

A Reply to Alex Callinicos

a Facebook note, May 2014

In his recent wide-ranging political article on the radical left today [1], Alex Callinicos chose to devote space to a critique of aspects of an academic journal article of mine [2]. Callinicos responds to my claim that forms of oppression such as racism, sexism and heterosexism cannot “simply be explained through class” by reiterating his view that form of oppression should be explained “in terms of the prevailing forces and relations of production.” In a 1990 article of his quoted in my article he presents this arrogantly as “the Marxist claim” – as if there could be only one Marxist approach to explaining oppression -- and in his recent article he calls it “the Marxist approach attacked by Camfield.”

Nothing Callinicos wrote changes my belief that, as I argue in my article, his approach to explaining forms of oppression can never be adequate. Analysis of specific forces and relations of production can indeed explain much about oppression, including, as I mention in my article, the origins of gender and racial oppression. It can also explain a great deal about the reproduction of forms of oppression. For example, my article argues (quoting Sue Ferguson and David McNally) that capital is “dependent on socio-historically located ‘biological processes specific to women – pregnancy, childbirth, lactation’, which ‘induces capital and its state to control and regulate female reproduction and ... to reinforce a male-dominant gender order.’” This is because capitalism relies on the production of the indispensable commodity of labour power in households, mainly by women. When it comes to explaining the persistence of racism today, I think that capitalist imperialism and the ways in which racism is profitable for capital go a long way.

But my contention is that features of a society’s forces and relations of production can never fully explain why forms of oppression are reproduced. This is because forms of oppression generate properties that contribute to their own persistence. These are found in the advantages relative to the conditions of an oppressed group that are conferred on members of a dominant group by how they are positioned by oppression, which we can call privilege [3].

Callinicos ignores my argument that “male privilege gives those who have it a material interest (mediated by class relations, which make this interest much greater for ruling-class men than working-class men, given the magnitude of the former’s stake in capitalism) in maintaining gender oppression.” Racism operates in a similar way for people socially categorized as white. Privilege “necessarily complicates the fight against racism because it convinces white workers that they have something to lose by not being white – which, of course, is true. If they did not get some advantage – and with it, the illusion that the system works for them – then racism would not be effective in dividing... workers.”[4] There is no shortage of examples of how racism is perpetuated by efforts to defend or expand privilege. For example, it is common for white workers to respond to competition for jobs in ways that harm racially-oppressed workers. This kind of response is rooted in the material differentials of privilege and the absence of a compelling practical alternative based on anti-racist working-class solidarity.[5] Campaigns to roll back affirmative action in the US and employment equity in Canada are, in part, defences of racial privilege. Mobilizations against multiculturalism policies and the presence of Muslims in

the public sphere are also, among other things, moves to defend or enhance privilege (the racial advantages at stake here are often tiny or nonexistent in material terms, no matter how meaningful they are to some white people, although policies in European countries that prohibit the wearing of “ostentatious” religious items bar many Muslims from some jobs, which in terms of racial privilege mainly serves to advantage white workers).

Of course, the relative advantages given to members of dominant groups corrode working-class solidarity. They are contrary to the class interests of all workers. That’s why privilege is contradictory for the working class. It’s poison bait, to use a phrase of Theodore Allen’s.

In short, to convincingly explain forms of oppression historical materialists need to go beyond Callinicos’s approach. This is one reason why we need to develop historical materialism by taking up important theoretical insights developed by others directly involved in or influenced by movements against oppression, which is the heart of what my article argues.

Callinicos calls this “merely an adaptation to some of the poststructuralist and postcolonial ideologies prevailing in the academy.” I’ll resist the temptation to suggest what political considerations influence his dogmatic defence of his classical Marxist approach to explaining oppression.

[1] “Thunder on the Left” in *International Socialism* 143, online at isj.org.uk

[2] “Theoretical Foundations of an Anti-Racist Queer Feminist Historical Materialism,” forthcoming in *Critical Sociology* and currently available in OnlineFirst at <http://crs.sagepub.com>

[3] I believe that a carefully-specified concept of privilege has a place in historical materialism. This can be used in the analysis of concrete situations to provide dialectical understandings of contradictory realities of oppression. But it must be distinguished from other uses of the concept of privilege, which today is unfortunately often used in place of the concepts of exploitation and oppression. For an excellent critique of thinking about class in terms of privilege rather than exploitation, see Steve Darcy, “‘Exploitation’ Versus ‘Privilege’ in Class Analysis” (<http://publicautonomy.org/2014/06/20/bromma>). “Privilege” is used by people with very different theoretical and political views. This means that it is a mistake to lump all of them together into something called “privilege theory” that can then be denounced. This is what Esme

Choonara and Yuri Prasad do in “What’s Wrong With Privilege Theory?” in *International Socialism* 142 (which Callinicos cites favourably).

[4] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Making Sense of Society In Order to Change It” in *socialistworker.org* (<http://socialistworker.org/2013/11/07/making-sense-of-society-to-change-it>)

[5] Robert Brenner and Johanna Brenner’s article “Reagan, the Right and the Working Class” in *Against the Current* 2 (1981) identifies the logic behind what they call “attempts by stronger sections of the working class to defend their positions at the expense of weaker sections.”