

Title: Phoebe Maltz Bovy, How Useful is Privilege Checking?
Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy
Episode: 74

Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Phoebe Maltz Bovy is my guest today. She's the author of *The Perils of "Privilege": Why Injustice Can't be Solved by Accusing Others of Advantage*, which was published in 2017. Her essays on privilege and politics have also appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic*, the *Washington Post* and other publications.

She also co-hosts the heterodox online show *Feminine Chaos* with Kat Rosenfield. It's available in streaming video on Bloggingheads.tv and as a podcast. We'll be talking about her book and some of her more recent articles.

Hi Phoebe. Welcome to the show.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Hi Chris. Thanks for having me on.

Chris Martin: So you were the author of a book called *The Perils of Privilege* and you've talked about privilege on your Bloggingheads show as well and written about it.

Tell me about what you discovered in the course of doing research about how people use the word "privilege" in academia and in just general discourse right now.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: So it struck me just years ago on – when I was a blogger and a PhD student. I was doing my PhD in French. So this didn't really come up so much in the course work or anything just like – as I was in my spare time reading a lot of different blogs. But people were constantly calling out one another's privilege online and if I say that now in 2019, it means something – it implies something different than what it meant when I was first noticing it like maybe around like 2009 or so.

So now if you say privilege without a context, it suggests – often it suggests white privilege, but it just suggests something a little bit maybe more thought through in certain respects. Then it really meant like you're fancy but you don't realize you're fancy.

Like you're posh but you don't realize you're posh or you're posh and you haven't properly sort of apologized for it, things like that. So that was how I first noticed privilege kind of in online discourse.

Chris Martin: It was just discussions among academics?

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: No, no. This would have been some academics, some lawyers, some random people on the internet. I don't know who they were. A lot of feminist bloggers. All sorts of people were using it.

In terms of where it comes up in academia, it's a little different. So basically, I noticed it first just in my kind of spare time activities as – I was doing some journalism. Also just doing a lot of blogging and reading internet comments.

But in academia it comes up in kind of a different way which is just a lot of sort of – it functions as a way of avoiding discussing material as in like money type issues. So rather than talking about how high tuition is at a school or like at a university or in – especially a US university or talking about what percent of the student body comes from like the top one percent of wealth in that country.

There will instead be a discussion about privilege and privilege not meaning wealth, but privilege meaning – well, that's just sort of what I explored and what I found – the most interesting thing I found in this was really to do with like college applications and admissions in the US where you have to write – to get into a top university, you have to write an admissions essay and it's very important.

Like the most important thing, if you're reading about this online, the most – and I just know this and I totally do. I'm American and went to the University of Chicago for undergrad. I'm aware of all of these things.

You have to not seem privileged. It's paramount. You have to not come across as privileged. You can pay a lot of money to a tutor who can show you how to not come across as privileged.

What just amazed me about this is at the same time is there's this whole thing about like don't mention your new Ferrari in your college application. You actually have to be very privileged, virtually have to be, to get into one of these schools to begin with to attend the school and pay for not just the tuition but the implied social life.

Like if you just have scholarships but don't have extra money for whatever, the ski vacation everybody is going on, you know, maybe you will be left out, things like this. It's taboo to question this also and that was another aspect of this that interests me.

It's not so much what I explore in the book. But just when I think about it now, if you say that – I mean I mentioned it briefly in the book. But if you say that you think privileged conversations are not great, people are going to assume that this means either that you don't think inequality is real or that you think inequality is real but fantastic and you think everything is absolutely fine.

So you sort of situate yourself in the cultural conversation in the place of the people who are saying like white privilege is a myth, male privilege is a myth, all of these things, and that's not at all where I'm putting myself in the conversation.

That's not where I stand on these things and I think that was sort of the trickiest aspect in a lot of ways with this book is that I think people wanted it to be a few different things that it wasn't. I think some people wanted it to be – privilege is a myth. Actually it's – everything is fine or actually hierarchies are great, like existing hierarchies or they wanted it to be – like the perils of privilege like about how people who are on the top of whichever hierarchy are evil or something like that, which isn't really that either. Yeah.

