

Working Paper 1

Theories of Social Exclusion and The Public Library

Dave Muddiman

Abstract

“Social exclusion” has increasingly taken over from terms like poverty and deprivation as a term for describing social division. The paper considers social exclusion, and the related term “social inclusion”, and its implications for the public library. It reviews the development of the concept of social exclusion and assesses its strengths and weaknesses as a way of describing social division. Here, it distinguishes between narrower and broader manifestations of the social exclusion idea, with the former suggesting targeted action and the latter a wider social project. The paper then identifies aspects of exclusion in the UK, and links these to the transition from an industrial to a claimed “information” society. The final part of the paper explores implications of the social exclusion debate for the public library, concluding that a wide range of policy initiatives will be needed for libraries to have a significant impact on poverty and inequality (April 1999).

1. Introduction

Until a decade or so ago, it was common to describe social divisions and inequality, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, in terms of concepts like poverty, deprivation and disadvantage. Underpinning most of these terms was the idea that poor or disadvantaged members of society lacked adequate *resources* with which to achieve acceptable standards of well being and with which to participate in the customary activities of society (Townsend, 1979). Whilst theorists argued about the causes and precise nature of such poverty, there was widespread agreement that, in its extreme manifestations at least, it was socially unacceptable and morally indefensible [1]. The goals of social policy in most mid-twentieth century liberal democracies thus focused upon the amelioration of poverty and disadvantage through the provision of various kinds of relief, either in the form of cash benefits or public services providing benefit in kind. As we shall see in other working papers, such policies manifested themselves in the public library community mainly in terms of initiatives targeted intermittently at “disadvantaged” groups of users; a strategy that has met with mixed and uncertain degrees of success (Black and Muddiman, 1997).

In the 1990s, however, a relatively new concept - social exclusion (together with its relatives *social inclusion* and *social cohesion*) has taken over as the most fashionable term for describing social division. In particular, the European Commission has utilised the idea as a centrepiece of its social policy (Room, 1992) and it has formed the basis of much of the Labour Party's recent thinking on social justice as exemplified in the Borrie Commission Report (Commission on Social Justice, 1994). In government, Labour has set up a special

“Social Exclusion Unit” reporting directly to the Cabinet Office and Prime Minister with the intention of co-ordinating action in the field. The unit has already sponsored a number of initiatives on school truancy and exclusion; street living and problem housing estates (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Wider research, sponsored by the ESRC, is also under way into the causes and consequences of exclusion and policy development at both national and local level is beginning to gather pace (Hills, 1998). Our own research obviously contributes to this process.

The dimensions of the social exclusion/inclusion discourse, and its implications for the public library are thus the subject of this brief paper. It seeks to review the development of the concept of social exclusion and assess its strengths and weaknesses as a way of describing social divisions. It aims to then identify some key aspects of exclusion in contemporary Britain, and to link these to the transition to what is claimed to be an “information” society. Finally, it explores some implications of the social exclusion debate for the public library: in particular it considers how a focus on social exclusion might affect general patterns of public library policy and how the public library might thus contribute to a “socially inclusive” information society.

2. The social exclusion debate

What, then, is social exclusion and how does it differ from concepts such as poverty and disadvantage which it has replaced? First, and perhaps most importantly, theorists of social exclusion stress its *multidimensional* nature. Social exclusion, they argue, relates not simply to a lack of material resources, but also to matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power. In other words, the idea of social exclusion attempts to capture the complexity of *powerlessness* in modern society rather than simply focusing on one of its outcomes. Thus, in practical terms, the UK government Social Exclusion Unit defines exclusion in terms of a combination of

“linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998).

More theoretically, for the Council of Europe:

“social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterisations alienation and distance from mainstream society” (Duffy, 1995).

Within this framework, the term social exclusion has also been most generally used to refer to *persistent and systematic* multiple deprivation, as opposed to poverty or disadvantage experienced for short periods of time (Walker, 1997). In this respect, the concept of exclusion is also important because it captures the *processes* of disempowerment and alienation, whereas other descriptions focus largely on the outcomes of such processes. So, for Hills (1998) a focus on social exclusion can highlight the links between the sorts of problems noted above, and the way that the resultant dynamics affect the lives of individuals, families or whole neighbourhoods over what are sometimes lengthy periods of time. A study of processes is also claimed to be important because it can be used to identify the factors which lead into situations of decline and exclusion, and, more positively, to chart mobility out of

poverty. The identification of strategies of “empowerment” of individuals and communities is a common outcome of this kind of analysis.

