Access for All? The promise and problems of universalism.[1]

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In what follows, I explore why the question of 'access for all' is both important and difficult. Beginning by treating it as a contested claim, I will consider some of its political, institutional and professional implications. What do I mean by saying that access for all is a contested claim? First of all, it is a claim – a demand that access for all needs to be created. It is a claim about change. To demand 'access for all' is to speak about, and speak against, social conditions that are unjust, unequal or excluding. At its simplest, then, to claim 'access for all' is to address social arrangements in which all people do not have access.

Secondly, it is a claim made by – or on behalf of – specific social groups against their experience of exclusion, marginalization or subordination. I have added these other terms because I think that 'exclusion' is too simple, and too problematic, a term to capture all the aspects of unjust social arrangements that produce claims for 'access'.[2] Access is a demand to be treated equitably in relation to a range of valued social resources, conditions and relationships. It is a claim to be a *member*: of the society, the polity or the nation. It is a claim to be a *citizen*: to possess rights and the capacity to make legitimate demands on the state. It is a claim on the apparatuses and agencies that sustain *social citizenship*: citizenship brings with it access to benefits, services and rights of 'fair dealing' or 'fair treatment'. As this last point suggests, it is a claim about *equality*: the expectation that all citizens will be dealt with by public agencies in ways that are not discriminatory or oppressive.

Governments and states tend to make statements about universalism: "all citizens shall...". Access for all expresses the demand from excluded, marginalised and subordinated groups to make it come true. Access for all is the call for universalism to be true in practice – that all people should be citizens. It is a demand articulated from the experience of being treated as 'second class citizens', 'third class citizens' or even being denied the status of citizen at all. It is a reminder that citizenship has always been contested exactly in this form. Citizenship – as a national political status – originated in Western liberal democracies embodied in the form of white, male, property owning 'citizens'. It has been contested – in a variety of struggles – by those excluded from this embodied conception of the universal subject. Each struggle has contained the insistence that states must make the promise of universalism come true.[3]

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[1] This paper was originally prepared as the opening talk of the TISSA plenum in St. Petersburg in August 2004, whose topic was "Access for All" (see http://www.summer-academy.net). In revising it, I have tried to stay close to its original style as a lecture, placing more formal academic elements in footnotes, rather than breaking up the text. I am grateful to the organisers and to the participants for the ensuing conversations that have enlarged and enriched my thinking about the question of access.

[2] The concept of exclusion – and its opposite, inclusion – imply a very simplified and two-dimensional view of societies. This binary – in/out of society – fails to address the organization of forms of inequality and subordination 'within' societies. More generally, see the discussions in Byrne, 1999, and Levitas, 1998.

[3] I have argued this at greater length in Clarke 2004a, chapter 2 and 3.

We can now see why 'access for all' may be a contested claim. It challenges existing social arrangements, the interests that are embedded with them, and the existing habits that sustain such arrangements. These habits include the habits of everyday thought – the normative conceptions, forms of reasoning and legitimation that account for why existing arrangements are necessary, natural and constitute the best possible world. They also include habits of institutional and professional practice – in the agencies that work to sustain existing arrangements and help individuals adapt to the contradictions, tensions, disjunctures and discomforts that accompany them. The institutions of western welfarism have a history of such habits – educating people (differentially) so that they come to 'know their place' in society; containing and managing disorderly and dangerous populations; and assuaging the pains and misery that flow from injustice and inequality. The 'maintenance of social order' that functionalist analyses identify as the necessary role of public agencies always means the maintenance of a *particular* social order (with all its specific structures of inequality, subordination and oppression).

Because the claim of 'access for all' voices challenges to the existing order of things (and the habits in which it is sustained), the claim is often resisted. Sometimes it is resisted in the name of the limits of universalism. Racialised structures of inequality have been defended in terms of a distinction between the 'fully human' and the 'others'. Gendered structures of inequality have been legitimated by reference to women's lack of those faculties and competences possessed by men. Universalism only applies, it is sometimes claimed, to those who share the characteristics of the universal subject. Others need special measures, protection, development or guardianship until they can become 'like us' (which may be never…). The place of 'minorities' is both a numerical place (the implicitly 'normal' majority and the others) and a hierarchical place (being a 'minor' in a world of more or less protective adults).

