

The White Privilege Moment

By Cory Weinberg

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When Bill O'Reilly decried on his show last week a course on white privilege supposedly starting at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, he said his working class roots make him "exempt" from white privilege. Scholars across the country could have told the Fox News commentator that he got the concept wrong.

The concept of white privilege – with roots in the 19th century, a resurgence in 1980s feminist scholarship and now making a mainstream splash – doesn't point fingers at white supremacy or racist acts, but at structural and historical problems in society. White privilege is about the way white people are treated, generally favorably, regardless of what is in their hearts and minds. And Harvard officials aren't starting a course on the topic, despite what you might hear on Fox.

But despite misconceptions and misinformation, Paul R. Croll, assistant professor of sociology at Augustana College, sees the recent discussion as part of a watershed moment for the academic field. "It's a complex, deep sociological idea being brought into the mainstream, and it's not easy to understand always. But even an angry discussion opens the door," Croll said. "Bill O'Reilly saying 'I don't have white privilege' is still Bill O'Reilly saying 'white privilege.' "

Evidence of the theory's newfound popularity is clear. It has become a common part of introductory sociology courses, and Croll said students now come into early courses with some familiarity with the concept. The annual White Privilege Conference, which was held in Madison, Wisconsin this year, has grown exponentially to 2,400 attendees. Colleges such as Illinois Wesleyan University have started orientations and workshops introducing students to the topic.

But perhaps the clearest signal that discussions about white privilege have taken hold is by measuring up the opposition – and it's not just O'Reilly.

An opinion piece by a Princeton University freshman Tal Fortang went viral after he slammed the term because of "the problem with calling someone out for the 'privilege' which you assume has defined their narrative. You don't know what their struggles have been, what they may have gone through to be where they are."

Organizers and scholars at the White Privilege Conference received hate mail after Fox News publicized a four-part documentary this month that showed conservative activists taking

hidden cameras into the annual event. “It’s very entertaining to watch a nut-job run around crying racism. Good thing [nobody] has ever heard of you,” read one email to a sociology professor featured in the videos.

When Kyle Olson, editor-in-chief of the conservative activism site Progressives Today, went on Fox News last week to discuss his investigation into the White Privilege Conference, he asserted that the white privilege movement looked to take down capitalism and Christianity. Abby Ferber, a scholar of the far right and a professor of sociology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, also received hate mail for her work at the conference, and said the pushback took her by surprise. “When I was studying the white supremacy movement, I faced no resistance whatsoever,” she said. “It’s only as the work looks at everyday racism that people are feeling very threatened and we see this incredible resistance and backlash.”

There’s a silver lining to the hate mail and opposition, said Jacqueline Battalora, a professor of sociology and criminal justice Saint Xavier University.

“Some of us have been talking about white privilege for a very long time but in many ways we should thank Fox News because they’re giving it legs,” said Battalora, author of *Birth of a White Nation*. “The more we have a conversation, the more we’ve revealed the problems with our history. That has the potential to bring out a change to benefit all of us.”

Professors who teach and research on white privilege admit they have work to do to fend off right-wing opposition on the topic. The truer meaning of white privilege – “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day,” according to a 1987 essay by Peggy McIntosh that popularized the term – has yet to fully sink in. “We need to do a better job as scholars to make it clear it’s structural and not individual,” Croll said.

At the optional orientation for white students at Illinois Wesleyan University, called “Engaging Diversity,” assistant professor of sociology Meghan Burke said the program has seen steady numbers and engaged students, with accreditors pointing to it as a positive move in diversity efforts.

But four years into a program that serves about 20 students each year, organizers still face the challenge of not “scaring students away” and pushing past the idea that “we’re supposedly this color-blind society,” she said.

“The big challenge I’ve found year to year is helping students really get what this is about. It’s a delicate balance to not hit them over the head with it,” she said. “It’s not called the ‘Heavy, Scary, Oppression, White Privilege Program,’ it’s called ‘Engaging Diversity,’ and it sounds silly and light but that is how we engage with diversity.”