Postscript: A Theory of Access Revisited

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EDITORIAL

Postscript: A Theory of Access Revisited

The articles in this volume conceptually and empirically engage and extend our 'theory of access' (Ribot and Peluso 2003) through theoretically informed grounded analysis. The articles nuance our repertoire of access mechanisms, suggesting ways to think more deeply and broadly with the concept. They provide an array of new applications and scales at which the analysis of access pertains under changing political economic and environmental circumstances. This helps clarify the origins of environmental problems and conflicts. Several show how the analysis of access helps us understand patterns of resource distribution, sites of struggle over power and authority, and ways that our notion of "webs of power" could be more effectively structured and defined. In this essay we reflect on how this special issue expands our thinking on power and authority, access maintenance and control, distinctions between access and property, and scales of analysis.

Power Relations, Authority, Access Control

Since the article appeared, many writers have focused on its definition of access as "the ability to benefit from a thing," through what we, following Ashraf Ghani (1995, 2), called a "bundle of powers." Ghani expanded the notion of property from Henry Maine's (1917, 105, Chapter 6) "bundle of rights" to a bundle of powers. We expanded the bundle of powers idea from a definition of property rights to the broader concept of access. We (2003, 154) say:

> Focusing on natural resources as the "things" in question, we explore the range of powers—embodied in and exercised through various mechanisms, processes, and social relations—that affect people's ability to benefit from resources. These powers constitute the material, cultural and political-economic strands within the "bundles" and "webs" of powers that configure resource access. Different people and institutions hold and can draw on different "bundles of powers" located and constituted within "webs of powers" made up of these strands. People and institutions are positioned differently in relation to resources at various historical moments and geographical scales. The strands thus shift and change over time, changing the nature of power and forms of access to resources.

Throughout our article, we discuss mechanisms of access as relations of power. We view power as an effect that emerges from social relations and ongoing struggles within them. Gramsci (1971) called the social controls emergent in such struggles "hegemonic." We see resource controls that result from struggles over access in a similar light; and it is here that we overlap with theoretical ideas in political economy and political ecology (see, e.g., Mann 2009; Watts 2000; Blaikie 1985). In this special issue, all the articles examine how certain powers and the social relationships through which they emerged have changed, even as they remain connected through webs and or hierarchies. We talk about these relationships as "mechanisms" that influence who is able to enjoy benefits from resources, an environment, or other "things." Except for those dealing directly with force and violent dispossession, the papers examine how consent (or acquiescence) and dissent (struggle) are manufactured in the quest to gain, maintain, or control access to resources. By recognizing that all efforts to gain, maintain, or control access are, at base, struggles in the domain of social relations, we

explicitly caste our bundles of powers as relational. Thus, a bundle of powers is a set of relationships through which people and their institutions realize benefits from things.

In our theory of access, we also specify types of relations of access among those who control and those who seek to gain or maintain access – they relate through cooperation, competition, conflict and negotiation. To control access is to mediate the access of others and includes the power to exclude (see also, Hall, Hirsch and Li 2011). To gain or maintain access is done via relations with those who control. Direct access – where one enjoys the benefits from things without immediate mediation, is also relational insofar as acts of use or enjoyment follow from and take on meaning and thus support or admonition within society. No act of taking, production or reproduction, no act of being or becoming occurs outside of social interdependence (see Butler 2010).

The relation between access control and maintenance provides a new way of analyzing multi-tiered social hierarchies as highlighted in Milgrom and Ribot (this issue). They explain that having to maintain one's access through others who control resources demonstrates hierarchies as well as webs of powers, or what they call, "fluid multi-layered social hierarchies." Class formation and other sorts of social differentiation can thus be analyzed and illustrated through access analyses. The analysis of "relations of access" parallels and expands "relations of production" by moving the basis of analysis from ownership-based relations to the multiple access mechanisms.