At other times, such claims for access are resisted in the name of 'reasonableness'. To change social arrangements is too expensive, too risky, too dangerous – or simply unnatural. Far better, then, that people should adjust and 'make the best of a bad job'. In recent decades we have heard again the authoritative voice of the nineteenth century that warns us of the dangers of 'social engineering'. To go against human nature (as it expressed in these social arrangements) is to risk disaster, disorder and danger. The return of the 'biological imperative' (this time as genetic determinism) is an insistent warning about the risks involved in 'tinkering' with basic human (or animal) truths. These truths involve claims about race, sexuality, gender, inequality and competitiveness (particularly its expression in the 'entrepreneurial spirit') – precisely the contested fields of social change where progressive possibilities have been imagined as both realising and expanding the reach of universalism.[4]

Access for all produces such reactions: efforts to close off the possibilities of social change that would interfere with society understood as 'business as usual'. Such reactions take the form of political programmes and ideologies, and they appear in institutional forms as aspects of social and public policy. They also take shape in the practices of such institutions – in the work of state agents as bureaucrats and professionals. Indeed, professional practice – in such 'mediating professions' as education and social work – has been the site of persistent conflict about expansive demands for 'access' and repressive reactions that seek to maintain authority, hierarchy and discipline – to preserve social orders in which people know their place.

[4] See the brilliant dissection and discussion of science, biology and nature in Roger Lancaster's *The Trouble with Nature* (2003).

Place, space and access

Questions of access imply spatial arrangements – in which people are located in places, or demand access to other – more privileged – spaces. Here I sketch some of the current spatial arrangements in which access is voiced and contested. The starting point is necessarily the space of the nation-state. We must start here because this is the terrain on which the discourses of citizenship, membership, exclusion/inclusion and access have been historically formulated. Citizenship has been national citizenship and 'access' has centred on who is to be included in the nation (and on what terms).[5] The material control and symbolic ownership of 'national' spaces has become more problematic as borders become more uncertain. The apparent solidity of the territorial model of the nation-state, so central to European social and political theory, no longer seems secure. Borders are changed, rendered permeable and reconstructed. At the same time, supra-national institutions and transnational processes flow across – and unsettle – national spaces. So, too, the assumed equivalences between nation, territory, people, culture and state – can no longer be taken for granted.[6] People demand access – from outside and inside – to the privileges of membership. Such demands are resisted – not least in terms of the imagined unities of the past (the unity of people, place, culture and state). Analytically, it is important to not reproduce such imaginary unities – the danger is to treat 'access' demands as only emerging from outside, rather than recognising how the Other/the excluded are internal (and integral) to the national space. The 'excluded' are not just 'migrants'. Such a distinction between indigenous and migrant hides the longer history of migration, mixing and multiplicity behind European 'nations' and pretends that such issues are only of the present moment.[7]

Access takes a variety of spatial forms in the contemporary period. Let me highlight a few. The largest spatial dimensions evoked in contested formations of inequality, injustice and exclusion are those of North and South (or the West and the Rest). How can the peoples of the South have access to the privileges – wealth, health, standards of living, rights and so on – enjoyed in Europe and North America? Such a question appears unanswerable as the power bloc of the North refuses all access strategies but one – global free trade. The other routes to 'access' – whether staying home and being supported by debt reduction, wealth transfer and public investment; or migrating to the North to find the promises of privilege – are the subject of powerful refusals, controls and containment.

