

Access revisited: An introduction to the special issue

Introduction

As political-economic forces at every scale and locus are transforming nature and society, struggles are mounting over access to natural resources. Wide-ranging and deepening inequality (e.g. Hickel 2017) suggests that questions of access are germane to critical social science today, possibly even more than in previous decades. Resource access struggles are part and parcel of unequal exchanges and outcomes, failure to recognize claims, lack of participation in decision making, and market processes. Access theory, not least Ribot and Peluso's (2003) *A Theory of Access*, presents concepts of power, control, benefits and burdens for analyzing access, which continue to gain pertinence today. Access theory and analysis have continually proven to be a versatile way to understand some of the most elusive obstacles to effective natural resources governance such as elite control over resources, exploitative market relations, and policies that eschew rights.

This special issue was triggered by the 15 year anniversary of the publication of *A Theory of Access* and encompasses a literature review of *A Theory of Access* followed by eight articles with conceptual and empirical advances in access theory. It concludes with a postscript by Jesse Ribot and Nancy Peluso, reflecting on this special issue and *A Theory of Access* 15 years after its publication. In this introduction, we introduce access theory and the contributions of each article to new ways of theorizing and applying the concept of access.

Access theory

Although *A Theory of Access* is the best known and most widely cited work on access, it is rooted in a rich body of scholarship. Ribot and Peluso build on the works of Berry (1998, 1989, 1993, 1994), Blaikie (1985), Li (2000, 1999), MacPherson (1978), Watts (1983, 1987) and others. Ribot and Peluso themselves had been working on several empirical studies that informed their framing of access. Peluso had been writing on control of access to production forests in Java (Indonesia) in her book *Rich Forests, Poor People* (Peluso 1992). She here emphasized three components: control of land, control of species and control of forest labour. In addition, ideological control, "embodied in the forest laws that legitimate state authority in forests, joins with the other three components to constitute forest access" (Peluso 1992, 17). In Peluso's analysis, the state's control of access is met by various forms of violent and non-violent resistance by peasants living in and close to the forest. Also in subsequent works, Peluso is concerned with resource access and property, e.g. in her analysis of property rights dynamics of fruit trees in West Kalimantan (Peluso 1996).

Ribot (1998), in his analysis of the charcoal commodity chain in Senegal, presents key elements of what subsequently became *A Theory of Access*. This includes a definition of access and the notion of access expanding beyond property. He also sketches out the categories of access mechanisms (property, social identity, social relations, capital, etc.)

thereby laying the foundation for the later description of structural and relational mechanisms in *A Theory of Access*. Finally, he presents the concept of mapping access involving identification of actors, evaluation of income and profits among groups of actors and within groups, and using this distribution to map the mechanisms by which access to benefits is maintained and controlled. Thus, reading of Ribot and Peluso (2003) can be productively combined with reading of Ribot (1998) especially because the latter provides the rich empirical details and examples that the more conceptual piece, Ribot and Peluso (2003), understandably could not.

In the paragraphs to follow, we briefly present and discuss the central elements of *A Theory of Access*. Ribot and Peluso's central contribution in *A Theory of Access* is to advance property thinking to consider a broader set of structural and social relations that determine who benefits from things. As Ribot and Peluso (2003, 157) explain, "our move from concepts of property and tenure to access locates property as one set of factors (nuanced in many ways) in a larger array of institutions, social and political-economic relations, and discursive strategies that shape benefit flows." This move is apparent already in the way access is defined; access is "the ability to benefit from things – including material objects, persons, institutions and symbols" (p. 153). The focus is on *ability*, which includes, but extends beyond, rights (property). *A Theory of Access* presents a comprehensible and flexible framework to understand access that takes a point of departure in scholarship on property and tenure which considers property as an "enforceable claim" (see MacPherson 1978, 3). In access theory, property is a relationship among social actors with regard to objects of value, with rights legitimized in the sense that they are sanctioned by the state or other politico-legal authorities (Sikor and Lund 2009, 4). By emphasizing property established through law, custom and convention, Ribot and Peluso incorporate the notion of legal pluralism and forum shopping (von Benda-Beckman and von Benda-Beckman 1999); and that property relations are often ambiguous and contested. Hence, various groups of actors attempt to have their claims recognized as property and multiple institutions compete to sanction and validate such claims (Sikor and Lund 2009).

