**Renouncing Privilege, Using Privilege**

*By Sally Matthews*

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*Summary*

In this paper I ask whether we can use the privileges conferred upon us by an unjust order to bring about a more just order. Taking G.A. Cohen’s *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* as a starting point, I think about and contrast the ideas of renouncing and using privilege. I use feminist writings on privilege and anti-colonial writings on solidarity to explore both the possibilities and the limitations of the idea of using privilege in order to undo it.

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‘There’s something I must ask you, Fulvia’, said Morris Zapp, as he sipped Scotch on the rocks poured from a crystal decanter brought on a silver tray by a black-uniformed, white-aproned maid to the first-floor drawing-room of the magnificent eighteenth-century house just off the Villa Napoleone .... ‘how can you manage to reconcile living like a millionaire with being a Marxist?’

From *Small World* by David Lodge (1984, pp. 127-128)

Reflecting on his youthful ambivalence about left social activism, Robert Atwan describes meeting a ‘leading Marxist historian’ who ‘stood in a faculty parking lot politely chatting with us in his expensive Italian attire, one elegant shoe casually poised on the bumper of his Mercedes Benz’ (2003, p.62). While Atwan, who comes from a working class background, had previously admired this historian’s work, he now felt that he could not relate to or share this man’s view of the world. David Lodge’s character Fulvia Morgana invites a similar response to Atwan’s elegant Marxist – many of us feel a kind of awkwardness, or even suspicion or anger, when confronted with someone who apparently seeks to bring down a societal order that so obviously benefits him or her. Similar but less extreme examples than those described above also create discomfort – sitting around a table at a conference dinner with a glass of good wine discussing poverty alleviation can also create a sense of awkwardness and disjuncture.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These feelings of awkwardness, disjuncture or even anger relate to an apparent tension between advocating a more just societal order while enjoying the fruits of a life made possible by the prevailing unjust societal order. G.A. Cohen very helpfully sums up an aspect of this tension in the final chapter of the book *If you’re an egalitarian, how come you’re so rich?* (2001) where he asks ‘whether egalitarians who live in an unequal society ... are committed to implementing, so far as they can, in their own lives, the norm of equality that they prescribe for government’ (Cohen, 2001, p.149).[[2]](#footnote-2) Cohen discusses various defences a rich egalitarian could mount for keeping his wealth. All of these defences, with one important exception, are defences that make it neither obligatory nor wrong for the rich egalitarian to give away his wealth and some of these defences make renouncing wealth supererogatory although not obligatory for rich egalitarians (see Cohen 2001:178). The one exception is an example in which Cohen suggests that the rich egalitarian could argue that it is not wrong of him to keep his wealth, but rather that it would indeed be wrong of him to give it away. This argument goes more or less like this: by maintaining my wealth I am able to exercise more influence and thus to do more to advance the goals of egalitarianism than I would were I to redistribute my own income and thus lose my position of relative influence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While Cohen’s essay focuses on the apparent (if not indeed actual) tension embodied by the rich egalitarian, I pose his question more broadly and ask if one can justly benefit from any set of unjust circumstances while also working to change those circumstances. Can I benefit from white privilege while participating in anti-racist activism? Can a man benefit from patriarchy while also advocating feminism? To use a more concrete example, does the fact that while I (a white, middle-class South African woman) sit here writing about inequality and injustice, my children are being cared for by a black childminder who I can afford only because of the racialised unequal economic order in South Africa, make my situation paradoxical in some way, or even hypocritical? My essay may be part of an attempt to change this unjust order (or at least to reflect critically upon it), but it is that order that has made it possible for me to find the time to write it.

This paper brings together three fairly disparate discussions: firstly, Cohen’s work which has been influential within moral and political philosophy; secondly, feminist reflections on privilege; and, thirdly, post-colonial discussions of the role of the ‘petit bourgeoisie’ in struggles against colonialism. I draw these three very different discussions together to respond to the question of what those who benefit from societal orders they acknowledge to be unjust ought to do with the privilege(s) such orders confer upon them.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to very briefly outline what I mean by some of the terms I use in this paper. Throughout, I will be using the terms ‘the privileged’ and ‘the oppressed’ to refer to those advantaged and disadvantaged by a particular unjust order. My use of the term ‘the privileged’ is particularly indebted to Alison Bailey’s (1998) discussion of privilege in which she carefully examines the etymology of the word and painstakingly distinguishes between what she calls earned advantages and the unearned advantages which characterise privilege. Following Bailey, those who are privileged by a particular unjust order are those who are receive unearned advantages in a systematic way because they are members of a particular social group. My understanding of oppression follows that of Iris Marion Young who is discussed at length below. I should note here that it is important to acknowledge that individuals are typically not always privileged or always oppressed within a given society and so when I talk about ‘the privileged’ or ‘the oppressed’, I do not mean to suggest that individuals are always members only of one or the other of these categories, although as I discuss below, those who are privileged by any particular unjust order are typically privileged in a whole range of ways and their privileges are typically mutually reinforcing. It is however, clearly possible for a person – say, for example a white middle-class woman – to be both oppressed (by patriarchy) and privileged (by white supremacy and capitalism).