Chris Martin: You found that people also tend to say, “Check your privilege,” and I've read about this. I've never actually heard someone use it in a conversation. But part of your argument is that “check your privilege” tends to backfire and not accomplish much. So talk about that a bit.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So the expression that I've noticed the most early on and still I'm obsessed with it is “Your privilege is showing.” Where you see it will more often I think be online than in person. I've heard anecdotes about it like in a classroom setting. But I think it is a very online phenomenon which I don't think makes it any less real.

But yeah – and what I'm obsessed with about “Your privilege is showing,” is it isn't telling you that it's a problem that society is structured such that you have these unearned advantages that you shouldn't have.

It's saying that the problem is that the privilege is showing. OK? That if you were just discreet about your unearned advantages or had the etiquette – if you were even a little bit more posh and knew how to properly present your unearned advantages, that that would be fine and you see this a lot just in terms of – I mean I keep returning to the topic of feminist essays but also women's lifestyle essays although these two things have kind of to some extent merged in just mainstream articles, but just where unless the writer acknowledges her privilege, she will get a ton of feedback about how she hasn't acknowledged her privilege.

So that's where this “Your privilege is showing” comes up and this came up recently with the – in a book review of the author – Lindy West's new book where a reviewer in the Times pointed out that Lindy West is a feminist writer and writes about her own life and about ways she has been marginalized that do not happen to be the – like all possible forms of marginalization and the reviewer took her to task for not spending enough time addressing the struggles or the – no, not the struggles, sorry. The murders in fact of trans-women of color when that is not Lindy West's particular plight.

She writes about being white and about being fat and about being discriminated against on the basis of her weight and her gender. Yeah. So basically, “Your privilege is showing,” is not – obviously in the New York Times review, it wasn't “Your privilege is showing,” but that approach really lives on. This is like a recent review.

The other thing though that is amazing about “Your privilege is showing,” is that people who defend talking about privilege in this way will say, well, it's not about you. It's not about you. The people who received privilege checking as a personal critique are making it all about them. But it's not about them.

But then you think about the expression. Your privilege is showing. It is about you. I don't think somebody is mistaken if they think it is about them.

Chris Martin: Right, right. I definitely think there's – well, wherever you go in the world, there are divisions and social class and you can take any two increments, one above the other, and people with a slightly higher increment don't understand some of the things they can take for granted because of their position in the social class.

So you can pretty much go to any position in the social – a person in any position in the social class and say that I'm – at some point, your privilege is showing because you don't understand some of the comforts you have relative – so even someone pretty low is – someone earning \$20,000 a year can take certain things for granted that a person earning \$5000 a year cannot. So ...

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Yeah. I mean in terms of that – so this is really important. I think – I believe that privilege is a thing and does make people oblivious to the situations that they don't know personally. I think that's 100 percent true and if anything, that the way privilege discourse plays out obscures that because I think it makes it seem as though it is an achievable – and it's not just that it's an achievable goal but it should be the main goal of sort of social justice is making people aware of their privileges, that that's really the goal is making sure that everybody has checked their own privilege, has contemplated it properly and publicly in the right language in a way that makes everybody happy.

I'm saying that no, I think people or all of us, whatever our situations in life, unaware of things we haven't dealt with. I think that's unavoidable and kind of the human condition. I don't think that you achieve anything sort of – I mean I think it's – I think as a matter of politeness, it's good to sort of be self-aware in that sense.

You know, it's like you're more pleasant to be around if you're self-aware. But that's not actually some sort of social justice commitment. If somebody has something due to structural inequality that they shouldn't which is – gets them another hole, sinkhole topic of whether it makes sense to think of things as privileges, if they're things everybody should have. Maybe not but that's something else.

But yeah, I just don't think that acknowledging – I think there has been this huge, huge, huge overemphasis especially in academia of – on acknowledging privilege, on properly showcasing privilege and it's just sort of – it's not even necessarily that it's instead of doing something about it. It's just sort of – it's almost a separate thing. It's this etiquette that's in place.

