

## Access denied: the dark side of prestige

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*'In order for others to [be accommodated], who as beings have a different set of requirements, they would have to push for a modification of the environment. Some have to push to be accommodated. Given how able-bodied privilege comes to structure a world (both a physical and social world) then people with disabilities have to push to have their own requirements met.'* ([Sara Ahmed](#))

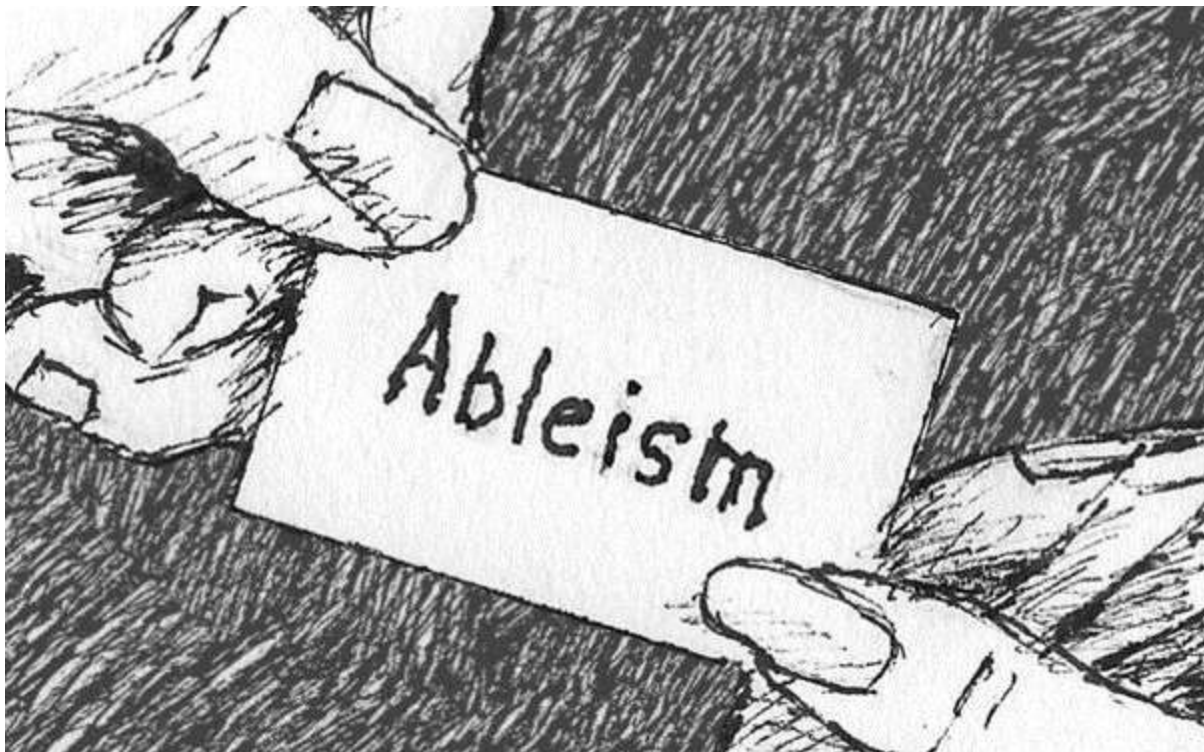


Image from [Rooted in Rights](#).

Spaces. Each one requires a different physical and intellectual attentiveness. Perhaps you have never thought about how much energy it will take to get from one space to another, how your body responds when faced with slight inclines or uneven paths. The lighting of a space, whether there is a clear trajectory from the doorway to a seat. The space itself, how it seems inoffensive yet from the outside looking in, certain spaces are porous, where the walls, floor, ceiling have come to assume a certain type of body will fill that space.

Some weeks ago, there was a public engagement session that I wanted to attend in the Department of Sociology at The University of Cambridge. Around the same week, I was looking forward to a lecture on intersectionality by Sara Ahmed. Both events were scheduled to take place in the same seminar room, but I could not go because on those days, it was too difficult to walk up or down stairs. I live with complex and rare multi-system invisible illnesses, and the challenges I face, particularly within society and academia are what disable me (thus, I identify myself as a disabled person). Living with invisible conditions means that I look physically capable and 'healthy.' In this blog post, I want to create (or contribute to) a dialogue about the salient and ignored issues related to being disabled (both visibly and invisibly) within an academic institution, access (or lack of) to spaces, and what messages this reproduces.

I feel honoured to be a Visiting Scholar at Reprosoc[1] in the Sociology Department at The University of Cambridge. My family are proud. It is a privilege. Speaking out in any way that isn't positive about a prestigious institution feels wrong – I should be thankful, right? A girl who didn't attend high school and fought her way through her undergraduate and graduate school now sits at a desk at one of the world's most renowned universities, and I am raising questions that may make people uncomfortable. But, as Sara Ahmed would say, you have to push against the tide and push against others walking in the opposite direction to be accommodated. As for the notion of privilege and prestige, they work to silence me, trying to erase my discomfort before I begin to give shape to the words and dare to speak them. However my positionality as a temporary visitor is perhaps what gives me the confidence to be honest. My goal is simple: to raise awareness so that long-term, disabled students, staff, and other visiting scholars have access to any room or area that able-bodied people have.