**Injustice as Oppression**

If, as egalitarians believe, an unequal distribution of wealth is unjust, then it seems to follow that rich egalitarians ought to give up their wealth as this wealth embodies the injustice of our contemporary inegalitarian world and because rich egalitarians could presumably advance the cause of egalitarianism by donating their excess wealth to an egalitarian cause of some sort or even just by giving it to poorer people. Cohen’s pre-occupation is with finding out whether there is a way in which this failure to give up wealth can be justified. It should be noted that for the most part Cohen discusses egalitarianism within what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls the ‘distributive paradigm of justice’. An egalitarian working within this paradigm would assume that an egalitarian order is an order in which the end-state pattern of the distribution of goods is fairly equal. Although many who approach justice in this way – and certainly Cohen – acknowledge that injustice is not *only* about the end-state pattern of distribution of goods, their focus is on this pattern and on finding a way to improve it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Young (1990) argues that rather than being primarily about distribution, injustice is primarily about oppression, even when the notion of distributive justice is extended to non-material goods, such as power, rights, self-respect and opportunity. The distributive paradigm, even when extended to include the non-material, concentrates attention on the end-state pattern of distribution to the neglect of a focus on the processes, relations and contexts from which this pattern results. In this way the causes of maldistribution are obscured. Young (1990, p.38) suggests that a more appropriate way to approach justice is to begin by defining injustice as oppression and domination and to define both of these very broadly:

Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people’s ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen. … Domination consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Persons live within structures of domination if other persons or groups can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions.

When we understand injustice as oppression and domination, topics which cannot comfortably be accommodated within the distributive paradigm, such as questions of power and culture, can be better addressed. Young does not think that we should not concern ourselves at all with distribution, but argues that a focus on oppression and domination ought to be the starting point from which we should begin to look at justice (Young, 1990, p.16). Young believes that this approach is also superior in that it is informed by a more appropriate understanding of what people are in that it recognises that ‘[i]ndividuals are not primarily receivers of goods or carriers of properties, but actors with meanings and purposes, who act with, against, or in relation to one another’ (Young, 1990, p.28).

To further elaborate on the concept of oppression, Young (1990, pp.39-65) identifies and discusses ‘five faces of oppression’: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Young’s discussion of the ‘five faces of oppression’ suggests that different kinds of oppression relate to one another and intersect. This recognition of the way that oppression operates is similar to Marilyn Frye’s (1983) metaphor of a bird-cage which helps us see that to best understand oppression, we need to look at oppressive structures as a whole, rather than focusing on this or that aspect of oppression:

Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by the myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire at any time it wanted to go somewhere…. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment…. (Frye, 1983:4-5).

Frye’s account of oppression emphasises that it is important to consider the different ‘forces and barriers’ that prevent an oppressed person from being free, rather than just to myopically focus on one or another aspect of their position. While Frye is concerned in her essay with demonstrating how patriarchy oppresses women by placing countless small and seemingly insignificant constraints upon women’s action, her way of examining oppression is also helpful when thinking about the way in which different kinds of oppression (for example oppression along race, sex or class lines) as well as different elements of each of these kinds of oppression, intersect and reinforce each other.

Bailey (1998) uses Frye’s account of oppression to provide a parallel account of privilege, showing that to understand the difference between privilege and earned advantages, we need to look at the way in which privilege operates macroscopically. Whereas earned advantages typically advance people only in limited circumstances, privilege has a ‘wild card’ feature which ‘grants extra advantages to holders in a broader variety of circumstances’ (1999:114). To use Peggy McIntosh’s (2004) helpful metaphor, dominant groups are holders of a whole ‘invisible knapsack’ of tools they are able to use to advantage them in a whole range of settings. Bailey also shows that to understand oppression properly we need also to understand privilege – the structural features of oppression generate privilege, thus making it important to be attentive to the ways in which systems of domination oppress some while privileging others (1999:117).