Ribot and Peluso (2003) broadly classify mechanisms of access into rights-based and structural and relational mechanisms. The first category, rights-based access, is the property relations discussed above, that is, claims sanctioned by law, custom or convention. Under rights-based access, Ribot and Peluso also include illegal access, that is, access which is not socially sanctioned (not based on law, custom or convention), e.g. theft. Their argument is based on a discussion of morality and legitimacy; what one group may consider as theft, may be considered as moral and legitimate by another.

Under structural and relational mechanisms of access, Ribot and Peluso lay out a framework encompassing access to technology, access to capital, access to markets, access to labor and labor opportunities, access to knowledge, access to authority, access through social identity and access via the negotiation of other social relations. The framework is generic and decidedly heuristic, designed to be flexible and adaptable to different contexts. A social actor has access to a specific set of access mechanisms, that is, he or she holds a specific "bundle of powers", in analogy with the "bundle of rights" notion used in relation to property, e.g. Schlager and Ostrom (1992) and Sikor et al. (2017). So to Ribot and Peluso, ability is contingent on power, and the mechanisms held by a social actor are the (strands of) powers that cumulatively generate the ability (access).

In laying out these categories of structural and relational mechanisms, Ribot and Peluso capture and integrate multiple views of power (see also Myers and Hansen, this issue). First, and perhaps most obvious, they embrace a structural, Marxist political economy view on power: access is shaped by broader socio-economic forces in society. Second, *A Theory of Access* features a more post-structuralist (Foucaultian) perspective of power. Central here is the role of discursive power whereby social actors produce discourses, understood as a socially shared perspective on a topic, and are able to get other actors to adopt and reproduce the discourse (Svarstad et al. 2018). Third, by drawing on Weber and Lukes, Ribot and Peluso (2003) integrate an actor-oriented power perspective. That is, actors possess agency and they in various ways harness and exercise power that provides them the ability to benefit from “things” (Svarstad et al. 2018).

Finally, *A Theory of Access* introduces three concepts of social action in relation to access: Access control, maintenance of access and gaining access. Ribot and Peluso (2003, 158-9) write:

Access control is the ability to mediate others' access. Control “...refers to the checking and direction of action, the function or power of directing and regulating free action” (Rangan 1997:72). *Maintenance* of access requires expending resources or powers to keep a particular sort of resource access open (e.g. Berry 1993). Maintenance and control are complementary. They are social positions that temporarily crystalize around means of access. [sic]. We speak of a third term, *gaining* access, as the more general process by which access is established. (emphasis in original).

Ribot and Peluso exemplify access maintenance and control with reference to Marxist political economy. The capitalist class owns/controls the means of production, that is, they control access, while the proletariat maintains access through their labor and by transferring some of the benefits to those who control it. Access analysis obviously moves beyond the class analysis, because an individual may hold various means of both access control and maintenance, as noted in the discussion on powers above. Note also here the conceptual connection between access control and property: granting and enforcing property is an important way of controlling social actors' access.

The contributions to this volume

In the planning of this special issue, we sought out the top contemporary scholars working on access. We identified them through the Myers and Hansen literature review (this issue) and our own scholarly networks. 39 scholars were contacted (22 women, 17 men) and 10 (5 women, 5 men) met in Utrecht in July 2017 to discuss the special issue proposal and how our cases could fit together to make a cohesive volume. Ultimately, eight articles were developed, passed review and were accepted for this special issue of *Society & Natural Resources*. These articles engage with, and contribute to, access theory. In this section we briefly present each article and highlight the key contributions.