Social exclusion also often incorporates a stronger *spatial* focus than previous descriptions and discussions of social division. As we shall see, this is in part a result of the perception that some social groups and neighbourhoods have become more detached and alienated from mainstream society than hithertofore. A number of studies (Pacione, 1997; Lee et al, 1997) have thus pointed to the increasing *spatial polarisation* of British society in the 1980s and 1990s, fuelled by the restructuring of employment patterns and housing policies such as the sale of better quality council houses. As a result, a concentration of material poverty, economic inactivity, lone parenthood, crime and other indicators of exclusion are claimed to have resulted in the creation of a “residuum” of unpopular council estates and inner city areas with very poor private rented housing stock. Such a supposed concentration of “excluded” individuals in “zones of exclusion” has had a double-edged effect on the visibility of poverty and exclusion: on the one hand, intensifying and (in many media reports) sensationalising its effects; but, on the other hand, seemingly removing it from “mainstream” life.

Many observers also point to a similar polarisation in the social structure in Britain, with the gap between rich and poor increasing dramatically in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. Real income for the poorest tenth of the population actually fell by 13% in the period 1979-94, whereas it rose by an average of 40% for the whole population (Oppenheim, 1997). Statistics like this have led to a number of popular writers, such as Will Hutton, proposing a new, tripartite division of British society into 30% excluded; 30% insecure and 40% secure (Hutton, 1995). More controversially, others have linked the emergence of such an excluded minority to the development of an “underclass” to parallel that theorised by Wilson in the black inner cities of the USA (Wilson, 1997). Roberts, for example, writes of the emergence in the 1980s of a “social group or class of people located at the bottom of the class structure who, over time, have become structurally separate and culturally distinct from the regularly employed working class ... who are persistently reliant on state benefits and permanently confined to living in poorer housing and neighbourhoods (Roberts, 1997).

Right wing commentators, like American Charles Murray, ascribe membership of such an underclass largely to choice and the development of a culture of poverty, characterised by crime; drugs; single parenthood and family breakdown (Murray, 1990). Writers like Frank Field, however, whilst maintaining the usefulness of the concept, reject such pathological explanations. In *Losing Out: the Emergence of Britain's Underclass* (1989) he identifies the “causes” of the underclass very firmly in terms of economics, class divisions and public policy. He also identifies three key underclass groups: the long term unemployed; single parent families and elderly pensioners (Field, 1989). Such labelling was not without controversy, but Field's book was to have a major influence on the exclusion debate, and later, of course, on social security policy post-1997.

Whatever the merits of the underclass case, it undoubtedly triggered the emergence of discussion about social exclusion, because it heightened the general sense of social fragmentation and breakdown in the early 1990s. For observers like Field, it linked crucially to the notion of *social citizenship*, inherited from socialists like T.H. Marshall. Field believed that the emergence of a British underclass, excluded from the norms and values of mainstream society, undermined the idea, central to social democracy, that *all* citizens had fundamental social and economic, as well as political and legal, rights. These ideas were also taken up by the Borrie Commission on Social Justice, and on a wider scale by the European

Union Observatory on Social Exclusion which placed the idea of citizenship at the centre of the inclusion/exclusion debate. Policy makers such as these set about defining the goal of a *socially inclusive* society which incorporated the “social rights of citizens to certain basic standards of living and to participation in the social and educational opportunities of society” (Room et al, 1992). The goal of social policy for the EU was to create a citizenship which incorporated social rights as well as civil and political ones. Such policies, it was felt, would create a cohesive and stable social order, as well as being justifiable in moral terms.