If we consider Young, Frye and Bailey’s discussions of oppression together we are led, firstly, to think about oppression in a way that makes us recognise that oppression has many faces and that people can be oppressed through the operation of numerous forces and barriers which individually seem insignificant.[[5]](#footnote-5) Secondly, we are led to reflect on the way in which unjust orders confer privilege on some while oppressing others and to recognise that privilege too has many faces in that people who are privileged typically have all kinds of different advantages (some seemingly insignificant when considered on their own) which work together to create unjust inequalities between different societal groups. If we bear these points in mind, then the question of renouncing privilege becomes more complicated than Cohen’s account suggests, and we come to recognise some of the possibilities and limitations of the intriguing idea that Cohen very briefly introduces towards the end of his essay – the idea that those who are unjustly privileged could use their privileges in such a way as to work towards the dismantling of the order that confers them.

**Renouncing Privilege**

Rent a flat above a shop, cut your hair and get a job.
Smoke some fags and play some pool, pretend you never went to school.
But still you'll never get it right
'cos when you're laid in bed at night watching roaches climb the wall
If you call your Dad he could stop it all.
You'll never live like common people
You'll never do whatever common people do
You'll never fail like common people
You'll never watch your life slide out of view, and dance and drink and screw
Because there's nothing else to do.

- Pulp, Common People.

Cohen’s concern is to consider whether the rich egalitarian can *justifiably* retain his wealth or whether, for the sake of consistency, his embracing of egalitarianism should result in his renouncement of his wealth. But if we keep the above discussion on oppression and privilege in mind, we are led to recognise that the rich are generally not privileged only through having money and that their renouncement of their wealth will not divest them of other privileges, nor will the attainment of an equal distribution of wealth end oppression.

If we insist on thinking about both oppression and privilege as multi-faceted, then we are encouraged not to focus on only one aspect of privilege such as the superfluity of money. But, if we think of privilege in this way, then we recognize, as does Marilyn Frye, that ‘*privilege* is itself an odd sort of self-regenerative thing which, once you’ve got it, cannot be simply shucked off like a too-warm jacket’ (1992, p.29). Of course, we are able to refuse some privileges, but others, particularly those that are accorded to people on account of physical features like a white skin or male sex, are difficult to fully renounce.

While it is easy to accept that privileges such as those granted to white people or men cannot easily be thrown off, Frye shows how the no-longer-rich-because-she-gave-her-wealth-to-Oxfam egalitarian is also not fully able to throw off the privilege she had by virtue of being wealthy. Speaking of her own consideration of whether or not she should give up her fairly well-paid job, Frye (1992, p.29) says:

it seems more of a privilege to be able to *turn down* a [well-paid][[6]](#footnote-6) administrative job than to be in a position to get it in the first place. …. The person who does not take the [well-paid] job can handle the resulting poverty relatively well because the same skills, training, connections and style which fit her for the job, enable her to be a reasonably crafty consumer and manipulator of bureaucratic process, and give her a network of well-connected acquaintances; and she starts out her poverty in good health .... For most people, poverty is intolerably destructive; for most people, choosing it would be choosing a form of suicide. Having relative poverty as a genuine and interesting option is itself a privilege.

Once the question of the rich egalitarian’s wealth is put into a context in which we see her wealth as only one facet of a relatively privileged life, we begin to see that giving that wealth away does not fundamentally change her position in the system that privileges her and oppresses others. Privilege is a ‘sticky web’ (Frye, 1992:151) that the privileged cannot so easily escape.

Furthermore, some of those who have reflected on white privilege point out that renouncing privilege can be a way of keeping attention on the privileged without achieving very much for the oppressed. Alison Bailey discusses how some white people have tried to refuse their privilege by trying to take on an identity other than white. Acknowledging and seeking to escape their white privilege they try ‘imaginatively refashioning [their identities] as privilege-free’ (Bailey, 1999:90). Sometimes this entails ‘acting Black’ or results in claims by white people such as ‘I really feel like a Black person inside’. Bailey rejects such strategies arguing that the cultural impersonation of black people

does not divest whites of privilege ... it makes [white people] look silly. In most cases, ‘acting Black’ so as to avoid confronting whiteness is both a trivialization of oppression faced by African Americans and a disingenuous destruction of one's own identity (Bailey 1999:90)

Trying to renounce privilege can effectively mean that the privileged person, burdened with guilt, acts so as to alleviate the guilt he or she feels on recognition of her privilege, but fails to actually cease being privileged. Rather than trying to cast off our privilege, Sandra Bartky (2002, p.80) argues that the ‘ineradicable distance’ between the privileged and the oppressed must be recognised so that we can ‘discourage the temptation on the part of the advantaged one to believe that her oppressor’s guilt can be overcome through heroic acts of ego-identification’. She goes on to stress that ‘the preservation of the otherness of the Other works against her re-colonization’ (p.80). Bartky is not speaking here so much about renouncingprivilege but about privileged people identifying with the oppressed; however, her point is relevant in that renouncing privileges such as class or white or male privilege may entail identifying with and attempting to take up the same position as the oppressed person. As Bartky (2002, p. 80) warns, this can ‘rob the disadvantaged of her specificity and uniqueness’. Wanting to *become* like the oppressed (or literally to join the oppressed) can be a way for the privileged to try to discharge their burden of guilt, but ultimately such attempts neither actually divest them of privilege and can entail a failure to recognise the nature and uniqueness of the experience of the oppressed, as suggested in the Pulp song quoted at the beginning of this section.