Chris Martin: Right. And you do mention the concept of privilege in some ways originates with Peggy McIntosh's article because that was the first major article taking this perspective. When I first read it, I had mixed reactions to it. Overall, I think it's not an article where McIntosh really argues that people need to constantly check their privilege. It's an article that helps you take the perspective of someone who's African-American in the United States if you're white.

So how do you think we ended up starting with an article like that, that helped you with perspective-taking and ended up in a culture where we're now expecting people to do that all the time?

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Well, I think if you look at what – so just in terms of where the concept of privilege comes from, I mean I don't go into every single like historical facet of where it comes up. But that – the Peggy McIntosh concept of unpacking the knapsack, that is really where privilege in the way it's discussed today I think comes from. I think that if you look at her checklist and that – this is something I discuss in my book.

Basically some of the things she lists as her privileges as a white person in America have to do with exactly that. Others have to do with being Peggy McIntosh in America and her social class, her career, her specificity just in general. Certain things didn't really add up as having to do with whiteness. Others did.

So where I think this matters in general in terms of how this has played out is that I think what has happened and I think – and I write about this and this is – I think if anything, become more the case, at least as much the case since I was writing this.

But something has happened in this conversation. Not our conversation but I mean like the cultural conversation about privilege where white privilege and socioeconomic privilege get kind of mixed up in this way where the people who are most vocally sort of apologizing for or showcase – whatever you want to call it, their white privilege tend to be people who are also privileged in other ways and then you get people who are white but not otherwise privileged saying, "Wait a second. That's not me." Then you get this whole, "No way," but they have to acknowledge their white privilege.

It's like they are privileged in so far as they're white but they're not privileged in all the other ways that somebody like Peggy McIntosh might be and then I think that that has sort of muddled things in this whole notion that – it's also sort of – made it seem as though the problem is that people who have unearned advantages need to just get it together and realize that they should shed those unearned advantages.

I think the problem with this is that most people, regardless of demographic traits, feel that they don't have enough and are probably right about that. So this notion that, you know, that doesn't give them an excuse to be bigoted, it does however mean that an approach of anti-bigotry that says you need to apologize for having everything isn't going to work because they don't think they have everything and they don't have everything and they're not wrong, if that makes sense.

So that's one thing I think happened with sort of – how it got to where it is today. Then the other is just this notion of sort of privilege checking as a kind of online activity. That's sort of like with BuzzFeed quizzes, like how privileged are you and things like this.

It's very shareable content both online and like in classrooms. It's just there's a lot of kind of activities that can go with checking one's privilege and there I think the issue is partly that I think there's something I find disturbing about this kind of requirement that you share everything about yourself and this assumption that if people – is this weird assumption today that people are doing.

So that if you haven't shared a specific obstacle, you can't possibly have had that obstacle and thus you're privileged. So it's this weird thing where people are kind of put into this bind where either they – either they explain exactly every obstacle they've ever faced to everybody at all times, like online or whatever or in the classroom or it's as good as they're admitting that they've never faced any obstacles and they just kind of have to nod along to that.

Chris Martin: So what do you suggest as a solution? I know that's not your area of specialty. You're more of a critical scholar. But when you are asked to talk about solutions, what do you suggest?

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Yeah. It's tricky. So I think a lot of times people have asked me, "So what should you do? If you feel like calling out somebody is privileged, what should you say instead of check your privilege?" and there – my perhaps disappointing answer is sometimes nothing. Sometimes you just – sometimes you need to think about why it is you're wanting to say this.

If you just are kind of trying to point out in an internet argument that somebody else is privileged and there's really no end goal beyond that – I mean if you're doing it just to vent and – fine, go ahead. Then there isn't really any point in an alternative. But if you're trying to have a sort of productive conversation about something, it's possible that nothing is gained by alerting somebody to their privilege and that finding different wording isn't really the answer and especially if it's about a cultural criticism.

Maybe framing everything in terms of privilege to begin with isn't necessarily even the right approach. Like this whole question of like punch up, punch down and all this like maybe – maybe the framework itself is the issue.

But if you want to actually sort of change things substantively, I think what's useful is to just look at where their actual substantive issues you think should be different.