One effect of the link to citizenship is its tendency to broaden the terms of the social exclusion debate away from a narrow focus on a supposed underclass to a much wider discussion about welfare policy and social rights. As Ruth Lister notes, those excluded from social opportunity incorporate not only the social groups identified by Field et al as a marginalised underclass (Lister, 1991). Many other groups experience denial of welfare and civil rights such as people with disabilities; black and cultural minority communities; women; gays and lesbians; travellers and so on. Such groups often experience “exclusion” from mainstream society not only in an economic sense, but also as a cultural, political and organisational phenomenon. Moreover, these groups are very widely dispersed throughout society, not necessarily concentrated in underclass suburbs or inner cities. As a result, according to Lister, this widespread exclusion challenges welfare organisations (like public libraries) to examine their own relationships with their clients, and understand the extent to which these still incorporate exclusionary practices. If social rights of citizenship are to be widely achieved, it follows that some reconsideration of *equality of opportunity* will need to follow.

The focus on citizenship also links with one of the key problems experienced by theorists of social exclusion: the issue of inclusion and social diversity. One clear danger of “inclusive” societies is that they become conformist, assimilative and intolerant of “deviant” behaviour. Indeed, as some policy makers are now arguing, excluded groups might be seen as having responsibilities as well as rights, and might be expected to conform to certain norms of social behaviour, such as taking a job. But how far might such pressures to conform be taken, and how are they compatible with the existence of pluralistic and culturally diverse societies? As Levitas (1996) makes clear in her critique of social exclusion, one effect of such “Durkheimian” ideas might well be to label and indeed “exclude” all of those - like some single parents for example - who are unprepared to take low paid work, when in reality they already perform a legitimate and indispensable social function (housework/childrearing). Policies aimed at social inclusion might also, of course, exclude other groups such as those unwilling to engage in “community” activity or those unwilling to settle in one place. Some writers on policy have clearly recognised these dangers, and have generally used the term *social cohesion* (as opposed to inclusion) to indicate a much wider focus on developing *social capital*: the institutions, networks and opportunities available to “excluded” citizens in civil society as a whole (Hutton, 1995, Miller, 1998).

These observations also echo those criticisms of the “underclass” thesis which argue that such labels do poor people much harm because they stigmatise and exclude rather than draw attention to problems (Bagguely and Mann, 1992). Byrne (1997a) convincingly extends this critique to narrow definitions of social exclusion, demonstrating that the idea of a permanently excluded underclass comprising 30% of the population in conditions of multiple deprivation is a substantial overstatement. Nevertheless, Byrne argues, a much *larger* proportion of the population - something like half - now experience chronic instability in employment prospects - and are in danger of periodic lapses into conditions of extreme

financial difficulty and insecurity. This group, according to Byrne, represents a new “reserve army” of labour for globalised capitalism and they are excluded from full participation in society in the sense that they lack the permanent means to sustain affluence in terms of home ownership, car ownership, leisure and educational opportunities and so on. According to Byrne, we thus have to face the prospect that “social exclusion”, as a concept can be applied, at least from time to time, to many more people and places than on the surface seems to be the case.

In concluding this section it thus seems important to distinguish between two main manifestations of the social exclusion idea. Narrower explorations of the theme usually stress:

- the multidimensional nature of poverty and disadvantage;
- the persistence of multiple deprivation over time;
- the extreme effects of such deprivation on relatively concentrated social groups and geographical locations;
- the desirability of “including” such groups in mainstream society.

Broader applications of the idea, in contrast, emphasise:

- the vulnerability of large proportions of the population to situations of exclusion for at least some of their lives;
- the need a social dimension to the idea of citizenship, linked to the ideas of equality of opportunity and protection from poverty;
- the desirability of “cohesive” societies which nevertheless respect social difference.

It is perhaps important to stress that both views of social exclusion have some legitimacy, and although their policy implications are not contradictory, they do differ in emphasis. The narrow view of social exclusion logically suggests focused and targeted action aimed at particular problems, social groups and communities. The broader view, however, implies a much wider project to build social capital and equal opportunity in society. The implications of each for the public library will be briefly discussed in Section 4.

