global expanse of harms, resentments, and violences that we confront, I argue that critical theorists – in security studies, IR and elsewhere – cannot afford to persist in neglecting privilege. This neglect perpetuates ignorance of consequential power relations and obscures how practices of privilege, everyday and everywhere, operate to reinforce, normalize and reproduce structural inequalities. I assume that *critical* security studies seeks to further a reduction in emotional and embodied harms produced by, and productive of, structural inequalities, and I argue that doing so requires accurately understanding and actively dismantling the power relations of privilege. Accordingly, I contend that failure to critically engage how privilege operates severely compromises the quality of current theorizing and what ‘critical’ theorists offer the field’s future studies.

My contribution then situates racism in the *intersectional matrix* of structural inequalities, foregrounds how systems of privilege operate to reproduce this matrix and its many harms, and examines the role of white privilege in reproducing the invisibility and normalization of racism (and its related inequalities). To do so I present a condensed overview of what I call ‘critical privilege studies’ (CPS)² and indicate how this analytical framing contributes to ‘a radically different, anti- or non-racist IR and everyday’ (Rutazibwa, 2016: 199). I argue that the systematic study of privilege shifts our attention, illuminates unfamiliar patterns, and enriches critical theorizing within and beyond IR.

CPS makes distinctive contributions, primarily by examining how those who benefit the most – everyday and everywhere – participate in *reproducing* inequalities, sometimes intentionally but also – most often and most problematically – when not ‘consciously’ intending to do so (but doing so all the same). The structural orientation of CPS reveals how normalization reproduces – while concealing – the power relations and structural logics of dominate-subordinate relations, and how behaving ‘normally’ in unequal systems reinforces and reproduces their hierarchies, whether intended or not. CPS clarifies how privilege works to

²In the anglophone and typically westerncentric scholarship I access, most studies centering *privilege* as a critical analytics of power emerge from critical sociology, tend to assume nationally bounded societies, and often focus on a single vector of privilege, most often that of ‘white-Black’ racism (Diangelo, 2018) and less frequently gender (Johnson, 2014). For introductory purposes, my account draws primarily on comprehensive, multi-privilege studies, especially Wildman, 1996; Johnson, 2006; Pease, 2010.

entrench and amplify structural inequalities, while enabling those with privilege to be unaware of, habitually ignore and also deny how privilege tilts the playing field in their favor – a reality that fosters feelings of superiority for some and inferiority for others. And by recognizing that everyone occupies multiple social categories, CPS uniquely engages the complex dynamics of theorizing *intersectionality* and points to the inadequacy of critical projects that focus exclusively on a single vector of oppression.

Given complex arguments, an unfamiliar body of research and space limitations, my goal in the following is both sufficient general coverage of CPS to convey its analytical framework and critical promise, and specific attention to racism – here, white privilege – in line with the theme of the Forum.³ I summarize how CPS conceptualizes privilege, how key structural dimensions of privilege -- invisibilization, normalization, entitlement – shape social relations everyday and everywhere, and offer concluding reflections.

What is privilege?

[N]o matter what form privilege takes, it involves everyone in one way or another (Johnson, 2006: 55).

In early work on privilege, Peggy McIntosh (1988) sought a better understanding of male resistance to recognizing gender privilege, white women's resistance to recognizing race privilege, and how 'invisible' power relations shape entrenched inequalities. McIntosh realized that she 'had been taught [to see] racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught *not* to see' how it puts her at an advantage (1988: 2 emphasis added). By exploring privilege in interlocking hierarchies, McIntosh laid the groundwork for understanding privilege as unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred: *unearned* because not due to anything one personally did or failed to do; *exclusive* because privilege for some groups literally denies it to other groups; and *socially conferred* because it is an effect of social arrangements and how one is identified by others as belonging to a culturally valued category.

Privilege as it operates in the real world is patterned, by structural subject positioning in dominate-subordinate relations, and also complicated, by diverse sites of privilege and dynamically shifting contexts. Systems of privilege – and their organizing logics – differ most obviously in relation to the inequality referenced (race, gender, nationality, religion), and the inequalities referenced differ with respect to their histories, locations, harms, ideological legitimations and social practices. Systems of privilege also differ in the array of advantages that are available to dominant groups (self-esteem, mental and physical well-being, embodied health and security, cultural and material resources). At the same time, all of us *all of the time* 'occupy' multiple social categories (age, ability, sexuality, race, caste, nationality) and their differential valorizations; depending on contexts we may be privileged in some (white, male) and in others subordinated (black, gay) or both simultaneously (white, lesbian) – obviously with significantly varying effects. I note that experiencing both privilege and subordination in shifting contexts produces a 'blurring' of experiences that (further!) complicates awareness of privilege as structural power relations (Wildman, 1996: 29).