Such issues are also played out around the construction of Europe – in its managed expansion and its management of exclusion. Europe is a flexible space (capable of 'enlargment'); it is also a multiply constituted space (there are different Europes – from the Schengen grouping's territory, through 'Euroland' to the European Union). Europe – to preserve its internal development and coherence – needs to be defended against its others. The management of exclusion is a process of policing the (moveable) borders; externalising such borders (such that migrants are managed 'eslewhere'); and internalising border controls (such that those suspected f being 'illegals' are subject to surveillance and control within Europe). This is the

[5] Of course, the unsettling of the European form of the nation-state means that the 'national' component of citizenship is more contested – in the face of new mobilities, in the context of multiple or transnational citizenships and in the light of claims of forms of supra-national citizenship (see e.g. Castles and Davidson, 2001; Ong, 1999; Soysal, 1994).

[6] The general argument about the problems of such imagined unities are effectively made in Gupta and Ferguson (1992), and explored in different ways in Eley and Suny (1996).

[7] On the contested present – and pasts – of Europe, see Balibar (2002). Fink, Lewis and Clarke (2001) explore the mutually constituve relationships between social policy and Europe as a social formation.

perverse opposite of what early Globalization enthusiasts described as the ‘borderless world’ – instead we see the proliferation of borders as the spatial dimensions of ‘access’ become more intensively managed.[8]

Access issues are also spatially framed in the new localism. In a variety of ways, localities, neighbourhoods and communities have become increasingly significant focal points for governing the social. Here, too, we find complex mixtures of people and places being defined as ‘socially excluded’. Such populations are to be groomed and enabled to make the transition from outside to inside. In Europe and elsewhere, social inclusion has emerged as a central governmental objective. There remain ‘problem populations’ who fail to make the transition – and become subject to governmental practices of containment, surveillance, criminalization and incarceration. In the face of the promise of inclusion, those who remain excluded are double failures (having failed to normalise themselves originally, and then resisted governmental enabling and empowerment).[9]

I do not mean to suggest that these different axes of place, space and access are the only forms – but they are central to the contemporary politics and policies of access – shaping how the demands are formulated, understood and responded to. Both the national and the local are being reconstructed in the process – and ‘access’ retains its meaning of ‘gaining entry’ to some place. The desire to gain entry is a potent political force in a world where increasing inequalities, injustices and insecurities have a profoundly spatial character – globally, nationally and locally.

Constructing access: routes and routines.

I now turn to the different forms in which access may become policy and practice. I distinguish between what might be called liberal or passive forms; outreach approaches to inclusion; and transformative views of access in heterogeneous societies. I stress heterogeneity because several themes are condensed in conflicts over access, especially the profoundly problematic relationship between social difference and social inequality. In this context, I will suggest that difference/diversity – understood as forms of cultural variation – is intimately linked with the structuring of inequalities. As a result, the politics and policies that flow around questions of diversity are potent ones because they contain (and sometimes fail to contain) politics and policies concerning inequality. To put it another way, we may be able to identify patterns of socio-economic inequality (and their contemporary trends towards deepening inequalities), but these inequalities are socially distributed. Some groups are more ‘at risk’ of being impoverished than others: tendentially, women, children, older people, disabled people and racialised and minoritised groups. Positions in the field of social relationships (not just class relationships) place people in a structured probabilities of poverty. I do not mean there are not other forms of injustice, oppression and exclusion, but I do want to insist on the interrelationship of the politics of difference and the politics of inequality.[10]

[8] On the borderless world, see Ohmae, 1991. The spatial formations of inclusion and exclusion in globlization are the subject of an innovative discussion in Cameron and Palan, 2004. The intensification and internalization of ‘border management’ is a key theme in Balibar, 2002.

[9] This theme is central to Bauman’s concept of the ‘new poor’ (Bauman, 1998; see also Lister, 2004). New Labour’s view of the socially excluded and their governmental strategies is discussed in Clarke and Newman, 2004.

[10] On poverty and social differentiation, see Lister, 2004 chapter 3. For important arguments about diversity, difference and social policy, see Lewis, 2003, and Cooper, 2004.