3. The dimensions of social exclusion in contemporary Britain

What are the causes and dimensions of social exclusion in contemporary Britain? One important causal link that is especially relevant to the concerns of this paper is that between the transition from industrial to “information” society and new forms of social exclusion. There is clear agreement that an underlying cause of contemporary social exclusion lies in the *restructuring* of industrial capitalism to a post-industrial, or what is sometimes called an “informational”, system of production which is global in its reach but profoundly uneven in its effects (Castells, 1996). One key aspect of this restructuring has involved the transition of relatively stable mass labour markets of the industrial age into “post-Fordist” systems which

have rapidly shifting and fluctuating demands for skills and work. As a result, “jobs for life”, mainly for men, and based on fixed and stable sets of skills and competencies, have been eroded in many advanced economies. Replacing them are “flexible” labour markets; temporary, part time and sub-contracted work, much of it low paid, targeted at women, and located in burgeoning service, “back office” and information processing sectors of the economy (Mingione, 1997). This new scenario has brought employment instability for many and absolute unemployment for a minority. In significant pockets of most advanced economies, long term, permanent unemployment has come in the wake of the run down of traditional manufacturing industry. It has led to well documented examples of the kinds of exclusion and multiple deprivation noted in the previous section.

For Manuel Castells, in informational capitalism, social exclusion is usually associated with lack of the “possibility of access to relatively regular paid labour, for at least one member of the household” (Castells, 1998, p.71). If this assessment is true, contemporary Britain has widespread problems: in 1994, 19.1% of UK households (excluding students and pensioners) had no working adults, compared with a similar figure of only 6.5% in 1977. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, *economic inactivity* rates, as opposed to rates of people claiming unemployment benefit, are extremely high: the proportion of men of working age in the UK who are not employed at any one time was 24% and as high as 37% in one region (Merseyside). Unemployment is thus not a problem that has “gone away”: it affects large numbers of people in all regions of the UK, although, the evidence suggests, mainly as a shifting and sporadic phenomenon. Most people affected by unemployment do obtain work, but mainly in part-time and temporary work where one and a half million new jobs were created between 1984 and 1996. Within this shifting, unstable labour market some even more desperate problems persist: the proportion of unemployed people classified as “long term” unemployed (i.e. unemployed for over a year or more) usually hovers around 40% of the total compared with only 20% a generation ago (Convery, 1997). It comprised 850,000 people at the end of 1996, including a disproportionate number of people from the regions at the top of Table 1. If an excluded underclass exists, these people might truly be said to be it. However, employment statistics make grimmer reading and suggest that exclusion from paid work is a much wider and more pervasive problem than that.

Table 1: UK Non employment by selected regions (males of working age) 1997

Region	Unemployment rate	Inactivity rate	Total non employed
Merseyside	13%	24%	37%
South Yorkshire	12%	21%	33%
Tyne and Wear	11%	21%	32%
Northern Ireland	12%	20%	32%
Strathclyde	10%	20%	30%
Wales	10%	20%	30%
Inner London	9%	19%	28%
Greater Manchester	9%	19%	28%
West Midlands	10%	16%	26%
West Yorkshire	8%	16%	24%
Rest of Scotland	8%	15%	23%
South West	7%	14%	21%
Outer London	7%	14%	21%
East Midlands	8%	13%	21%
East Anglia	6%	12%	18%

South East	7%	11%	18%
All United Kingdom	9%	15%	24%

Source: Office for National Statistics

Not surprisingly, these unemployment figures are to a large extent reflected in growing material poverty and income inequality. Walker (1997) argues convincingly that such poverty is not only a matter of global economic trends, but is a consequence of a deliberate “strategy of inequality” adopted by the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1997, which saw a more unequal society as a means of stimulating competitiveness. However, the benefits of any Conservative “economic miracle” failed to trickle down to the poor. According to DSS figures, the numbers of people living in official “poverty” (below 50% of average income after housing costs) grew from 5 million people (5% of the population) in 1979 to nearly 14 million (25%) in 1993/4. Moreover, by 1993/4 32% of all children lived in families on these income levels.

The poor are thus no marginalised underclass: even by the Government's own admission, they amount to very large numbers of people. Nevertheless, there is at the same time evidence of desperate, additional problems for the extremely poor. Whilst rises in real income for the whole of society amounted to an average of 40% between 1979 and 1993/4, for the top tenth of earners they came to an amazing 65%. In contrast, the combination of employment, tax and benefit policies had a markedly different effect on the poorest. The second poorest tenth of the population recorded a rise of only 4% in real income levels by comparison and the poorest tenth actually recorded a *drop* in real incomes of 13% (Oppenheim, 1997, p.23).