Myers and Hansen (this issue) undertake a review of more than 1,100 sources that have cited *A Theory of Access* to understand in what ways the literature engages with the theory and to what effects. They found that 80% of the sources cited only, or made a cursory citation to some aspect of the theory. Forty sources (4 %) were considered to engage deeply

with *A Theory of Access*, including using it together with other theories to build on theory or formulating a critique. In between these groups where a large, intermediate group of sources (186; 16 %) which used *A Theory of Access* as framework to structure their empirical analysis (that is, access mapping). The review focuses on the sources that engage deeply with *A Theory of Access* and suggests that they may be conveniently grouped into those which engage with *A Theory of Access* in relation to other frameworks with similar concerns: (1) entitlements framework, (2) sustainable livelihoods approach, (3) powers of exclusion; and sources which engage in broader theoretical and conceptual debates in the social sciences: (4) gender, (5) materiality, (6) property and authority, and (7) power. The review concludes that there are few substantial critiques or enhancements to *A Theory of Access*, but that it has had a huge influence on social theory through the broad body of scholarship that has used, and continues to use it as a basis for analysis as a result of its heuristic nature.

Kronenburg Garcia and van Dijk (this issue) in their article “Towards a theory of claim making: Bridging access and property theory,” make a conceptual contribution to access theory by interrogating the dynamics and linkages between access and property. The authors build on Sikor and Lund’s (2009) notion of a “grey zone” between access and property – what people have rights to and what they merely have access to – and where actors attempt to have their access recognized as property by a politico-legal institution. They outline an analytical framework of claim making: “grounding claims” is the practice of inscribing or altering the landscape with visible markers connoting ownership; “talking claims” when speech is used strategically to make, justify and contest claims; and “representing claims” when claims are represented on material objects (maps, title deeds) that are detached from the resource. The authors intend to broaden Sikor and Lund’s discussion of the grey zone to not only consider processes of turning access into property – a process the authors call appropriation – but also to explore the reverse process of property translating into access (called accessing) with claim-making being the link between the two.

Milgroom and Ribot (this issue) in “Children of another land: social disarticulation, access to natural resources and the reconfiguration of authority in post settlement” contribute to access theory, specifically in relation to the relationship between politico-legal institutions’ practices of vetting and legitimizing claims and the effects these practices have on their authority. The article thus engages with Sikor and Lund’s (2009) discussion of a “contract” between property and the authority of politico-legal institutions. An important contribution of the article is its empirical illustration of how the relationship between access (property) and authority plays out in practice. The article is set in the context of a forced resettlement of a village within the Limpopo National Park in Mozambique to a location outside the park. It illustrates that “it is through changes in the ability to allocate resource access that authority structures fall or rise and systems of rule are ruptured or built” (p. 2). In the case, the leader of the village loses his authority in the reallocation process precisely because he no longer holds the ability to allocate resource access. The article also applies access framework to show that social problems that follow relocation do not, as relocation theorists have argued, merely reflect cultural stresses. Social dissolutions are rooted in the changes of material relations that follow displacement into a new environment. It is changes in resource access that unravel social and authority relations.

In their article “Access as the means for understanding social-ecological resilience”, Calderon-Contreras and White (this issue) demonstrate how *A Theory of Access* can usefully address perceived theoretical gaps within the social dimensions of Social Ecological Systems (SES) resilience theory. They argue that *A Theory of Access* has potential to enable a deeper and more grounded view of the “social” component of SES resilience, particularly when applied to three properties of SES resilience: connectivity, diversity and feedback, because it gives opportunities for a more detailed examination of power and inequality. The authors demonstrate this integration through two case studies: a coastal fishing community in the United Kingdom and a mountainous indigenous community in Mexico.

Agyei, Hansen and Acheampong’s article “Access along Ghana’s charcoal commodity chain” examines differential distribution of benefits in markets, emphasizing inequality especially in the low incomes of primary producers. The authors nuance Ribot and Peluso’s mechanisms of access by demonstrating new means by which access is gained, maintained and controlled. Specifically, Agyei, Hansen and Acheampong bring out force, moral economy, social movements, and innovation to the repertoire of access mechanisms in access analysis. While they acknowledge that these variables can be considered implicit in *A Theory of Access*, they argue that they should be given more prominence and that they could be treated as mechanisms of access in their own right.