Sikor and Lund (2009) launched an important series of articles on the relation between access and the production of authority. They argue that access and authority are mutually constitutive. Controlling access to a resource by physically enforcing it or adjudicating conflicts over it can produce legitimacy, and, when it does, produces recognition as authority. This recognition, in turn, reinforces their powers to control (allocate, enforce, and adjudicate) access. Sikor and Lund focus primarily on property relations, the enforcement of claims as rights (see McPherson 1978), and on a more or less dyadic relationship – or multiple dyadic relations in the case of competing authorities. While recognizing this important contribution by Sikor and Lund, we continue to see access relationships as creating more complex hierarchies of authority, with property rights representing only one means by which to gain access (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Spierenberg (this issue) presents a clear illustration of the intersection of identity and hierarchies of control and maintenance. She documented that when black laborers in contemporary South Africa had gained access to white farmers' land by exchanging their [unpaid] agricultural labor for a place to live and keep cattle, they could remain on the land. However, with the rise of land reform initiatives and laws meant to formalize blacks' rights as tillers of the land, white landowners found new ways to remove people from the land and to maintain control. By removing blacks, landowners precluded their future acquisition of the formalized rights that social movements and political actors were promoting. White farmers refused to rehire any worker-residents who had left, physically transported blacks to townships from the rural area, and violently evicted blacks. They also converted their livestock farms to game farming.

Game farming allowed these land holders to claim they were protecting nature because "game" are also considered "wildlife" and "biodiversity." Other narrative moves included claims that transformed their identities from "just" farmers or ranchers to environmental preservationists or sustainable livestock producers. They moved from ranching methane-producing animals to the protectors of Africa's heritage and into the domain of the "eco." They changed from allying with free laborers to joining forces with the more powerful environmentalists. Black South Africans have lost work while colonial apartheid relations on the land are being reinstated.

Agyei, Hansen and Acheampong (this issue) are also concerned with the deployment of identity to leverage access. They show how rules and norms in Ghana change with changing political economies and ecologies, as do access mechanisms, subjectivities, and the possibilities for new access strategies – even as hierarchical authorities persist. In one district, by claiming their rights as the chief's subjects to access trees and make charcoal, producers organized to bargain down the percentage of the charcoal fees traditionally taken by their chiefs. These producers resisted a culturally accepted right of the chief. More surprisingly, forest producers of different ethnic heritage (who were also subjects of this chief) claimed that their incomes were declining and asked the chief to make a more "moral" choice by granting them fee exemptions. Thus, different subjects used different kinds of identity claims to access the resource and increase their shares of charcoal revenues while also maintaining access to charcoal revenues via chiefs—at the top of the local social hierarchy.

In sum, access mapping can identify the power relations, nodes of authority, and hierarchies in which those bundles of power are embedded and realized or changed.

Property, Access, Rights and Claims

At the time we wrote the access piece, the property relations literature was already a nuanced literature that addressed some of the concepts and relationships we developed around access. Yet, our difficulties in using property theory alone in sites of contestation over resources led us to develop a new term. We explicitly focused on the ability to benefit because "ability" took us away from the focus on "rights" and allowed us a means of ascertaining whether, how, and why those benefits were realized or not. As access theory shows, rights may be guaranteed but they are not always accessible. The concept of access provides a means of interrogating this disjuncture between formal law and diverse practices. Property theory had already acknowledged this anomaly in its definition of "enforceable claims." For example, MacPherson (1978) identified some of the overlapping authoritative relationships involved in conflicts over resource control. As well, "legal pluralism" scholars focused on multiple types of property claims (including customary and conventional). They and other scholars' use of terms such as "property relations" or "tenure relations" helped move the focus of empirical exploration from legal-property arenas into the domain of less formal social relations. Yet, legal pluralist approaches often follow on the heels of colonial "customary law" scholarship. That literature has generated fierce debates over "recognition" of customary "law" versus its production as "law" (see, e.g., Burns 1999; Li 2000). Focused more on formal rules and institutions of control, these approaches did not get at who is actually able to benefit from resources in practice. Our shift from rules to ability to benefit provided an empirical entry point that put property in its place as one means of deriving benefits from things – among other means.

Nevertheless, we also contend that formal rights, including property rights, do not guarantee access, because not all formal claims are enforceable, as property theorists pointed out. For that reason, ownership, title-holding, or rights-based benefits are only part of the access repertoire. One may have formal rights to harvest or plant a forest or a plantation and still not be able to benefit from it without access to labor for harvesting or to markets (Faye and Ribot 2017). Access also helps explain direct and structural takings that do not fall within the domain of property rights. For example, access mechanisms can include the use of brutal, structural, and slow forms of violence and force, which may result in either illegal or unauthorized access as well as access sanctioned by states. Of course, property rights remain one important mechanism of gaining access.

