

Privilege versus Detriment

When we call disadvantages “detriments,” the direction of reform can be clearer than when we speak of “privileges”.

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The concept of “privilege” has become common in political discourse, while the term “detriment” is seldom used. One incurs a detriment, and is detrimented, when one is harmed, offended, displeased, or disadvantaged, unrelated to merit. One obtains a privilege, and is privileged, when a person or group is advantaged, benefitted, pleased, or favored relative to other groups, when the gain is unrelated to merit.

Some socialists emphasize “white privilege”. Suppose a white man is able to walk down a street without being harassed, while a black man will be stopped and questioned by the police. The socialist will say that the white man is privileged in being free of harassment. But actually, the ability of an innocent person to walk without being stopped and frisked is a natural right, not a special favor. The black man has suffered a violation of his natural rights, a detriment not suffered by the white man.

The socialist will also claim that there is “male privilege.” Suppose a man can walk down the street in peace, while a woman walking down the same street will be whistled at, aggressively approached, and may even be physically attacked. Does the man have a privilege? No, one has a natural right to be free of aggression. The woman suffers a violation of her rights, a detriment.

Women suffer many detriments because of social custom and culture, rather than governmental law. Wives tend to do more household work, even when they are working for wages as many hours as the husband. In some fields of work, men have more prestige and authority, unrelated to merit. The culture is not so much giving males privileges as it imposes on women various detriments.

Some detriments are mandated by law. In most US places, men are free to remove their shirts, while a bare-breasted woman would get arrested. The men do not have a privilege; the women have a legal detriment.

There are many other areas of privilege versus detriment. Those whose native language is English have an advantage as most of the educated world learns English as a second language. But the English speakers do not have a privilege; rather, those that need to learn English have a linguistic detriment.

Some feminists object to the standard in pronouns of using the masculine (he, him, his, himself) for general usage. This is not so much as male privilege as a lacuna in the English language, the absence of gender-neutral pronouns. Because “he” is used both for males and for people in general, women are subject to a linguistic detriment. One remedy is to use gender-neutral pronouns.

Female detriments can become tragic in cultures where male children are preferred. A boy is not privileged by not being aborted or killed. Rather, the girls suffer a lethal detriment. In my judgment, more progress can be made to stop this anti-female bias by calling it a detriment rather than saying the boys are privileged. Boys as well as girls have a right to not be murdered.

Female detriments have been lethal in India, where rape and violence has made headlines. But there is substantial rape in the US and throughout the world, which clearly makes being female a detriment in much of the world.

The trouble with saying there is a male privilege is that men do not feel privileged by not being attacked or disfavored. It should be normal to be left in peace, and to be respected. By identifying the problem as a detriment, we can then raise more awareness and support for remedies. We can also then better deal with the real privileges, favors to those who get subsidies from government because of political clout.

The language of privilege versus detriments influences policy. "Privilege" implies special favors that should be removed. "Detriment" implies harms and disadvantages that should be stopped. For the problem of infanticide, for example, it is not that privileged boys should be killed in an equal ratio, but that girls should not be murdered for being female.

Let's speak less of racial and gender privilege and more of detriments!

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FRED E. FOLDVARY, Ph.D., (May 11, 1946 — June 5, 2021) was an economist who wrote weekly editorials for [Progress.org](#) since 1997. Foldvary's commentaries are well respected for their currency, sound logic, wit, and consistent devotion to human freedom. He received his B.A. in economics from the University of California at Berkeley, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University. He taught economics at Virginia Tech, John F. Kennedy University, Santa Clara University, and San Jose State University.

Foldvary is the author of *The Soul of Liberty*, *Public Goods and Private Communities*, and *Dictionary of Free Market Economics*. He edited and contributed to *Beyond Neoclassical Economics* and, with Dan Klein, *The Half-Life of Policy Rationales*. Foldvary's areas of research included public finance, governance, ethical philosophy, and land economics.

Foldvary is notably known for going on record in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in 1997 to predict the exact timing of the 2008 economic depression—eleven years before the event occurred. He was able to do so due to his extensive knowledge of the real-estate cycle.

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