



## Book Review

# Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage and Systematic Injustice in an Unequal World (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

Pease, B. (2022). Zed Books. ISBN 9781913441135 (paper) CAD\$37.75; ISBN 9781913441142 (e-book) CAD\$30.20. 336 pages.

CAITLIN FEELEY

Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

Social justice studies and activism are often focused on the role of oppressed groups in challenging their oppression, while privileged groups and their responsibility in reproducing inequality tends to be overlooked. In *Undoing Privilege*, Pease centres the narrative around the operation of privilege to raise attention to its pervasive and unchallenged nature. The book is intended for readers who possess some form of privileged identity and who are willing to grapple with the impacts of their unearned advantages on the lives of others. The book interrogates the contradictions associated with privilege, which include the complexity of privileged people participating in struggles for social justice, as well as the author's positionality as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied man writing a book about privilege.

Pease identifies a gap in discourses about privilege in popular culture and activism, where analyses tend to focus on privilege at the individual level and neglect its structural and systemic dimensions. He also identifies a gap in academia, where studies are mostly focused on oppression or on the privilege of the elite. The book aims to address this gap by offering a nuanced analysis of privilege that examines how it operates at the individual, cultural, and structural levels. The central claim of *Undoing Privilege* is that unearned privilege operates to maintain inequality and oppress people who are unable to access it. Pease suggests that the inequality produced by privilege is often implicit because privilege tends to be invisible to people who possess it,

*Correspondence Address:* Caitlin Feeley, Department of Sociology, Toronto Metropolitan University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3; email: [cfeeley@torontomu.ca](mailto:cfeeley@torontomu.ca)

ISSN: 1911-4788



privileged groups are afforded the power of deciding social norms, and privilege is perceived as natural. He recognizes that privilege is complex by rejecting the binary that someone is either privileged or oppressed and by proposing that members of privileged groups do not all benefit from their privilege equally.

Pease is an Australian activist, academic, and social work educator. His research focuses include men's involvement in profeminist movements, violence against women, undoing privilege, and critical social work studies (University of Tasmania, n.d.). His activist work has included co-founding Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA), which aims to encourage men to take responsibility for ending violence against women and facilitating educational workshops about patriarchy. Pease relates what he has learned from his research, activism, and lived experience to the systems of privilege he analyzes throughout the book. In particular, he is able to draw on his knowledge of the challenges that result from privileged groups engaging in social justice movements. For example, he indicates that men who participate in women's movements often take positions of power, which demonstrates how allyship can turn into taking control over a group's struggle.

The book is organized into three sections; the first section lays the theoretical foundation for understanding privilege and how it operates, the second section analyzes 10 sites of privilege, and the final section focuses on the processes of undoing privilege. The second edition of the book includes the same six sites of privilege as the first edition: eurocentrism and western dominance, class elitism, racial formations and white supremacy, the gender order and patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ableism and the embodiment of privilege. Four additional sites of privilege are included in the second edition: anthropocentrism and human supremacy, the gender binary and cisgender privilege, Christian hegemony, and adult-centrism. Pease begins each chapter by relating his own experience to the specific system of privilege, then synthesizes the literature on each form of privilege, and finishes by identifying strategies for change. Ending each chapter in this way is an effective tactic for encouraging readers to pursue social justice because it can encourage them to take action to undo privilege at the individual and structural levels. As an example, Pease provides strategies that people of Western descent can take to decolonize their minds, including learning from non-Western knowledges and cultures.

In the Preface, Pease indicates that the structure of the book, in which each chapter focuses on one type of privilege, risks neglecting an intersectional analysis by examining each system in isolation. However, one of the book's strengths is its ability to overcome this limitation and effectively apply an intersectional lens, which it accomplishes by dedicating a chapter to the matrix of privilege and by examining the intersections of each site of privilege. In the chapter on white supremacy, Pease applies an intersectional lens to examine whiteness by suggesting that it is often essentialized and that white privilege must be considered in relation to other identity markers. However, he also

indicates that acknowledging differences among white privilege can take attention away from white dominance and enable white people to only focus on their oppression, rather than their white privilege. An intersectional analysis is critical to examining structures of privilege because it recognizes that structures of power intersect to influence the extent to which an individual can access privilege. In the Combahee River Collective statement (1977), for example, Black feminists highlight their struggle to address a number of systems of oppression without racial, class, sexual, and heterosexual privilege, which intersect to limit their access to power and resources. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize how intersectionality not only applies to systems of oppression, but also systems of privilege.

Another strength of Pease's writing is his ability to reflect on and confront his own privileged identities to encourage privileged readers to do the same. In the chapter on anthropocentrism and human supremacy, Pease discusses his personal journey with eating meat and explains that when he was first challenged about the contradiction of studying privilege and being a meat eater, he reacted defensively. He indicates that he had not previously considered the ethical implications of eating meat and has since adopted a more plant-based diet. By offering an honest reflection about his privilege and the steps that he has taken to begin to undo his privilege, Pease creates a space in which readers can feel comfortable with interrogating their own privilege. Additionally, considering Pease's intersecting privileged identities, it is important for him to demonstrate reflexivity and vulnerability in his writing on privilege. He references Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility* (2018), which emphasizes that when challenged to confront their privilege, white people often respond with defensiveness and hostility. As a result, Pease's writing about grappling with his own privileged identities pushes back against white fragility and may encourage readers to do the same.

Although demonstrating self-reflexivity is useful in a book about challenging privilege, it is not necessarily enough to empower readers to confront their privilege. One way that the book could have improved in encouraging individuals to take action is by addressing the readers directly, which could have instilled in them a greater sense of responsibility to examine their privilege. Additionally, the book could have offered readers reflection questions or exercises to consider. Only one chapter includes a list of reflection questions which were developed by Rochlin (1972) and addressed to heterosexuals to disrupt the assumption that their sexuality is normative. Including a similar list of questions in the other chapters would have been helpful to prompt privileged readers to engage in self-reflection.

*Undoing Privilege* is an important addition to the social justice literature because of its focus on the power of unearned privilege. Pease's writing expands the dominant understanding that privilege is an individual issue by uncovering its structural and systemic manifestations, while also maintaining that privileged people have the ability to disrupt their privilege. This book is useful for academics who study the dynamics of oppression, especially because

it recognizes that the role of privilege in producing oppression tends to be overlooked, despite the significant impact it has on those who are oppressed. Activists who are interested in reflecting on their privilege and how it impacts their involvement in struggles for social justice will also find this book beneficial. With increased public discourse about the impacts of unearned privilege, Pease's book contributes the necessary complexity and nuance to analyses of privilege and offers readers the ability to begin to confront the implications of their own privilege.

## References

- Combahee River Collective. (1977). *The Combahee River Collective statement*. Retrieved June 5, 2023, from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility*. Penguin Random House.
- Pease, B. (2022). *Undoing privilege: Unearned advantage and systemic injustice in an unequal world* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Rochlin, M. (1972). *Heterosexual questionnaire*. University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. [https://www.uwgb.edu/UWGBCMS/media/pride-center/files/pdf/Heterosexual\\_Questionnaire.pdf](https://www.uwgb.edu/UWGBCMS/media/pride-center/files/pdf/Heterosexual_Questionnaire.pdf)
- University of Tasmania (n.d.) *Bob Pease*. Retrieved January 24, 2023, from <https://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/social-sciences/bob-pease>