In their paper, Kronenburg García and Van Dijk propose to "bridge access and property theory through [their notion of] claim-making" (this issue). Following Sikor and Lund (2009), they cast claim making as a gray zone that joins the two. As evoked above, we see claims as being implicit and explicit in access theory. Above we have discussed the definition of property as an "enforceable" claim, and noted that claiming is important in both property and access approaches. In addition, we note that the word "claim" comes from Latin, i.e., "*clamare*" to cry out" (Webster Online Dictionary). Webster defines a claim as an *announcement of intentions*; it is more about seeking access or property than realizing it. Enforcement gives property its secure character. Yet if a claiming voice is stifled, ignored, or unheard, or the response contested, we shift from the domain of property to one in which access is the more dynamic, revealing, and applicable concept.

Further, when what is meant by claiming is "taking," or "possession," it is a form of direct access (Ribot and Peluso 2003, 161, 170).[1] In short, we conceptualized property and access as nested concepts in which property is one kind of access – property claims are more formal; they involve formal-legal, customary, or conventional enforcement structures. It is nevertheless useful to point out that all kinds of access mechanisms and means of access—including property—begin from some kind of claim-making, as Kronenburg García, and Van Dyke have shown.

Scales of Application and Overlap

Szaboova, Brown and Fischer (this issue) add what they call 'psychosocial' means of access, applying it to an environment, place, or a resource. Someone may be physically present within a beautiful landscape for example, but unable to benefit from its enjoyment because some association, perception, memory or meaning inhering in that place blocks their ability to enjoy it. This sort of psychosocial conditioning can affect an individual or a group; it can be part of a hierarchy of access mechanisms or be imbricated with others. Szaboova et al. explicitly draw on social structural influences and "cultural histories of people and places" (this issue, 3). Following Bourdieu (1977), they remind us that the set of practices and understandings and emotions associated with a particular place or environment constitutes a habitus, defining it as " … the vehicle through which the objective material structures of a given context becomes internalized, often sub-consciously, in the subjective tastes, preferences, and embodied experiences of people belonging to that context" (this issue, 3). The authors provide an original analysis of habitus as a:

> … potent vehicle for reproducing existing disadvantage …. as people's aspirations and practices are shaped by dispositions linked to objective structures such as gender, age, class, and economy. Habitus perpetuates the very structures that produce disadvantage in the first place (this issue, 3).

The authors refer mainly to ecosystem benefits from public resources in the global North that are seen to generally benefit mental health and well-being, contrasting scenery, beaches, mountains, cultural landscapes with resources that contribute to for economic, political, or sociocultural well-being. They focus on direct access but refine that concept by calling it, "access by proximity." They argue that proximity is not just about presence but about the sense of entitlement to go somewhere and to enjoy that place. Related to our brief discussion of power relations above, the authors cite Castree (1995) who identified

> links between socioecological exclusion and underlying power relations embedded in the history of landscapes, land-use systems and ideologies of nature that shape peoples' perceptions, meanings and attitudes towards environmental spaces.

Environments and the ability to access them are thus affected by social difference through emotional or perceptual "environments of the mind" (Szaboova, Brown, and Fischer, this issue). The authors then circle back to Agyeman's (1990) earlier work on the ways that white landscapes of the English countryside make people of color feel out of place and unwelcome. They give other examples of how emotions, personalities, and personal circumstances shape people's engagements with forests (and other resources). Though they do not mention Carolyn Finney (2015)'s book, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Finney also addressed this situation clearly; examining why fewer people of color, particularly African Americans, associate forests and coasts, trees and water, with the violence of slavery and the Jim Crow period in American history. Their analysis therefore, is useful in examining the shadows such past moments have cast – showing also that conflict itself creates a kind of emotional resistance in those subordinated by a conflict to even try to benefit from resources and environments.