A number of social groupings and categories are, as one would expect, disproportionately affected by these strategies of inequality. Many of these groups are discussed in detail in other working papers, but it is important to note them here. They include, as the largest category of all, women, who are disproportionately confined to lower levels of paid employment, to insecure jobs and to forms of work such as child rearing which receive minimal financial reward. They include also black and ethnic minority groups, who experience cultural and social forms of exclusion from citizenship, as well as material poverty. As a result, only about a half, (53%) of Britain's black and ethnic minority population of working age are in employment, compared with 73% of white people (Convery, 1997). Other groups disproportionately excluded include Field's original “underclass” groupings of the young unemployed, the older long term unemployed and elderly pensioners, although the former of these at least is the subject of intensive government action in the form of “New Deal”. As well as this, many other groupings: people with disabilities; travellers; refugees; gays and lesbians might also find that their experiences of cultural, social and physical exclusion are intensified if they fall into a situation of material deprivation. As the INSINC (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997, p.22-6) report notes, many of these groups are also marginalised from the benefits of the “information society” and indeed for some of these groups it is at least arguable that the very development of this society has actually led to their marginalisation. This issue will be explored further later in this section.

These patterns of disadvantage among social groups are not particularly new to British society: indeed many were recognised in the debate about the welfare state and equal opportunities that began in the 1970s (Williams, 1994). What is new, it is commonly claimed, about the social exclusion of the 1990s, is the spatial polarisation of rich and poor. According

to Manuel Castells, this is resulting in “zones” of social exclusion: “areas that are non valuable from the perspective of informational capitalism, ... are bypassed by its flows of wealth and information and ultimately deprived of the basic technological infrastructure that allows us to communicate, innovate, produce, consume and even live in today's world” (Castells, 1998, p.72). In Britain, such zones are often categorised by urban geographers in three groups: *inner city areas*; *peripheral housing estates*, mainly consisting of council or social housing; and *deindustrialised semi rural areas*, affected by the decline of primary and heavy industry in the 1980s. Table 2 shows the poorest local authority areas of Britain according to the 1991 census, and it will be obvious to most casual observers where each of the three types of area might be found.

Table 2: Most deprived local authority districts in Britain 1991

Unemployment	Inactivity rates	Households without car
1. Hackney 22.5	1. Rhonnda 32.3	1. Glasgow City 65.6
2. Knowsley 22.1	2. Easington 31.2	2. Hackney 61.7
3. Tower Hamlets 21.8	3. Merthyr 30.4	3. Tower Hamlets 61.6
4. Liverpool 21.1	4. Afan 30.2	4. Islington 59.9
5. Newham 19.3	5. Rhmney Valley 29.3	5. Clydebank 58.7
6. Glasgow City 19.1	6. Blaneau Gwent 29.3	6. Southwark 58.0
7. Manchester 18.7	7. Cynon Valley 29.2	7. Westminster 57.7
8. Southwark 18.2	8. Knowsley 28.2	8. Liverpool 57.0
9. Haringey 17.7	9. Cumnock and Doon Valley 28.0	9. Manchester 56.6
10. Lambeth 17.1	10. Glasgow City 27.8	10. Camden 55.8

Source: Pacione, 1997 p.44

In these and many similar locations statistics point to a geographical concentration of poverty and deprivation in particular wards and communities. Like the poorest people, the poorest districts are generally getting poorer and experiencing higher unemployment, higher crime and greater social problems than ever before (Lee et al, p.6-13). Other research (Lawless and Smith, 1998) suggests that place itself is becoming a further and independent cause of exclusion, in particular because of the ways in which living on a particular estate can stigmatise residents and create difficulties with government agencies and with obtaining employment. Such studies have now stimulated policy initiatives (such as the government's “worst estates” initiatives) focusing on multidimensional approaches to improving life in such places.

It remains important to point out, however, that exclusion in Britain is not limited to “deprived” areas: census figures confirm the paradox that most exclusion in Britain takes place outside “excluded” areas and all localities have their concentrations of poverty, however affluent the mainstream. One recent study of Strathclyde concludes that “poverty has become deeper and more widespread throughout Strathclyde, questioning the idea of a spatially concentrated, well defined and distinct group of the poor or underclass” (Danson and Mooney, 1998, p.229). Thus, while some areas suffer more visibly than others, no library authority is an exclusion-free zone.