What Bartky and Bailey both accept is the impossibility of the privileged person ever actually fully taking up the position of the oppressed, or even fully identifying with the oppressed. This is not to say that either of them believe that the privileged should not try to understand the position of the oppressed or even to share in it to some extent, but just to emphasise that the sense of guilt and complicity felt by the privileged person who recognises the injustice of the order that privileges her, cannot be overcome through the apparent renouncing of privilege because privilege is not something easily shrugged off.

Furthermore, not only is it impossible for the privileged person to fully throw off privilege and become one with the oppressed, but even if he or she could achieve this, it could be argued that a complete renouncing of privilege is not desirable. As Frye (1993:30) points out renouncing privilege does not mean extricating oneself from an unjust system, but rather simply relocating oneself in it and providing another victim for the exploitation and oppression that occurs within the unjust system.

Similarly, Bartky criticises Simone Weil, who is admired by some for having reportedly starved herself to death in solidarity with the victims of the Second World War,[[7]](#footnote-7) saying that

Weil’s self-inflicted sufferings seem to me to have been futile, if not masochistic. To stand in solidarity with others is to work actively to eliminate their misery not to arrange one’s life so as to share it (Bartky, 2002: 74)

Unless the renouncing of the privilege in question is likely to actually help change the oppressive situation, renouncing privilege could simply allow the privileged person to acquire a martyr-like status and to divest themselves of their feelings of guilt without actually making any significant contribution to ending injustice.

**Using Privilege**

None of the above suggests that in no cases should privilege of any kind ever be renounced. What it does suggest, though, is that entirely renouncing privilege is impossible and that trying to divest ourselves of privilege can, in certain instances at least, be undesirable. Those who try to divest themselves of privileges are unlikely to fully succeed – the no-longer-rich-because-she-gave-her-money-to-Oxfam egalitarian and the black-acting white, for example, do not share the same position as a poor or a black person, and their sacrifice may function to keep attention on themselves or to alleviate their feelings of guilt without doing very much to end injustice. But where does this leave us? Bailey (1999:88) talks of the ‘political paralysis’ she felt on realising that she was unjustly privileged, but that she could not fully throw off this privilege. If we cannot divest ourselves fully of privilege, but we do not want to use privilege as ‘its use only fortifies the system [we] want to demolish’, what can we do?

Bailey accepts that using privilege, rather than renouncing it, involves complicity with the unjust order which grants the privilege, but argues it may be that using privilege is ultimately best despite this complicity. She provides the helpful example of the dilemma of a white American university professor who is asked by an African American student to assist the student with an administrative matter as the racist attitudes of some university administrators have resulted in unfair treatment of the student (Bailey, 1999:94-96; 103-104). If the professor accompanies the student to the administration block and uses her authority to sort the issue out, the student manages to get past the particular hurdle in her way, but the professor’s intervention ‘reinscribes, rather than undermines, the script that teaches the [admin] staff to listen to and believe white people and does not honor the explanations of most students of color’ (Bailey, 1999:95). But if she declines to use her white privilege in favour of the student, for fear ‘of buttressing the system that gives privilege currency’ (1999:103), the student might rightfully be angry. In refusing to use her white privilege, the professor is in the privileged position of deciding what aspects of oppression she is most comfortable addressing and is insensitive to the immediate needs of a relatively powerless person.

Sonia Kruks (2005) provides another very nice example, this time not hypothetical. She discusses how Simone de Beauvoir used her privileged position as a well-known French intellectual in order to advocate for the release of Djamila Boupacha, an Algerian woman accused of planting a bomb during the Algerian war of independence. De Beauvoir was able to publish an article in the prominent *Le Monde* newspaper giving Boupacha’s side of the story and encouraging French readers to put pressure on the Algerian colonial and French governments to release Boupacha. She also went on to engage in further activism in favour of Boupacha, all the while using her position of influence to shift French public opinion on the Algerian War. Kruks (2005:193-194) argues that De Beauvoir could be criticised for objectifying Boupacha in her activism and for choosing to present her in ways that most concurred with the arguments De Beauvoir sought to advance without consulting her. Kruks (ref) also shows how De Beauvoir made use of problematic patriotic rhetoric about how the French were betraying their own honour through their actions in Algeria, thereby presenting the maintenance of French honour and integrity as a vitally important reason for ending the war. Thus, she used her own position of privilege in order to act in solidarity with the oppressed in Algeria, but did so in a way that, as in the Bailey example, could be said to reinscribe, rather than undermine, some aspects of the prevailing unjust order.