On matters of scale, access analysis explores the multiple causes of a single instance of benefit – starting from the most local scale and moving outward. McDermott et al. (this issue) invert this analysis by using the access framework to analyze the multiple implications for access of a single international forestry-policy instrument deployed in Ghana and Indonesia. Rather than tracing causality from an instance of access as we have done, they trace effects from a particular policy. In doing so, they are able clearly illuminate how international policies introduce simplifications to make the world legible (a la Scott 1998) and in the process reconfigure patterns of access on the ground. In the Ghana case, for example, the Voluntary Participation Agreements " … favor state control and the access of large-scale industry and international actors to high-value timber over customary systems of local control and access." Similarly, in Indonesia, they found that by focusing on export timber destined to Europe, VPAs left out the local concerns and claims of customary leaders. The verification of land ownership – a cumbersome process – excluded many smallholders who lack title, undermined smallholder competitiveness, and was so cumbersome that local leaders lost interest in engaging.

In McDermott et al.'s cases, external verification and control overrode local complexity and differentiated means of access via what are ultimately brutal simplifications for those who do not fit the applied standards – designed for and to create legal space for global actors. What is legible to and navigable by the local user in traditional systems of access, was obscured, even eradicated. The simplest solution from the point of view of the state forest managers became the granting of concessions to large companies producing tree crops for export.

Calderón-Contreras and White (this issue) assert that Theory of Access "does not attempt to explain the role of scale when it comes to access … ." This is true, we do not provide a detailed analysis of scale. Rather, we suggest tracing webs of access outward across scales and backward in history to wherever causal chains may lead. Yet, Calderon-Contreras and White use access theory to focus their rich analysis of cases in Mexico and the UK on the specific factors facilitating or obstructing access at multiple scales. They have thus provided an illustration of how to use empirical data to identify relevant scales of causality.

The method of access mapping outlined in "A theory of access" encourages cross-scale analysis, yet does not pre-map all scalar phenomena. The articles in this special issue by Szaboova, Brown and Fischer, McDermott et al., as well as Calderón-Contreras and White illustrate the use of access mapping at multiple scales in specific sites and cases of conflict. They each reveal causality at various (produced) scales from the emotional and individual through to the global.

Conclusion

Access theory aims at description and explanation of the origins of environmental and resource problems and conflicts, in part to identify prescriptions that may increase justice

and security. Access theory's initial premise is that every case has its own historical and place-based dynamics related to social difference. The framework's intent is to guide analysis and identify potential points of intervention to resolve conflict or ameliorate political and ecological conditions. Access dynamics cannot be modeled in a broadly applicable, general manner. Rather, access theory and its continued dynamic application to changing social and ecological conditions, offers a grounded means for understanding when, why, and how access has played out in specific contexts. Without situated, relational histories (Peluso 2012), models are limited and do not produce effective policy.

There are many promising applications and extensions of access theory, in large part because understanding access is a critical component of any political economic or political ecological analysis of resource or environmental use, crisis, or conflict. In our own work we have explored new access arenas. For example, Ribot (2014) has called for access analysis to explain vulnerability to climate-related displacement, economic loss, hunger or famine. Such vulnerability is, in essence, an "access failure," paralleling Sen's (1981) explicit legal framing of "entitlement failure." Yet access failure can stem from failure of any means of attaining security, whether legal, extra-legal or illegal. The access approach provides guidelines for engaging in case-by-case analyses of the causes of climate-related vulnerabilities – via the multiple deprivations from lack of access to resources, markets and representation. Peluso has extended access analysis to situated socio-natural and resource histories of rubber (2009), gold (2017), as well as to environmental violence (Peluso and Watts 2001; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011), augmenting her work on forests and agrarian change.

We hope that *"A theory of access"* will continue to be used to examine resource conflicts, problems, forms of collaboration, related risks, and sustainable as well as inappropriate management in Northern and Southern environments. To find the origins of an environmental problem, as Piers Blaikie (1985) presciently stated, we need to understand access: who is able to benefit from things, under what conditions, mobilizing what relations of power, and through what set of mechanisms. With that we can outline cause, identify response, indicate responsibility and promote positive change–as the authors and editors of this special issue on *Access Revisited* have demonstrated.

Note

1. Note that the word "possess" is likely from "*potis* 'having power, powerful, able' … +*sedere* … 'to sit'": the power or ability to sit – circling back to power.

Acknowledgments

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