The pioneering work of Black feminists has taught us that systems of inequality do not operate along separate tracks but intersect in complementary, complicating and even

³I aim to present an overview of CPS that encourages further exploration, elaboration and complication. I hope that greater awareness of privilege spurs critical reflection (as it has for me) not only regarding prevailing inequalities and 'invisible' power relations, but also (especially!) the privileges we personally take for granted.

contradictory ways.⁴ Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 18) aptly concludes there are ‘...few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives.’ In short, while the structural logics of domination and subordination figure in all systems of privilege, lived experiences of, for example, sexual, religious and racial oppression are *not* simply analogous. Importantly, our location in multiple categories in mutating circumstances belies mono-dimensional analyses, and the variation among forms of domination and the heterogeneity and hierarchies that exist *within* social categories caution against ‘comparing oppressions.’ The paramount consideration when interpreting privilege is how specific contexts always and pervasively shape which forms of privilege ‘matter’ and how participants interact.⁵

Privilege is also paradoxical, which figures – like the ‘blurring’ noted earlier – in obscuring its power relations. You can be privileged, even extremely privileged, without feeling happy, successful or even feeling advantaged. Because contexts include conflicting statuses and fluid interactions, outcomes are rarely foregone conclusions. When inequalities are systemic (sustained by policies, laws, ideological and institutional controls), being ‘privileged’ or ‘subordinated’ has less to do with individual agency, choice or intention than how one is *structurally* positioned within social systems and how social categories are differentially valorized. What matters is ‘which category we happen to be sorted into by other people and how they treat us as a result’ (Johnson, 2006: 35). Privilege then does not guarantee only positive outcomes to the privileged or only negative outcomes to ‘the oppressed.’ Contexts always and decisively matter.

What *is* guaranteed is that those who are privileged can, and typically do, take for granted *unearned* advantages that are *at the expense of* those who are not privileged. This effectively, inevitably and often dramatically, *tilts* the playing field, so that (by definition) those who are subordinated must participate in a relentlessly uphill struggle, in a game not of their choosing, *and* with fewer advantages or resources. At the same time – and a crucial, fundamental point: the

⁴The black feminist idea of intersectionality dates back to the late 1800s (Nash, 2019: 6-7), gained momentum and circulation after the Combahee River Collective’s Statement (1979/1977), accelerated with the circulation of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1988, 1991) work and spurred a now extensive literature of insights, studies and also intense debates; recent contributions include Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Bilge, 2013; Hill Collins, 2015; Parashar, 2016; Gill and Pires, 2019. I understand intersectionality as an ‘analytic sensibility’ that reclaims an initial emphasis on ‘structures of power and exclusion’; hence, *not* as a reference to ‘identity’ categories (or ‘add and stir’ accounts) but to historically contingent, mutable and *interactive* ‘political and structural inequalities’ (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013: 795, 797). I am persuaded that mono-dimensional accounts of social categories and forms of dominance thwart more adequate critical analyses (see also Mills, 2015a, 2015b) and I particularly endorse CPS as uniquely addressing the challenges of taking intersectionality seriously.

⁵The specificity that contextual differences warrant is clearly in tension with the summary points that a broad-stroke introduction to CPS demands. I am aware of over-generalizations throughout this essay and caution again that their relevance varies with reference to varying privileges, participants and contexts. Given the priorities of the Forum, I focus here on the racialized system of white privilege that is especially entrenched, powerful and structurally violent, yet operates, like all systems of privilege, in an interactive, intersectional matrix of structural inequalities.

tilt of the playing field necessarily shapes the conduct of *all* of the players and *all* of the results.

Structural patterns of privilege

We need to identify the key dimensions of privilege; the invisibility of privilege by those who have it; the power of the privileged group to determine the social norm; the naturalization of privilege and the sense of entitlement that accompanies privilege (Pease, 2010: 9).

