



Settler privilege checklist

This list is based on an article “unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack-of-settler-privilege¹” inspired by the work of Peggy McIntosh who first popularized the concept of white privilege in her now-classic 1989 essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

You have some degree of unearned settler privilege or complicity in settler colonialism if any of these statements apply to you:

1. I can live anywhere in the US and Canada without being disturbed that people of my race or ethnic group were not systematically killed or displaced so that I could live there.
2. I don't have to worry that images, symbols, or names of people of my ethnicity will be used as sports mascots, Halloween costumes, or marketing logos, and that I will be told that when they are that I am being honored, even when I say I don't feel honored.
3. I am not burdened that people not of my ethnicity will appropriate the spirituality and religion specific to my community and justify it with arguments that everybody has a constitutional right to practice whatever religion they choose.
4. I am not concerned about my group's history being accurately represented in my children's education, or represented at all.
5. I don't have to worry that I will be perceived as an authentic member of my ethnic group based on a sufficient amount of “blood,” as verified by a government-issued document.
6. I can see myself and my ethnic group represented in a wide variety of media and popular culture that aren't predominantly stereotypes.
7. I am usually represented in statistical findings in studies and reports.
8. I am never confronted with comments that express surprise that my group is still existent.

¹ <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/11/unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack-of-settler-privilege.html>



9. I am never confronted with comments that imply that my group deserved to be wiped out because they were all killing each other already anyway before being invaded by outsiders.
10. I don't have to hear references about my group described as a "plight."
11. I never have to defend against the desecration or digging up of burials of my ancestors for capitalist development.
12. I can be assured that the legal system will defend my ability to practice my religion in its original setting, and respect that it is based on a different set of assumptions about the world than other religions.
13. I am not subject to a legal system that is based on a concept of cultural and religious inferiority of my group.
14. I don't see myself spoken of as a "savage" or other derisive term in any of the countries founding documents.
15. I never have to worry that my legal existence or that of my group can be terminated at any time by the US government without my consent.
16. I have no ancestors who were considered "wards of the state" even though they committed no crime.
17. I have no ancestors that were hunted for bounties paid for by any governmental agency.



Settler Privilege

Like white fragility, settler fragility is the inability to talk about unearned privilege—in this case, the privilege of living on lands that were taken in the name of democracy through profound violence and injustice. Like white privilege, white supremacy is also at the root of settler fragility. The difference is that foreign invasion, dispossession of Indigenous lands, and genocide were based on (white) European religious and cultural supremacy as encoded in the doctrine of discovery, not racial supremacy. And, unlike for other people of color who have made significant legal gains in the US legal system, the nearly two-centuries-old doctrine of discovery is at the foundation of the legal system that still paternalistically determines Native lives and lands.

Settler privilege thus simultaneously implicates and is beyond racism, which is one reason why, paradoxically, even non-Native people of color can experience a type of privilege and fragility. Fragility stems from the need to distance oneself from complicity in settler colonialism, in what some scholars have called “settler moves to innocence.” The good-bad binary is part of this distancing impulse, because like racism, nobody wants to be associated with genocide and injustice, especially in a country that touts its democracy and equality, and especially for people who have been oppressed by it in other ways. But compared to white privilege, this is what makes settler privilege so much more beguiling and difficult: it cuts to the core of American identity in all its iterations, subtly calling into question the legitimacy of the US and the sense of belonging on the land.

Here are some of the ways settler fragility can be seen in all ranges of the political spectrum. On the liberal end we see:

“I love Indians and Indian culture. I believe I have Native ancestry somewhere in my family tree” (I have been oppressed, too, even though I’m white).

“Even though the Indians didn’t deserve what we did to them, the damage is done and there is nothing we can do to right the wrongs that have been done to them” (We should all move on and forget the past, and Indians should get beyond their victimization).

“We are all one people now” (The settler state and all its attendant privileges must prevail).

“I am a person of color and am subject to racism, so I don’t have settler privilege” (I have no reason to be accountable to settler colonialism since I am oppressed, too).

“Since I am poor and don’t own any land, I don’t have settler privilege.”

In the middle we see:

“Neither I or my ancestors killed anyone to be here” (my people are not to blame).



“We can’t apply the standards of today to the behavior of our (European) ancestors” (evasion of accountability).

“Most Native American people have white ancestry” (that means they are complicit in settler colonialism, too; if everyone is to blame, then no one is to blame).

On the right end of the spectrum:

“Indians were all killing each other anyway when Europeans got here” (they were uncivilized savages anyway).

“I’m a ‘native’ American because I was born here” (American Indian history is irrelevant, and the settler state prevails).

It’s important to emphasize that like white privilege, settler privilege is systemic, so just denying that one doesn’t possess it doesn’t mean one isn’t complicit in it. This is about deeply questioning all the assumptions we have been raised with in a society built on imperialism, private property (which includes slavery), and capitalism. Even for Native people who don’t live in their ancestral homelands, the questions need to be asked: who are the original people of the place where I live, and what are my responsibilities to them?