Whatever the spatial patterning of social exclusion, one significant dimension of it that seems to affect most excluded individuals and groups is a difficulty in accessing “local public goods” (Bramley, 1996). Such goods might include a whole range of services from policing

to street sweeping, and of course the public library itself. Of particular importance are decent housing, adversely affected by the sale of better quality council housing stock in the 1980s, and education (Lee et al, 1995). Education is doubly significant because it is a potential avenue of social mobility for the excluded young, but as Byrne (1997b) argues, the current system of secondary school education in the UK tends to lead to a clustering of working class children in poor performing schools with predominantly limited horizons for their pupils. Current government initiatives focus on “improving” the performance of such schools, but many educationalists argue that the broader system is the problem.

Poor access to other services can also reinforce such marginalisation. In an analysis in 1996 of the use of local authority services, Bramley found that demand-led leisure services such as libraries, sports centres, adult education classes and museums and galleries all had what poor people called a “pro rich” bias (Bramley 1996) because of their continuing marketisation and prioritisation of middle class use. As a result, he suggests, poor households are less likely to participate in the “normal life of the community” because they experience insidious exclusion from its key institutions. Such institutional exclusion is, of course, a very important issue for a nominally “open” but voluntary institution like the public library.

Whether such forms of exclusion have been intensified or ameliorated by the “information revolution” is a difficult area of debate. Whilst most observers accept that there is no such thing as “information poverty” as a distinct concept, many rightly insist that, in combination with a raft of other factors, poor access to information can be an important element of social exclusion. As long ago as 1986, Graham Murdock detailed how difficulties in accessing the telephone system could adversely affect welfare benefit claimants (Murdock, 1996). More recently, researchers have pointed to the negative impact of information systems such as electronic cash transfer and geodemographic profiling on the poor (Kruger, 1997). Exclusion from such ICT networks can magnify the isolation of the already poor. Such exclusion might occur because poor people struggle to gain access to institutions and networks which provide them with chances to communicate and receive information: they become literally “unplugged”. Moreover, such exclusion might also involve a deficit of “information capability” (INSINC, 1997): the necessary technical and literacy skills to handle and utilise information effectively.

Recognising these problems, a number of recent reports have called for policies which will help to create a “socially inclusive information society”. Whilst such a concept might well be seen as a contradiction in terms [2], it is nevertheless useful as an umbrella term for expressing the goal of a just society in “informational” terms. The INSINC (1997) working party utilises the term very much in this sense as a way of defining the “informational” rights of citizens. These include:

- easy to use public and individual access to communication channels;
- rights of free access to information which is “essential for full participation in society”;
- rights of training and education to raise information handling skills, information awareness and competence (INSINC, 1997).

In more practical terms, the notion of a socially inclusive information society also serves as a useful mechanism for drawing together those policies and initiatives at the informational level which might assist in ameliorating current social divisions. Such policies might include:

- developments in technological infrastructure relating to the public availability of ICTs;
- strategies of access to information and issues concerning the institutional shape and delivery of information services;
- education, skills and literacy policies.

Many of these policy areas are, of course, crucially relevant to the future of the public library. This section has argued that social exclusion is a very widespread phenomenon in contemporary Britain affecting all regions and areas and large numbers of people. However, within this general trend some social groups have been particularly hit, and exclusion has manifested itself as an intensification of poverty for the very poor. This has had spatial consequences and led to the development of some areas of towns and cities where the concentration of deprivation has become even more marked over the last 20 years. Some of these areas are marked by poor public services, infrastructure and “social capital”.

A further conclusion of this survey is that the form of contemporary exclusion is to some extent a result of the restructuring of labour markets which has accompanied the transition to informational capitalism. A dominant aspect of contemporary exclusion is the insecurity of work, and the lack of skills and opportunities in a “disorganised” market. Exclusion is also taking new informational forms in relation to lack of access to communication networks and channels. Whilst recognising that technology offers no easy fix, it thus makes some sense to talk about social justice in an informational context, and to plan and implement *information policies* that at least serve to ameliorate these new social divisions. The paper therefore now briefly turns to consider what part the public library might play in such developments.