Let us turn first to the liberal or passive form of access policy. In western capitalist societies, the twentieth century public realm was dominated by notions of formal (rather than substantive) equality. Citizenship presumed public institutions to which all citizens could have access. Thus, any under-representation of specific social groups could be understood as a consequence of their failures to 'put themselves forward'. Not enough women in politics – they lack the necessary presence, power or personal qualities to succeed. Not enough working class young people staying on at school – they can't be bothered; they'd rather have jobs/children. Not enough ethnic minority people in higher education – they don't apply…. Liberal or welfarist institutions have understood themselves as 'a door on which to knock'. If people want access – they only have to ask.

Where I work – the Open University in the UK – embodied this liberal/passive of access for many years. Despite substantial evidence about the under-representation of social groups (particularly those defined as 'ethnic minorities'), the institution felt confident about its 'open-ness'. Created in the 1960s as an alternative to 'conventional' universities, the Open University was intentionally and explicitly 'open access'. Open access was, indeed, a form of radicalism compared to established practices of selectivity – anyone could register for a university level course. For undergraduate study, there were (are) no educational prerequisites; no interviews to assess 'suitability'; no selection processes. This radicalism nevertheless reinforced a view of passive open-ness as the only form of access. If people did not put themselves forward, that was their choice.

Nevertheless, the combination of internal and external agitation of the 1979s and 1980s provoked a crisis in the liberal/passive mode – in the Open University just as elsewhere in welfarist institutions (a crisis which had the effect of radicalising social work, education, health work and so on). This coming together of internal and external challenges created a period of critical reflexivity about the assumptions and limitations of liberal welfarism (and the normative universalism that it embodied). At the core of this reflexivity was the question of what institutional and professional practices produced or reproduced patterns of social inequality, exclusion, marginalization and subordination. These were more than matters of politics (in the formal sense) or policy (as stated goals or objectives). Rather, what came under challenged were the liberal assumptions that neutrality, impartiality and benevolence were inscribed in welfarist institutions – and their dominant occupational/organizational modality of bureau-professionalism. Instead, challenges from a range of social standpoints revealed institutionalised patterns of discrimination that took social norms and reproduced them in policy and practice.[11]

Such challenges attacked a variety of institutional processes, practices and forms of relationship. They challenged the professionalized paternalism implicit in the language of 'clients'. They attacked racialised norms of conduct and access, as well as the gendered ordering of work, welfare and family at the root of western welfarism. They identified the ways in which gender and familial norms were articulated with heteronormative systems of sexual identity and orientation. In all of these, but perhaps most visibly in the movements of disabled people, they challenged the ways in which professional knowledge and power were sutured together. In all these ways, the patterns of conduct, language, style, and interaction –

[11] This argument about the challenges to bureau-professionalism as the occupational/organizational of welfarism is made at greater length in Clarke and Newman (1997). Managerialism emerged as the favoured solution to the resulting organizational/occupational crisis.

the habits of bureau-professional welfarism – became exposed to critical scrutiny and challenge.

In some ways, we might view the policy discourse of access as emerging from this crisis of welfarism. ‘Access’ is one way of speaking of the multiple demands, the multiple voices and the multiple positions that were unleashed in the 1970s and 1980s (and which have not yet gone away). ‘Access’ becomes an official language for talking about the excluded, the marginalised and the disadvantaged as heterogeneous groups who – for whatever reason – are not part of the ‘mainstream’. In the process, the task of public institutions becomes redefined: how can we engage everyone – in a diverse or multi-cultural society – in the ‘mainstream’? How do we construct the pathways that will lead to an inclusive society?

‘Access’ as a policy objective has reshaped the points of engagement between public institutions and society. Rather than being a ‘door on which to knock’, public institutions have constructed new entry points, new signposts and have taken themselves ‘out into the community’ in decentralising or outreach programmes. The aim is overcome ‘barriers to entry’; or get closer to the ‘hard to reach’ groups. This is a more active mode of ‘access’, and is a widespread response to the limitations of the liberal/passive mode. Participation is the superordinate value of access – individuals and groups who participate are no longer isolated, excluded or marginalised. Participation is the route to the ‘mainstream’.[12] The obstacles to participation may lie either in the institution (which is now encouraged to find ways of enabling participation) or in the social group (which is to be enabled to overcome its social or cultural deficits). Whatever their cause, access and participation are to be promoted.