I begin by noting that *individualist*, meritocratic and liberal ideologies that are prevalent in Whiteness/Europeanized cultures effectively foster the invisibility of privilege (and much else) by discounting structural power relations. A structural, *systemic* perspective understands individual conduct as continuously shaped by and shaping the systems we inhabit; neither exists without the other and neither can be reduced to the other. In complex ways, our positioning and participation within social structures implicate us in perpetuating, resisting and/or reconfiguring these power relations. This constitutive premise, which a systemic perspective makes visible, must be recognized for those with privilege to recognize their participation in reproducing oppression, even – indeed, especially – when claiming not to.

CPS foregrounds the *invisibility* of privilege as a singularly powerful mechanism for reproducing dominate-subordinate relations. On the one hand, invisibility ‘permits’ those with privilege to be unaware of, habitually disregard and/or deny responsibility for how they systemically benefit from and variously contribute to oppressive conditions. Reproducing this core problem is the common assumption that harmful effects depend on wilful intent; that oppressive conditions are caused solely by ‘bad’ people consciously intending to harm, discriminate, or exclude. This familiar reasoning confuses intentions with consequences. In systems based on structural inequality, simply adhering to societal norms – acting as culturally expected – reproduces harms and oppression whether they are intended or not (Diangelo, 2018: xiii).⁶ This common assumption has the insidious effect of encouraging those with privilege to presume that they are innocent of ‘being oppressive’ or implicated in reproducing oppression *unless and only if* they are acting with the intention to harm (discriminate, exclude, oppress). Most people – and presumably critical theorists – deny this intention, and when a systemic sensibility is absent, will ardently defend themselves against any claim of their implication in or responsibility for perpetuating oppressive conditions.

On the other hand, invisibility not only disables privileged group awareness but also shapes how those without privilege understand and respond to oppressive social practices – including internalized inferiority as well as intense resentments and extensive resistance. The point here is that blindness to privilege by those who have it shifts responsibility for explaining, criticizing and transforming oppression to those who suffer the most from it and have the fewest

⁶To be clear: my objective here is illuminating the structural logics of dominate-subordinate relations. The point is not to deny that agency and intentionality matter but to insist that they do so only in relation to historically specific, power-laden and unequal social relations that structurally contour the choices available to variously positioned individuals and groups. I note as well that my focus on privilege is not to (once again) center attention on the powerful, but to hold those with privilege responsible for their constitutive role in producing and especially in reproducing oppression. The point is also *not* to deny or trivialize the uncounted effects of *intentional* stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion and violence or to discount individual accountability for these; nor is it to omit or diminish how those in subordinated positions also participate in systems of inequality, and the importance of their social practices in reproducing, reconfiguring and transforming systemic conditions.

resources to fight it. We have abundant evidence that critics and protesters meet myriad forms of resistance, including not only opposition to specific proposals for change but also personal, socio-cultural and physical attacks on those who persist in challenging the status quo.⁷

These dynamics exemplify how structural positioning matters: while those experiencing subordination cannot afford to ignore oppressive conditions – and pay numerous ‘costs’ for protesting – those with privilege enjoy what Allan Johnson (2006: 22) calls the ‘luxury of obliviousness’ – the extraordinary *advantage* of being free to ‘choose’ whether and to what extent they ‘notice’ injustice, engage in critical reflection, and/or participate in ways that *challenge* status quo inequalities. I submit that this ‘luxury’ is particularly present among multiply-privileged academics, and figures in the ‘masking’ of power relations, ‘acceptance’ of racialized inequalities and persistent marginalization of dissenting, critical voices.

The invisibility of power relations reflects processes of *normalization*, the second key dimension of privilege. The argument here is that qualities, characteristics and priorities of dominant groups become *systemic norms* that shape everyone’s participation in unjust systems (Wildman, 1996). This includes habituated ways of identifying, thinking and acting, and written and unwritten societal ‘rules’ that establish patterned social expectations. The latter constitute ‘paths of least resistance’ that most of us follow most of the time, and mostly unconsciously, because to do otherwise is literally ‘unexpected’ and meets varying forms of resistance – from curious stares, verbal challenges, behavioral demands to physical and even lethal attacks (Johnson (2006: 80). In effect, what dominant groups deem normal and preferred becomes the system-wide expectation and the presumed *standard of comparison* – the basis for measuring success and failure – *for everyone*.