So I think about the difference between – just to give an answer of a more concrete example of this, the difference between seeking out universal healthcare. So I'm American but I live in Canada and I'm loving the universal healthcare here and think about the difference between – either choosing candidates, supporting presidential candidates who would get to that goal and acknowledging the difference between that on the one hand and being like a sort of – head into online arguments about acknowledging the privilege that comes with having health insurance in the States.

I think these are – or calling people out if they haven't been properly aware of the fact that not everybody has the same access to healthcare.

So that's where I think. Like I think it's just – I think this notion that the solution lies in everybody becoming aware of their privileges is just inaccurate and counterproductive. So it's not that I think that the problem is that the word "privilege" has become some sort of too fraught thing and people are too sensitive.

I mean people get defensive if they perceive that they're being criticized or whatever the wording. So that's one area I would change and the other is that I think precision.

So I think if somebody is being racist, sexist, homophobic, whatever it is and you want to call that out, call it out using those terms whereas "privileged" just I think is too abstract and is too likely to just kind of suggest that somebody is rich let's say if they're not and that could be just confusing rather than kind of pointing out what their actual issue is.

Chris Martin: What sort of critiques have you received for the book that you find interesting?

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: I mean some of the critiques are ones that I entirely agree with and I sort of like make them myself which is that it just couldn't do everything. So it's not like the full history of the use of the term "privilege" that it might have been with like infinite time and resources towards it.

Chris Martin: I think other people may have done that already, a few.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: I would have liked that because I did look into that as background and nobody had done that. That's open I believe. Somebody can do that. There are privilege readers like – but the history of the term "privilege," no. I had originally hoped to do more in that area and also just – yeah, like there are a whole bunch of different paths that this could have gone down potentially. Some that would have interested me, others that would have just not really been my area. So I couldn't do everything and that's always – I think for any author, going to be a regret that a book could do absolutely everything.

But ideologically, I mean I think some people probably perceived it – because like it came out in 2017. So I'm trying to remember exactly. I guess as – and I think this is just a function of kind of the media environment in general, that this was a book by somebody who had had it with being called out for privileged and was getting really in a huff.

That's really not what it is at all because I haven't ever been cancelled – I'm not like – because sometimes people have wanted me to tell the story of my cancellation and I was like, well, it's not a thing that has happened to me. So like I've read about these things because they're not what this is.

It's not a memoir. But I mean I think there are a lot of people. I guess the biggest – I would say like from the left pushback has been kind of like no, it's really, really important to talk about privilege because it is.

When I see in forums online where people say like content warning privilege, like obviously I've lost. I've lost this argument in a public – in public opinion in some respects. I also have a lot of people agree with me a lot about it.

Yeah. I think the general trend is for – it is very important to all talk about our privilege and if anything, that has become more so since I wrote this book, which is kind of frustrating. Then from the right, I think it's more that I don't think that the general progressive assessment of who has it easiest and who has it most difficult is inaccurate. I think from the right, that's a problem because I have a progressive outlook on this.

Like the things that progressives generally want changed when they talk about privilege are things that I also want changed. So I'm pointing out hypocrisies and inconsistencies but I'm not saying that the whole thing is wrong.

Yeah, yeah, and I guess – oh, this is actually really – the most important criticism that I've gotten that I really, really wish I would have sort of anticipated and preemptively pushed back against in the book is that it's a lot about the internet and it is. It is unabashedly a lot about people arguing online. Some of that has to do with the sort of – the conditions of production like how I was able to write the book while working, things like this.

But a lot of it – in fact I would even say nearly all of it has to do with what I wanted to write about. Like these are debates that are happening online and because of having started this topic – started being interested in this topic about a decade ago now really and just in an era when – like it was a big deal if an academic had a blog. It was like oh no, like what if people find out that they have a blog? That might be a problem.

Like that was kind of the era I came up in, in a way, and I think – I thought you just had to kind of like be much more tentative about talking about the internet. But this is just a little thing. You know, people arguing a lot and now it's like – I mean the US president is on Twitter. Are you – this is no longer seen as something – you know, most people are meeting their spouses online.

So yeah, it's no longer considered not real life anymore, something marginal to where things are really happening and I think if – and I think what I was trying to highlight in the book about the way privilege checking functions online, when people often don't know at all who they're talking to.