This more active view of access still leaves some questions unresolved. At the centre is a concern with exactly what it is to which people should have access. Access as an active policy presumes that the goal – participation in society/the mainstream/public institutions – is self-evidently desirable. Being ‘included’ appears as an end in itself. However, this view deals with social heterogeneity by imagining a distinction between a liberal, tolerant, cosmopolitan ‘core’ and a ‘periphery’ made up of culturally incompetent, pre-modern, entrenched, difficult, dysfunctional, de-moralised, disorderly or dangerous people. These fragments can be modernised, enabled, developed or activated in ways that will bring them into the core. But the ‘centre’ rarely looks so consistent, coherent or generous spirited as this suggests – and nor do marginal groups seem so lacking.

Let me put this argument a different way. Is ‘access’ a process of enabling entry to the established universalism? In such a view, the political and policy issues are ‘process’ centred. How do we get those people into this place? The place is itself unproblematic. But we know that all universalist positions are – more or less explicitly – normative. The place – the ‘centre’ – is imbued with normative judgements about ‘ways of life’ – the habits of thought and action that are desirable. And, in contrast, some habits become marked as undesirable, or in need of ‘modernization’. The contemporary struggles over multi-culturalism are one aspect of this tension – which ‘ways of life’ and habits can be accommodated within modern societies? In recent years, this has been dramatised in a number of sharp forms – around forms of religion in nominally secular societies; around the ‘rights’ and the limits of tolerance that may be extended to minoritised or deviant groups (gay and lesbian demands for civic

[12] The primary example of participation in this era is, of course, participation in waged work. Work – in this meaning – is the activity symbolises the active citizen, the responsible adult, and the good parent. New Labour’s conception of the ‘mainstream’ is that it is made up of ‘hard working families’.

equality, for example); and around the idea of ‘membership’ or ‘citizenship’ tests for migrating people.[13]

Here we begin to see the other, more hidden, dynamic of access. Access carries the possibility of transforming the centre itself. It implies that the normative universalism might be transformed by the entry of the marginal, subordinated and excluded. They may bring ways of life, habits of thought and action, and even demands for how things should be that disturb and disrupt the norms of the centre. Linking access to the social dynamics of diversity and difference makes visible the possibility of access as transformation, rather than access as containment. Social institutions face the challenge of going beyond ‘openness’ – and encountering the possibility of being transformed in the encounter with access.

We know, of course, that social institutions are reluctant to change – power, privilege and the pleasures of habit all support the temptation to resist change. But change happens under pressure. Habits are modified, or even overthrown. Institutional arrangements are adapted, reformed and remade. Struggles over ‘access’ – in the name of different sorts of actors (women, ethnic minorities, disabled people, users of public services) – have reshaped the institutions of Western societies.[14] Such struggles have been partial, uneven in their effects – and are vulnerable to ‘backlash’ moments in which lost powers and privileges are recouped. The embedding of ‘gender neutral’ policies in the European Union; the adaptations of ‘access’ to the public realm for disabled people; the concession of some ‘partner’ rights to gay and lesbian people and the constant ebb and flow of multi-culturalisms – each of these indicates the marks that ‘access struggles’ have left on the public realm of Western societies. I do not mean that these are a simple ‘march of progress’ but nor have they left the societies and their public apparatuses of law, policy and welfare practices unchanged.