This means that all participants, including the majority who are denied the advantages of privilege, are measured against – and expected to prioritize and conform to – the characteristics and expectations that are taken for granted as normal (and preferred) by the dominant, privileged and advantaged group. Educational institutions epitomize this process of centering and reproducing norms and ‘knowings’ that elites have prioritized, including what constitutes appropriate inquiry, credible research and quality scholarship. As referenced in the Introduction, the obvious example in security studies and IR is the dominance of Eurocentric/Western/White paradigms of knowledge production, the ahistorical, non-reflexive and reductive scholarship this cultivates, and the gate-keeping practices that sustain, while masking, racist epistemologies (Sajed, 2016) and the ‘Eurofetishism’ of even critical IR theory (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). And of course, claiming as *superior* what is ‘normal’ for the dominating group repeats a naturalization of social hierarchy familiar in Eurocentric narratives of developmentalism, social Darwinism and ‘modernization theory.’⁸

⁷Disparaging those who protest is a familiar and effective strategy, used especially against those who are actively challenging entrenched hierarchies and privileged ‘authorities.’ Today’s global communications and online social networks mean both that wider audiences are aware of protests and when dominant and/or resentful groups feel disparaged or ‘threatened’ they have myriad ways to dismiss, denigrate, and/or destructively (mis)represent the aims and practices of those challenging the status quo. These new forms of social violence are directed most often, and often viciously, at those opposing racism, heterosexism and (racist, masculinized, militarized) nationalism – and pose weighty challenges for the future of fields presuming to address conflicts.

⁸In endlessly problematic ways, the naturalization of European (white, patriarchal, Christian) superiority continues, despite being extensively critiqued (Anievas and Nicancioglu,

Similarly, what is marginalized – outside of the ‘center’ – is rendered at best secondary and literally of *marginal* significance, as we repeatedly witness in IR’s Western/White-centric worldview that discounts interest in or knowledge of ‘the rest.’ Two problems here: this fosters willful ignorance of and failure to learn from variations in what globally diverse people do, think and care about, which significantly distorts and impoverishes our understanding of social, including global, realities; and this occludes alternative visions, knowledges, experiences and belief systems that *matter* in constructing, making sense of, and (especially) thinking otherwise about world politics.⁹ These patterns of privilege consciously and unconsciously underpin expectations and policies that demand conformity with, and even allegiance to, dominant group norms; as evidenced for example in citizenship tests, loyalty oaths and criteria for academic publications and promotions. In this sense, the price of ‘recognition,’ validation or inclusion is *assimilation*, with the implicit and often explicit expectation that alternative ways of thinking identifying and doing – even if personally preferred – are best kept private or eliminated altogether.

These points bring us to the third dimension of privilege: *superiority and entitlement*. A sense of entitlement – feeling that one’s advantages are earned and therefore favorable treatment is deserved – is a predictable effect of being privileged.¹⁰ For dominating groups, having privilege is normal; it is invisible to them because it is just ‘the way things are’ (for them) and advantages can simply be taken for granted. Given socialization and societal norms, dominant groups understand their lives as not only ‘normal’ but ‘better, valued, superior’ lives, indeed, the standard of comparison for everyone. And as already noted, those with privilege are unlikely to think of themselves as *being* oppressive unless (and only if) they are intentionally engaging in acts of discrimination or domination. The presumption of superiority is additionally buttressed by relentless *centering* of privileged groups and their priorities, which encourages believing their disproportionate share of power is solely due to ‘natural’ superiority, without reference to violent histories, entrenched ideologies and unjust power relations.

As McIntosh (1988: 2) observes, privileged groups are actually taught *not* to notice systemic inequalities, their role in reproducing them, and the benefits they gain. Noticing entails paying attention, which takes energy and time, and privileged groups have both the luxury of obliviousness (not noticing) and the corollary ‘freedom’ to choose whether and when they might notice and whether and how they might actually challenge systemic oppression. For those who are multiply-privileged, moving through life is indeed easier; they are rarely subjected to the questioning, disparagement, disrespect and other forms of social violence that burden the lives of subordinated groups. This immunity from experiencing ‘marked status’ treatment is a

2015; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2018; Levine, 2004; Mills, 1997; Peterson, 2020; Stoler, 2002).

⁹On the uphill struggle to decenter the West and decolonize IR see for example, Agathangelou and Ling, 2009; Bhabra, 2011; Chakrabarty, 2000; Hobson, 2012; Jones, 2006; Niang, 2018; Persaud and Sajed, 2017; Sabaratnam, 2020.