They don't know their demographics. They don't know their identities. They don't know anything. But they just get these senses of oh, this is a fancy person. This is a not fancy person. This – you get people who are Black and they're called out for their white privilege by people who just didn't know that or weren't paying attention because like – because they're not seeing each other. People are not interacting face to face. Often it could just be avatars and pseudonyms.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I mean that happened to me. I'm Indian ethnically, South Asian Indian and I've had ...

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Have you been called out for your white privilege?

Chris Martin: Once, yeah. I guess just once. So maybe that's just so minor now that it's not a big deal. But yeah, there was one time because I mean I have a white name, Chris Martin. It's a Christian name. So I think someone just assumed I was white. Yeah.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: I've heard a lot of similar stories. I even encountered something similar to that in a review of this book where somebody was sort of saying that I didn't – that I was sort of like blithely unaware of the severity of being trolled by Nazis online.

I had to actually – as much as this breaches all sorts of author etiquette go into the comments and be like hi, I'm Jewish. Like I am white. I'm also Jewish. The Nazi trolls have come for me. That was literally like what this part of my book was about.

But yeah, I don't know. I think this is something that we're – it's much more the case online though where people don't know who they're talking to and assume privilege.

I think that yeah, so just in terms of like pushback that I've gotten, I think some of it was this is not this sort of book history that it should be. This is all about these websites and I very meticulously have like links in the index to a lot of websites. That's not done.

But I feel like I wish I would have – there was like one review of it possibly by a law professor that was like defending me for having done this and I felt wow, I should have kind of like done that in the book, defended myself for doing this a little bit more because I think it – the discussions online matter and it matters that they're happening online for how people talk to one another.

Chris Martin: Right. Yeah, I think there's still an age division to some degree. I'm not sure how many people over the age of, I don't know, 45 or 50, are very active on the kinds of forums. Like Tumblr that younger people are active on.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Oh, I've never been active on Tumblr. I don't know. But yeah, I think Twitter is probably – I don't know what the actual age breakdown is but I feel like there's a lot of people active on Twitter who are over 45 that ...

Chris Martin: Right, right. Twitter, I don't know. I sometimes think about – I know there's a lot of research out there on political debates on Twitter and whether people cluster or form silos.

What I don't know is how many people on Twitter are just there for the sports or something else and not really into politics at all and it might be a bit of an age breakdown there too. There's definitely some people who are there for the music discussions and sports discussions and not ...

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: For sure. Whenever I look for just some search term, for something I'm writing and I put in the term and I'm suddenly confronted with the whole world of Twitter that

isn't the people I follow. The first thing I notice isn't oh, they have different politics from the people I follow.

It's like they are there for like K-pop or something totally random that is not at all the topics that – I mean, well, some people I follow are into that. But I'm saying like yeah, you just see that it's like a wide range of interest that people have and it's not – not everybody is talking about whether you're more privileged if you support Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren. Not everybody is having that conversation.

Chris Martin: Do you have any future projects that are in the works right now, another book or articles or anything like that?

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: I mean what I am writing about is sort of female sexuality, specifically heterosexuality in our era. That's what I'm generally writing about but nothing to point anyone to just yet.

Chris Martin: Well, thanks for joining us on the show.

Phoebe Maltz Bovy: Thanks so much for having me.

Chris Martin: You can follow Phoebe on Twitter at “tweetertation”. It's spelled like “dissertation” except with “tweet” at the beginning. You can also listen to our show *Feminine Chaos* or watch it. It's co-hosted with Kat Rosenfield. Online you can watch it at bloggingheads.tv. As a podcast, you can catch it on any major podcast app.

I have included a couple of links to reviews of her books in the show notes for this episode and a couple of links to articles by her. There is also a link to the article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* by Peggy McIntosh, which we discussed in the episode.

Thanks again for listening. As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps more people find out about the show which is really valuable to us.

Also since this is still around Thanksgiving, I would like to thank you for being loyal listeners to the show and I hope you enjoy the episodes coming up in December.

We have Carol Quillen, President of Davidson College and Deb Mashek, Executive Director of Heterodox Academy.

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