A third helpful example is Richard Ohmann’s (1987) thoughtful discussion of his role in promoting Women’s Studies at his university. He points out that his membership of the ‘old boys’ network’ at his university made him able to contribute in very many helpful ways to the promotion of Women’s Studies:

I knew how budgets worked, how faculty committees worked, how a program without a faculty T.O. could influence departmental hiring; I knew what senior faculty members and administrators were likely to be hostile and helpful (Ohmann, 1987:185).

But, he notes, there is something a little ‘fishy’ about this idea of using male privilege in order to undermine it. His presence in meetings with the-powers-that-be may perhaps help Women’s Studies appear less threatening to the male establishment, but he wonders if this is really a good thing. His presence in meetings with feminist colleagues in the Women’s Studies department may close off certain discussions as, in some ways, he represents ‘practical rationality, the old institutions, the old boys’ (Ohmann, 1987:186).

What these three examples show is that using privilege in order to try to undermine the unjust order that brought about this privilege involves much uncertainty and unavoidable complicity. In each instance it is not all that clear that the actions of the privileged actors above really will *ultimately* work to undermine injustice. But what all three authors make clear is, firstly, that it is impossible for us to act ‘purely’ – we cannot use our privilege without some complicity with the unjust order; and secondly, that this is no reason to withdraw and to refuse to act.

On the first point, Kruks (2005:181) says that a lot of recent feminist work on privilege has focused on ‘a discourse of personal self-discovery, confession, and guilt’ leading privileged women to embark on projects of ‘self-transformation’ rather than political action. But Kruks calls this preoccupation with ‘working on oneself’ a ‘dangerous purism’ (2005, pp. 181, 185) and stresses that acting to end injustice becomes very difficult when one is preoccupied with trying to find a ‘pure’ way to participate in struggles against injustice. Similarly, Bailey (1999, p. 101) argues that Americans of colour:

are not concerned with whether white people can find philosophically sound ways out of their dilemmas; they want to know whether I can be counted on as an ally, whether I am willing to take risks, whether I am listening to them, and whether I am willing to use privilege to help gain access to resources and opportunities in a system designed to exclude them. Philosophical focus on my own dilemma does not engage directly with these concerns. More pragmatic responses need to be explored.

Ohmann (1989) too stresses that while introspection can be helpful and important, practical action in the interests of the oppressed is required. After discussing all the limitations on his participation in promoting Women’s Studies he ends his discussion light-heartedly by saying that he will try to remember all these difficulties at an upcoming meeting where he is to represent Women’s Studies but ‘what the hell, the Women’s Studies Program does need a halftime secretary and that will be at the top of my agenda’ (p.188). While he cannot fully share the position of women oppressed by patriarchy, he can use his position of influence to get the Women’s Studies Program a secretary!

Kruks, Bailey and Ohmann all emphasise the importance of engaging in political action rather than withdrawing and reflecting on our privilege in order to try to find a ‘pure’ way to act. A preoccupation with our own innocence in struggles for justice is very much a preoccupation of the privileged. What is needed is political action that will further justice. As Sandra Bartky (2002:148) says ‘we need to organize, not to mourn and not merely to “bleed”’. Rather than worrying about the purity of our own actions, we should just ‘find those organizations that appear to be making a difference, join them, support them’ (Bartky, 2002:148).

**Some Cautionary Comments**

In many ways the position taken up by Kruks, Bailey, Ohmann and Bartky is a liberating one for those weighed down with guilt about our own privileged position. It insists that we need not first purify ourselves of our guilt nor find ways to escape complicity as guilt cannot be fully shed nor complicity fully avoided. Rather, we need simply to find the right organizations, join them and use what abilities and resources we have as privileged people to assist in the fight for justice. But, while I find this position very appealing and – for the most part – convincing and correct, I do think that there are some notes of caution that need to be considered.