¹⁰We increasingly witness how a real or perceived threat to, or actual loss of, privilege frequently spurs a violent reaction. As social movements make gains, ‘internalized dominance’ (Diangelo, 2018) and ‘aggrieved entitlement’ (Kimmel, 2013/2017) may fuel a spiral of socio-psychological and physical violence by those fearing such loss, which is often expressed in domestic violence, mass shootings, anti-migrant hostilities, alt-Right nationalisms and neo-Nazi activities. These pose formidable challenges for the future of fields that presume to study violence.

consequential advantage of being privileged, not least with regard to self-esteem and feeling superior. It also suggests how little those who are privileged actually ‘know’ about the everyday conditions and lived experiences of those who are subordinated, and by extension, how little they know of majority lives and systemic power relations. Being so uninformed, those with privilege habitually *mistake* how dramatically the field is tilted, how significantly they benefit from this, and how poorly prepared they are to advance critical theorizing.

Concluding reflections

Whites spend a lot of time trying to convince ourselves and each other that we are not racist. A big step would be for whites to admit that we are racist and then to consider what to do about it (Wildman, 1996: 20).

I conclude with a brief review of how members of dominant groups typically respond to critiques of their privilege. I believe it confirms the validity and illustrates the implications of substantive points made throughout the paper and especially, how little those with white privilege actually know about majority lives and structural power relations. In one sense, it depicts patterned responses that are at best exasperating and at worst fatal for those experiencing subordination and taking risks to challenge the status quo. In a second sense, it prefigures ‘what must be done’ if self-proclaimed critics of racism are serious about accurately understanding *and* actively dismantling the power relations of privilege, including the seductions of feeling superior.

Those with privilege obviously vary in the degree to which they are aware of and/or think consciously about structural inequalities and their effects. This suggests a continuum: ardent minimizers claim there is no ‘real’ problem, or diminish its seriousness, or declare they are tired of hearing about it when they too are suffering (or are victimized), or even contend that those who are subordinated actually benefit. Others are willing to acknowledge that forms of inequality exist but deny being implicated, usually by blaming the problem on those suffering from it and holding them responsible for fixing it. When challenged, responses include claiming that protestors are unnecessarily (unreasonably, irrationally) angry, complaining, whining, or exaggerating actual harms, given the presumption that protestors ‘cause’ the problem by their (abnormal, inferior, disturbing) behaviors. It is then the exclusive responsibility of those dominated to be aware of, analyze and be able to explain the problem – calmly, logically, respectfully – if they expect to be ‘heard,’ validated or supported.

Awareness of serious problems may prompt ‘well intended’ individuals to ‘help’ by reducing especially offensive practices, perhaps increasing ‘charitable’ efforts or, more frequently, invoking an elite (superior, patronizing) analysis of what those who are dominated need to do to fix the problem. Those who claim a commitment to ‘fighting injustice’ tend to mistake a critique of their privilege as a personal attack and respond with an emotionally intense defense that confuses intentions with consequences and (re)focuses on the individual rather than the systemic problem.¹¹ For example: I am not racist/sexist/homophobic! Why are you attacking me? I am the one who is victimized! I am one of the good ones, an ally; I love or live/work/socialize with members of subordinated groups; I contribute to radical causes; I am not a ‘bad’ person (intending harm, exclusions) so I am clearly not being oppressive.

Unfortunately, and for reasons explored in this paper, when white privilege is challenged responses rarely feature what is most needed: taking the problem seriously; foregoing self-

¹¹Writing of racism, Diangelo (2018, 2) examines in depth how ‘white fragility’ is ‘triggered by discomfort and anxiety [but] is born of superiority and entitlement...It is not weakness [but] a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.’

defense; paying attention; listening; learning; relinquishing privilege; practicing humility; committing to personal change; working toward systemic transformation.

My contribution to the Forum foregrounds how the everyday and everywhere power relations of *white privilege* make the reproduction of racism ‘not only possible but also invisible and acceptable’ in the everyday and IR (Rutazibwa, 2016: 196). I support this claim by introducing ‘critical privilege studies’ (CPS) as a necessary framework for ‘unmasking’ – making *visible* – the structuring logics of dominate-subordinate relations that constitute and sustain social inequalities. I argue that persistent neglect of privilege necessarily compromises how adequately we understand the reproduction of, and responses to, entrenched inequalities and the social violence they generate, leading me to stress the urgency of engaging CPS for advancing what ‘critical’ theorists might offer the future fields of Critical Security Studies and International Relations.

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