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Keywords

Privilege

Privilege is first recorded in early Old English as a direct borrowing from the Latin *prīvilēgium* though it was later reinforced by, or possibly re-borrowed from, Anglo-Norman *privilege*. Its meaning in classical Latin was a bill or law originally against, later in favour of, an individual; the later meaning developed to signify a special right, advantage, prerogative, or claim. The etymology is relatively simple: Latin ‘prīvus’, ‘private, peculiar’ (‘restricted to one person or a small number of persons as opposed to the public, wider community’) + ‘lēg’-, ‘lēx’, ‘law’ (ultimately from ‘legēre’, ‘to read, select’ – hence ‘legal’). The root sense of legality is significant since it reveals the organised, structural and authoritative basis of a specific form of preferential treatment.

In its earliest use **privilege** was used with reference to ecclesiastical law, specifically a Papal ordinance that granted exemption from canon or civil law; its status was general and ongoing (as opposed to a ‘dispensation’, which granted licence only in relation to a particular instance). The central issue here is the authority which underpins the right to grant **privilege**; in the early uses of the term, precisely because (divine) authority lay with the Pope, **privilege** superseded civil law. Interestingly, however, running parallel with this first sense, though its developed use came slightly later, there is a secular use of **privilege** to mean a right or advantage granted to an individual or group beyond the rights or advantages given to others. First recorded in Old English this sense development occurs properly from the C14 and the OED definition is revealing in that it struggles somewhat with the characterisation of the nature of **privilege**, which it presents as more than ‘usual’, ‘normal’ and even ‘average’ rights. This of course begs the question as to what such rights were and upon whom they were bestowed, as well as eliding the social mechanisms by which **privilege** was conferred. Examples of **privilege**, again from C14, included special allowances or advantages attaching to a ‘specified office or rank’ (again originally clerical, later class-related), from which emerges the specialised rights and immunities granted to political legislators (‘parliamentary **privilege**’). Developing alongside this meaning, again from the C14, is a highly important sense: ‘an advantage or benefit, an honour, a rare opportunity, good luck’. This is evidently a weakening of the idea of an advantage granted by law, but its ideological significance again lies in its occlusion of the process by which **privilege** is granted. More often than not, the use of the term in this sense suggests that the benefit in question was bestowed by providence or chance (God in the earlier uses) rather than by specific social arrangements and historical choices. The contemporary, highly weakened, use of the term occurs in academic humble-bragging: ‘I’m **privileged** to have had an article published in *Key Words*’.

Privilege as a mass noun, used to refer to the fact or state of being **privileged** in a general sense, unsurprisingly derives from the concatenation of different meanings outlined above. Its crucial narrowing, however, appears to take place in the mid to late eighteenth century and it is used from that point specifically to refer to what the OED describes as the ‘economic and social **privileges** associated with rank or status’ (note the absence of the later term ‘class’). Yet interestingly, the main focus in the illustrative quotations in the dictionary is on the social aspect of **privilege**, particularly in relation to what might be called manners or deference. Thus Richardson in 1756, referring to a man ‘who wants to assume airs of **privilege**, and thinks he has a right to be impertinent’, or Orwell’s ‘no **privilege** and no boot-licking’ (1938). Indeed,

the economic aspect of **privilege** is made explicit only in specialist uses of the term: ‘the granting of a legal or commercial right conferring advantage over others – for example a patent or monopoly right’, and ‘a right to buy or to sell particular stocks or commodities at a specified price within a given time’. Until relatively recently, however, the dominant sense was that rather loose meaning of social and cultural advantage – Oxbridge as a bastion of **privilege**.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, and certainly in recent years, the term sharpened and indeed strengthened. Emerging from debates in Women’s Studies - specifically Peggy MacIntosh’s paper ‘White privilege and male privilege’ (1988) - ‘**privilege**’ was used initially to refer to the unearned structural advantages granted to men in patriarchal society. This sense was then extended to refer to any other form of unmerited benefit bestowed on an individual or social group on the basis of intersecting characteristics such as ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and age, through the organisation of society. The related phrase ‘check your **privilege**’ was then deployed to demand a self-reflexive acknowledgment of the role that unwarranted advantage might play in the lives of those who are **privileged** economically and socially in particular ways. This has led to confusion, not to say deeply felt resentment. The objection has been raised that, for example, a working-class white woman may have battled against a variety of structural disadvantages in order to achieve an educational qualification through merit. How then is she **privileged**? The answer lies in the fact that in a deeply unequal society, in which inequality is stratified in terms of the categories cited above, that white woman will have been advantaged structurally in certain ways, while still being disadvantaged in very many others. Indeed, in a certain sense, that’s precisely what social inequality means – the structural organisation of advantage and disadvantage in order to benefit some and harm others. The call to ‘check your **privilege**’ then is not necessarily a personal accusation (a charge that someone has done something wrong), but an appeal to consider the ways in which structural advantage and disadvantage is conferred authoritatively on all of us. **Privilege** in this sense may no longer take the form of a private law, but its effects are quite as binding.