Although there are archaic and small elevators (note the word 'small' as you read on) in some buildings, there are a number of areas that have none. The first time I was presented with stairs to the aforementioned seminar room, I walked up them. The next few times I couldn't due to pain and fatigue. I do a lot physically with my limitations already, so forcing my body to ascend stairs and endure pain as I sit through a lecture or seminar is not productive. I have found that having incredibly supportive colleagues and mentors is not enough. They cannot erase the stairs that must be climbed or make the paved streets straighter. It is illogical that given how inaccessible rooms and buildings are in a country that has so many laws about being inclusive (see The Equality Act 2010)

At an individual level, not being able to participate fully in the both the academic and social aspects at an institution is isolating and pushes me, as a disabled person, further into the periphery of university life. This is not an unfamiliar feeling: to sit and give people my attention when the pain sears through my body, being too exhausted but wanting to attend something important, swallowing medicine to get through the day. The difference between this 'normal' and my current locale is that the physical barriers become much less about *my* in/abilities and more about the spaces that I am barred from, where the hurdles are concrete steps, uneven pavements and the way this has been allowed to continue into 2017. It is in the spaces found outside of the rooms beyond my physical reach that I stand (often alone) and feel defeated. It is infuriating but also incredibly sad. Why is an institution that has so much to offer so exclusionary?

Without extra challenges, as a sick graduate student, it's a David and Goliath battle, a weak body pitted against a myriad of challenges that form one giant monster. Pain, fatigue, deadlines, nausea, weak immune system, dysfunctional autonomic system, rest to fit in around all of this, and not forgetting to eat. It's a constant roundabout of things to do, to cope with, and to juggle. Add on the normal pressures of completing a PhD (and particularly in anthropology where your body is your main tool as you undertake intense fieldwork – data collection – to understand the lives of your participants), I have a challenging schedule. Having environmental barriers further debilitates and narrows one's options to participate in the very world in which one continually fights to carve out a space for oneself. Sadly, to be at Cambridge has meant more about adapting to an able-bodied world and less about engaging with my research.

Aptly put by this [blogger](#), 'when having to constantly seek out whether there is building access [to events], you're having to foreground yourself as *someone disabled* before you get to present yourself as *someone who is a badass researcher*. Psychologically, achieving the inverse of this is hard enough with a temperamental body. Additional reasons to reinforce this lexical ordering of identity just aren't welcome, *especially when they're avoidable if the access information was just made public.*' Indeed, this is a problem for many disabled people. We are in 2017, a time where one would hope accessibility issues would be minor. I could spend my time here unseen. If buildings were more accessible, I would not have to voice the concerns here. However, I know that if I were here full-time I would be reluctant to step forward. This makes it more of an imperative that I advocate and highlight the need for the university to be more inclusive.

The life of an academic (graduate, post-doc, research associate, lecturer) demands nothing but commitment and hours of input in order to survive within the academic setting. If healthy individuals feel the pressure, how are disabled people to speak of our struggles without inviting a spotlight that questions whether we deserve a place at the table to begin with? And why are

people generally uneasy when the topic of disability is brought up? One thought: the systemic inequalities and oppression disabled people experience within institutions highlights how uncomfortable able-bodied people are with the concept of (any kind of) vulnerability. Disability studies have shown that one of the reasons able bodied people struggle to engage in dialogue about this topic is because *anyone could become disabled and require help*. Further, talk of limitations muddies the image of climbing the academic ladder or striving to be the best you. Thus invisible (and literal in the sense of lack of access) boundaries are created between the 'able' and the 'dis-abled,' and we become (alongside other oppressed minority groups) the Other (Ahmed, 2017 also writes to this).

At a wider level, **a disabled person cannot study sociology at The University of Cambridge**. There are specific spaces that it is not possible for disabled students to access. I'm here to ask, *what message does this reproduce?* In the first instance, certain bodies are more welcome than others. Yes there is a disability resource centre at the University, which I have no doubt provides help to those needing it, but I have to ask: where are all the disabled people? According to a [study](#) done in 2015, 1 in 10 students in tertiary education identify as disabled. Why am I seeing and feeling a disregard for those who inhabit this world differently to how able bodied persons might? Discarded before they are even acknowledged, the very smallness of the space that we are being given (if that) feels like a cursory attempt at inclusivity that fails. And the lack of access that I seek to this space but often cannot inhabit tells me something. To block, to restrict access, to continue to oppress, to ignore, speaks of what value is given to disabled people. And in turn it is reproducing the message that they are inferior to able-bodied individuals. *To be a disabled person, it is always in proximity to the 'abled'*. Indeed, a disabled body creates the illusion that the able-bodied is the superior one.

Back to spaces. When I'm well enough, I walk around some of the streets close to my office. It is an incredibly beautiful town. Yet on bad health days, I have not felt like I belong. However, encouraged by my colleagues I have found space (for example in my office) that is inclusive, welcoming and non-judgemental. However beyond this, rooms can turn into spaces to fear, and ultimately avoid. Each space resides in beautiful buildings, but I have become smaller and voiceless. Until now. A colleague said something that struck a chord with me recently: *Don't think you aren't worthy of being here. Push the boundaries. Push to make them more flexible*. And she is right. Waiting for others to realise anything can be futile. The best way I know how to push against the tide is through writing, experimenting and challenging inexcusable discrimination with the my own truth in order to challenge the norm so that those placed outside of it are not ignored.

[i] To note, this is *not* about my colleagues at Reprosoc, or anyone else that I have the pleasure to know in the Sociology Department. They make life a bit easier.