Social work occupies a distinctive and problematic place in the politics and practices of access. As a ‘mediating profession’, social work is engaged in the process of managing the relationships between (some) individuals and society, or (some) citizens and the state. Social work’s complicated and turbulent history speaks to the problems and contradictions of such a ‘mediating’ task. The dominant conception of such mediation has been the idea that social workers will normalise and include the excluded, dysfunctional and disorderly populations. But social workers have always been vulnerable to ‘taking the client’s view’ – advocating on behalf of the dispossessed, the subordinated and the oppressed. Varieties of ‘radical social work’ have argued for social transformation, rather than individual adaptation. In the last thirty years, social work has proved recurrently vulnerable to challenge and capture by social movements – feminism, anti-racism, disability politics, children’s rights and so on.[15]

This vulnerability is both a structural and a cultural feature of social work. Structurally, it is a consequence of the mediating role – if social work owes obligations to both the individual and

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[13] Some of these sites of tension and conflict are discussed more fully in Hesse, 2001; Lancaster, 2003; and Lewis, 2000 and 2003;

[14] These changes have taken place alongside – and inconsiderable tension with – other forms and directions of institutional change, particularly those associated with neo-liberal or corporate globalization. The resulting tensions are difficult – expanding access to a shrinking public realm, regulating for equality in a climate of de-regulation and flexibility and so on. However, thinking of this as a complex and contradictory political field is surely better than only noticing the neo-liberal or corporate trends (an argument advanced more fully in Clarke, 2004b).

[15] The idea of social work as a mediating profession is taken from Terence Johnson (1973) and was developed in some of the contributions to Clarke (1993).

society, there is always the possibility that it will take individuals and their circumstances seriously. Indeed, to have any credibility with the marginalised or subordinated groups with whom it works, social work must engage with their conditions and experiences. Culturally, the profession of social work has developed with a strong orientation towards valuing users, promoting autonomy and self-determination and, more recently towards non-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches to practice. As a result, social work – as a welfare practice – is prone to be pulled by different approaches to access. Sometimes, it has embodied the liberal/passive notion – indeed, the phrase a 'door on which to knock' was coined by the Seebohm Committee that established Social Services departments in England and Wales in the 1970s. Sometimes, it has been shaped by 'outreach' conceptions – working with and alongside marginalised groups to enhance their capacities and their participation in society. And, at other times, social work has been mobilised by more radical or transformative views about the forms of social change that are necessary to make access meaningful. This contested character of social work points to the larger conflicts that are at stake in the demand for 'access for all'. In particular, it points to the question of what the 'centre' becomes if all are allowed access. Can the 'mainstream' flow on unchanged by the new mix – or must it be enlarged, enhanced and enabled to become different?

In the politics of access, the question 'who do we think we are' has been opened to contestation. From the security of a mid-twentieth century 'We' that spoke in the authoritative tones of a white, male, middle class, able-bodied and heterosexual patriarch – the contemporary 'We' has become less certain. The 'we' is now more polyvocal as other voices struggle to enter and transform the 'centre'. This is a politics of access that insists 'entry' is not the same as 'assimilation' – those moving from the margins do not have to acquire the habits of thought and action of the centre. This politics of access poses the possibility of a new and more mobile universalism – a dynamic, rather than static, view of the 'open society'.

To deliver on the promise of 'access', then, we will need to understand its transformative potential – and the risk of political and institutional responses that aim at retrenchment, containment and assimilation. 'Access' has become a popular policy term (who, now, is not committed to 'widening access'?). But to take access seriously involves challenging liberal/passive versions of open-ness. It suggests that 'outreach' initiatives to seek out the marginalized and excluded may not be enough. Rather, the transformative politics of access suggests that the centre cannot stay the same – if access is to be a process of inclusion, then the 'we' that is at stake needs to be transformed. Access cannot produce a socially inclusive society if its model is that 'We' can make 'Them' more like 'Us': such a project produces only more ill-fitting, strained and contradictory fields of social relationships. Instead, a transformative view of access implies that 'Their' successful entry will create a different 'We' – a more complex, shifting, multi-voiced and mobile unity of differences. But it may also imply a more egalitarian 'We' – a We that can live with a diversity of differences, because differences are not the route to inequality. In the end, Access struggles combine the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution (precisely because in the contemporary world, identity and inequality are so tightly woven together). So, Access matters – because it is a focus for potentially transformative politics and practices, even as it is reduced to processes by which the marginal populations are managed and accommodated. Access itself is an unstable product of social, political and economic instabilities.

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