Firstly, all the above assumes that it is possible for those who are privileged by an unjust order to *genuinely* desire to bring about the end of such an order, but this is not obviously the case. It is most obviously in the interest of the privileged to defend the existing order and, indeed, almost all those who benefit from a particular kind of unjust order fail to oppose this order. We can rightfully be sceptical of any person who claims to seek to bring about the end of a state of affairs that so obviously benefits them. Consider the comments of one of the architects of black consciousness in South Africa, Steve Biko, who says:

… total identification with an oppressed group [by someone who is not a member of the oppressed group] in a system that forces one group to enjoy privilege and to live on the sweat of another, is impossible’ (Biko, 2004[1972], p.71)

While solidarity with the oppressed need not require ‘total identification’, it is worth thinking very carefully about the degree to which those who are privileged by a particular unjust order are actually able to identify with and *genuinely* act in the interests of those who are oppressed. While I have assumed throughout this essay that it is indeed possible for a privileged person, out of some kind of enlightened self-interest or perhaps even because of something that might be termed ‘altruism’ or ‘benevolence’, to genuinely desire to bring about the end of an order that privileges him or her; I do think that this desire is always going to be affected by some degree of ambivalence, a topic I hope to be able to discuss at more length on another occasion.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Accepting then, for now, the possibility of solidarity by those privileged by an unjust order with those oppressed by that same order, I think it worth giving careful attention to the conditions under which those who are not oppressed can best understand the situation of the oppressed and best be able to act in the interests of the oppressed. If we’re going to follow Bartky and join ‘organizations that appear to be making a difference’ (2002:148), how are we to know which organisations are making the greatest difference or even those that are making an appreciable difference? Much moral and political philosophy seems to assume that there are quite straightforward ways in which relatively privileged people can act to further the interests of the oppressed – that the problem is principally one of a lack of *willingness* to contribute rather than a lack of *ability* to contribute meaningfully. Think, for example, of much of Peter Singer’s work which suggests that donating to charities like Oxfam is straightforwardly good and in the interests of the poor and marginalised. This assumption would be questioned by writers such as Manji and O’Coill (2002) who argue that many international NGOs actually play a role in perpetuating rather than eliminating oppression in many poor parts of the world.[[9]](#footnote-9) Just because an organisation claims to be fighting poverty or racism or sexism or some other form of oppression, does not mean that supporting that organization will be an effective way to fight for justice, nor that members of the oppressed groups concerned actually feel represented by such organisations – and, of course, there is likely to much disagreement among the oppressed about the efficacy of various organisations, movements, ideologies and strategies.

It is here that some of the writings about struggles against colonialism in Africa are helpful. During anti-colonial struggles there was some debate about the potential role of the ‘petit bourgeoisie’ – of those Africans who were privileged (at least in some respects) by the colonial order, but who had become convinced of the injustice of colonialism and who longed to fight alongside the oppressed majority against imperialism. Two of the most prominent activist intellectuals of that era, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, both speak about the necessity for such relatively privileged elites to immerse themselves in the world of the oppressed. For example, Fanon speaks of how it is only when the colonized elite intellectual ‘comes into touch again with his people’ that the ‘artificial sentinel’ inside him which defends the values of the coloniser is finally ‘turned into dust’ (1963, p. 36). Similarly, he argues: ‘Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we [relatively privilege elites] must come; and it is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light’ (Fanon, 1963, p. 183).[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, Cabral speaks of the need for elite Africans to experience a ‘cultural conversion’ or ‘re-Africanisation’ (Cabral 1970, see also Chilcote, 1991, p.52) and stresses that this can only occur ‘through daily contact with the popular masses in the communion of sacrifice required by the struggle’ (Cabral, 1970). Cabral also speaks of elites needing to ‘return to the source’ and insists that this return has to be more than just a reassertion of the value of African culture and an interest in African history; rather it must be connected to mass popular struggle (Cabral, 1970, see also Cabral, 1972; Peterson, 2007).

Fanon and Cabral insist that it is only when Africans who are relatively privileged by the colonial order break with their position of privilege and immerse themselves in the struggles of the oppressed, that they will be able to act in solidarity with the oppressed. Both emphasise that more than an intellectual interest in African culture or history is needed for colonial elites to be able to stand alongside the ordinary oppressed masses against the colonisers. Indeed, Cabral in particular comes close to suggesting that the privileged do indeed need to *renounce* rather than use their privilege – he insists that the petit bourgeoisie ‘must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong’ (Cabral, 1966). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Matthews, 2010:176-177), a careful reading of Cabral suggests that he does not believe that it is possible or desirable for the colonised elite to become *the same as* the oppressed – rather, he would like to see them identify with the oppressed and display willingness to work alongside the oppressed so that they are able to use their skills and their particular understanding of the nature of imperial subjugation in order to advance the interests of the colonised. Similarly, Fanon argues that the colonial middle class ought to ‘put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities’ (1963, p.120). The acknowledgement by Fanon and Cabral that skills and knowledge about the nature of imperialism that the colonised elites have acquired is useful in the struggle suggests that they too believe that privilege can be used to confront unjust orders.