In their article “Access to ecosystem benefits: more than proximity”, Saboozva, Brown and Fisher (this issue) apply *A Theory of Access* to understanding how marginalized communities living in rural and coastal areas of the western United Kingdom struggle to benefit from these ecosystems. Where physical proximity is considered an advantage in accessing a multitude of ecosystem benefits, the authors complement Ribot and Peluso’s access theory with insights from health geography and environmental psychology to reveal two new mechanisms that mediate access to ecosystem benefits: physical and psycho-social. Their analysis places these characteristics in a larger context by demonstrating how structural factors shape the less-obvious mechanisms related to “cultural histories of people and place” by which the material reality around the individual becomes internalized so as to shape their ability to enter or enjoy the environment.

McDermott, Hirons and Setyowati (this issue) in their article “The interplay of global governance with domestic and local access: Case studies of FLEGT VPAs in Ghana and Indonesia,” explore how dynamics of scale and authority, from global to local levels, shape access to timber resources. So called Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) introduced by global scale institutions impose systems to verify the legality of timber extraction to eliminate trade in illegal wood. Through analysis of Ghanaian and Indonesian legal and policy documents and interviews with stakeholders at local to international scales, the authors reveal that despite different approaches and levels of focus on domestic timber markets in the two countries, the cumulative impact of the VPAs has been to open new avenues of influence for select national and international actors in ways that privilege international trade over domestic access to wood products. The article highlights the critical role of scale in shaping access, and suggests that the use of international state and market-based authority to govern domestic access to timber reinforces existing inequalities. They demonstrate how access control is, by making local production legible (a la Scott 1998) via

verification, being moved from local into global institutions. The article uses access theory to provide a stunning empirical look at globalization processes.

Spierenburg's (this issue) "Living on other people's land; impacts of farm conversions to game farming on farm dwellers' abilities to access land in the Eastern Cape, South Africa" provides a rich historical account of contestations over land and access to land in the Eastern Cape, South Africa between "white farmers" and landless "Africans". The article pays particular focus to the recent trend of conversion of agricultural and grazing land to wildlife-based production systems. The article describes the webs of powers (or mechanisms of access) applied by land owners and the landless to further their claims and access to land, and how this feeds into larger struggles about identity and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

We set out to develop a collection of contributions that would push access theory forward. Before looking forward, we took a look back by reviewing all publications that have cited this influential work by Ribot and Peluso. When we conducted our literature review (2017), there were almost 1,600 works citing *A Theory of Access*. By the time we wrote this introduction (January 2019), the same Google Scholar search yielded almost 2,000 results. Clearly, *A Theory of Access* still attracts attention.

Access theory remains widely used among scholars in the areas of natural resource management and land governance, especially pertaining to property and control over resources. The central access theory remains Ribot and Peluso (2003), with only a few attempts to update it 15 years later. The articles in this special issue collectively suggest a number of new mechanisms of access in addition to those suggested by Ribot and Peluso: force, moral economy, social movements, innovation, physical factors, psycho-social factors in addition implication for access at different scales. Several of the articles in the special issue relate to the "grey zone" between access and property. We consider the further development of access theory to be a productive field for further theoretical and empirical work.

This special issue is the first to focus specifically on access theory. We hope that it will be an important resource for scholars, students, and practitioners interested in access, or perhaps more generally, those interested in understanding who has the ability to benefit from things and how they gain, maintain and control that ability. As access scholars, we encourage more attention to access and how it can contribute to better considerations of power in natural resource governance. We contend that there is considerable scope for the further integration of access thinking in addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges, leading to more equitable and legitimate outcomes.

A Theory of Access has confirmed its enduring relevance and strength, with the articles in this special issue showing both areas of theoretical extension as well as innovative areas of application.

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