It should be acknowledged here that Fanon and Cabral are writing about a particular ‘in-between’ class of people here – of those who are both privileged and oppressed by the racist colonial order. Such individuals are not in quite the same position as the various privileged actors described above, but I do not think it inappropriate to suggest that those who occupy a less ‘in-between’ position are also more able to contribute to the struggles of the oppressed when they begin to have sustained, meaningful contact with the oppressed. Also, it is fair to say that many other individuals occupy ‘in-between’ positions which can be likened, at least to some extent, to the ‘in-between’ position occupied by the colonized elites.

Marilyn Frye provides a similar argument to that of Fanon and Cabral in her reflections on her ‘absurd’ position as someone who has an establishment position as an academic, but is attempting to use that position to oppose establishment values. She says:

My conclusion, for now, is that a feminist can conscientiously hold and use an establishment position, if she is simultaneously cultivating skills, attitudes, identity and an alternative community, with and in which she can function without that position, and which will keep her honest while she has it (Frye, 1992, p.35).

The inclusion of ‘an alternative community’ is, I think, important here. Elsewhere, Frye shows how her blindness to her own white privilege has been partly overcome through contact with and confrontation by black women (see Frye 1983, pp. 110-127). The important point that Frye, along with Fanon and Cabral, are making in their very different contexts is that privileged people can best understand how to act alongside the oppressed if they immerse themselves in the worlds of the oppressed and move into spaces where those who are oppressed are able to show them up and make them accountable.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This contact will require the renouncing or placing at risk of some privileges, even if it is acknowledged that privilege can never be fully thrown off. In the case of the struggle against colonialism, individuals among the colonized elite who wanted to be part of the struggle against colonialism were unlikely to be able to continue to occupy their privileged positions once they had thrown their lot in with struggles for independence and, indeed, placed not only their livelihoods, but their very lives at risk. Using one’s privilege in solidarity with the oppressed will inevitably place at least some aspects of one’s privileged position at risk.

A further cautionary comment is required here. Shannon Sullivan warns of the ‘habit [among white people] of claiming a “right” to project themselves into any and all spaces’ (2006, p. 165). While I argue above that privileged people can best determine how to support the struggles of the oppressed through sustained contact with them, caution is required regarding just how privileged people enter into such contact.[[12]](#footnote-12) Scholz (2008) deals with this issue at some length insisting that political solidarity requires that ‘[privileged] individuals who commit to action in solidarity do so in a non-domineering way so as to avoid reinscribing in the solidary group itself any privileged social state that may have enjoyed in the larger society’ (p.181).[[13]](#footnote-13) Relatedly, while privilege can be used in solidarity with the oppressed, it should be acknowledged that the assistance of privileged people is not always needed by the oppressed in their struggles. Talking about the struggle of black people against apartheid, Biko stresses that ‘blacks do not need a [white] go-between in this struggle for their emancipation’ (1970/2004:27). Here and elsewhere he stresses that the struggle for the liberation of black people must be led by black people and expresses his frustration with white liberals who he calls ‘self-appointed trustees of black interests’ (1972/2004:71). Privileged people are often accustomed to seeing themselves as important and their contribution to any project as valuable and may find it difficult to participate in struggles for justice with sufficient humility. It is for this reason that I am suspicious, for example, of Paul Kivel’s call for white Americans to be ‘strong white allies’ in black struggles in the United States – why does he assume that white people are able to be *strong* allies? Is it not likely that privileged people’s contribution to struggles against oppression will often be small and relatively insignificant? Indeed, Biko characterises white contributions to black liberation in South Africa to be similar to the provision of ‘lubricating material’ that helps the necessary change of gears to happen a little more smoothly – white people, he suggests, are not going to be leading the struggle and taking centre stage in dismantling racism, but they can help in very small and invisible ways to make the changes happen a little more smoothly (Biko 2004[1970]:27-28). Privileged actors who wish to assist in struggles against oppression need to be willing to relate to oppressed actors with the kind of humility that does not usually characterise relations between privileged and oppressed people and must be willing to submit to the leadership of the oppressed.

The cautionary comments above suggest that while privilege cannot be fully renounced and while complicity with unjust orders cannot be fully avoided, some aspects of privilege may need to be renounced and some care must be taken that our involvement with struggles for justice does not replicate the problematic relationships between the privileged and the oppressed within these struggles for justice.

**Returning to the Rich Egalitarian**

To summarise and conclude, let us return to Cohen’s rich egalitarian who wants to know whether or not he is obliged to give up his wealth as a consequence of his commitment to egalitarianism (Cohen’s discussion gave me the distinct impression that the egalitarian he had in mind was a white man, so let us call him ‘he’ here and assume him to be white and Western). The foregoing discussion suggests the following responses to the rich egalitarian’s dilemma. Firstly, the rich egalitarian can best understand his position of privilege if he recognises the broader ‘sticky web’ (Frye) of privilege of which his wealth is only one part. Secondly, he ought to realise that fully renouncing his privilege is not possible – even if he were to give away all his wealth, he could not come to share the position of those whose poverty was not self-chosen, nor is he able to renounce all other privileges he may have – such as the education his wealth has bought him, the privileges accorded to him as a white person and as a man. Thirdly, that he might well, as suggested by Cohen towards the end of his essay, be better able to contribute to struggles for justice through using rather than renouncing his privilege. Fourthly, that his concern for figuring out whether it is morally defensible to hang on to his wealth, along with the various very different concerns other privileged actors have for discovering a ‘pure’ way to respond to their privilege, are – at least to some extent – problematic in that these concerns keep attention on the privileged when perhaps it is in the interests of justice to shift this focus.[[14]](#footnote-14) Fifthly, if the rich egalitarian chooses to try to use his privilege in solidarity with the oppressed, he should acknowledge that this will inevitably involve complicity with the unjust order. Finally, while this complicity is unavoidable, it is worth thinking very carefully about the conditions under which privilege can most fruitfully be used in solidarity with the oppressed and recognising that quite often the privileged may have very little to offer in such struggles. It is also important to recognise that one can best act in solidarity with people with whom one has sustained meaningful contact.

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1. G.A. Cohen, discussed below, provides a whole string of helpful examples of this kind of discomfort, including a lengthy discussion of the Fulvia Morgana example (see Cohen, 2001, pp.151-154). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The book draws on Cohen’s earlier published work. Chapter 10, which is the Chapter under discussion here, is based on an article with the same name as the book (Cohen, 2000), but the book chapter is longer and the additional sections are a very helpful addition to the original article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Cohen, 2001, pp. 178-179. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note, for example, that Cohen insists that while the unjust power division that results in maldistribution is the *causally* fundamental injustice, he insists that it is not the *normatively* fundamental injustice, since it is plausible to say that the power difference qualifies as unjust *because* it (standardly) generates an unjust income distribution’ (Cohen, 2001, p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean Harvey’s *Civilized Oppression* (1999) is also helpful in elaborating how oppression occurs even in the absence of physical violence of the systematic use of the law to exclude people. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Frye is writing in 1976 and uses the example of a $15,000 a year job. I’ve adapted it here as $15,000 sounds somewhat less appealing today than it did at the time of her writing about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note that there is some debate as to whether Weil actually chose to starve herself to death, and so the criticism may not be apt of Weil in particular, but applies generally to the idea of extreme self-denial in solidarity with oppressed others. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Many of my concerns here have been motivated by Biko’s critiques of white liberals (see Biko 1970, 1972). Biko argues, for example, that some white liberals seek to contribute to black struggles as a way of appeasing their consciences, thus making it easier for them to continue to enjoy the privileges that they subconsciously do not wish to see threatened (see in particular Biko 1972, pp.70-71). In much of Biko’s writing he seems very sceptical about the very possibility of white solidarity with black struggles. In a very different way, G.A. Cohen’s essay also highlights this issue when he stresses that we want to know whether someone could *really* believe in egalitarianism while at the same time be wealthy or whether rich egalitarians are actually not egalitarians at all, even though they profess to be so. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Other critiques of the work of NGOs are provided by Hearn (2007), Shivji (2007) and Klees (2002). Disagreements about the usefulness of donations to organizations like Oxfam are also a subject of the debate between Singer and Andrew Kuper in *Ethics and International Affairs,* 2002, volume 16, no.1 (Singer 2002a, Singer 2000b, Kuper 2002a, Kuper 2002b). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a contemporary discussion of the idea of the need for the privileged to immerse themselves in this zone of instability, see Pithouse (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also Pithouse (forthcoming), for comments on this issue with particular regard to NGOs and civil society. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sullivan spends quite some time reflecting on how white people can best insure that their contact with black people is not intrusive and unwelcome – see Sullivan (2006: need pg refs, not in my white Africans article). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is a concern throughout the fifth chapter of Scholz *Political Solidarity* (2008, pp. 151-188). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. My essay is obviously subject to the same criticism here. Perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, deliberations of the role of the privileged are not very important or even act to obscure more important discussions. However, I do think that in the absence of such discussions and, importantly, in the light of what sometimes seems to be a general assumption that privileged actors can and do quite unproblematically act in the interests of the oppressed, it is worth thinking a little more critically about what privileged actors can – and cannot! – do. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)