4. Conclusions: some implications for the public library

We can now suggest that the scale and extent of social exclusion in contemporary Britain faces public services like libraries with enormous challenges. As other working papers in the series suggest, it is 20 years or so since public libraries seriously engaged in a policy debate about improving services to the poor, disadvantaged and working class. At that time, the focus of the debate revolved around the *disadvantaged*, defined by the *Libraries' Choice*, the key contemporary report, as “those barred from services either physically and psychologically” (Department of Education and Science, 1978, p.7). The report adopted the relatively simple solution to disadvantage of recommending that public libraries develop a range of special services, targeted at various disadvantaged social groups to facilitate equality of provision. Its recommendations were implemented with a mixed degree of success (see Black and Muddiman, 1997 and other working papers in this series). However, this time around, there can be no doubt that the scale and complexity of social exclusion in an *informational* society determines that no such straightforward recommendations can be made. Instead, it looks as though a much wider range of policy initiatives will be needed if libraries are to have a significant impact on poverty and inequality.

It is not within the scope of this working paper to suggest what this policy framework should be: that is the purpose of the whole research project, and much investigative work needs to be undertaken before we are in a position to offer firm recommendations. However, some lines of action are nevertheless clear from our survey of social exclusion, and I have noted in passing a number of prescriptions for action. Some of these are now highlighted, although at this stage no particular priority or importance is attached to each:

(i) *Empowering local communities.* One of the key advantages of approaches to social division based on social exclusion, it is often argued, is their focus on the multidimensional nature of exclusion and the fact that its overall effect is to disempower those affected by it. Such multidimensional problems, it is argued, particularly at the level of the neighbourhood, need integrated action by a range of public and voluntary agencies. These agencies also need to work in *partnership* with local people if (inappropriate) solutions or services are not merely to be imposed on the excluded. Thus libraries might work in partnership with voluntary agencies, other public agencies and local community groups in improving information networks, educational opportunities and so on. Sometimes these approaches are labeled as *community development* approaches (Matarasso, 1998).

(ii) *Targeting resources and services.* Our review of social exclusion in contemporary Britain has noted that to some extent poverty and unemployment have become spatially concentrated and that exclusion has disproportionately affected some social groups. This suggests that to some degree, account must be taken of these issues when determining library resource allocation, and that some scope exists for special action or initiatives in particular localities or targeted at specific social groups. However, this paper has also shown that there are real dangers in this approach, because exclusion is a very widespread social phenomenon and most social exclusion is located well outside its concentrated “zones”. As we have suggested, no library authority, and arguably no library, is an exclusion-free zone, and this suggests that strategies to tackle exclusion need to be adopted which involve the *whole library movement* (Alexander, 1992) rather than strategies which approach exclusion as an ephemeral or peripheral concern.

(iii) *Consumerism and managerial culture.* One real concern here is the *managerial and institutional* culture of the public library service. Over the last twenty years or so, this has moved away from a concern with disadvantage and inequality to a *consumerist* ethos which focuses on providing satisfying and quality services to *existing* customers, the most vocal of whom inevitably comprise an articulate and demanding middle class (Black and Muddiman, 1997; Usherwood, 1996). Such pressures continue, in the form of “Best Value” and other initiatives, and there is thus a real need for a re-evaluation of management priorities within the library service to incorporate an awareness of social exclusion.

(iv) *Equal opportunity.* As we have seen, one effect of the dissemination of this culture throughout public services has been the alienation or exclusion of poor and marginalised social groups because of inappropriate or irrelevant service provision. There is evidence of this both in public libraries (Roach and Morrison, 1998) and more widely throughout public services (Bramley, 1996). This suggests strongly that libraries (and, in passing, other public services) should re-examine *equal opportunity* as a rationale for service provision and not simply for employment practice. Equal opportunity would also ensure that initiatives which aim to foster social inclusion are not culturally and socially narrow or prescriptive and aim for pluralism or “inclusive diversity” (Miller, 1998) in the broadest sense.

(v) *Information Policy*. One final thread of this survey has been to demonstrate that contemporary social exclusion is inextricably bound up with the transition to “information” societies, or more specifically “informational capitalism” (Castells, 1998). This transition is starting (belatedly) to affect the public library and the public library community is beginning to grapple with policies which will determine the shape and extent of a public presence in a “networked” society. What kind of “people’s network” emerges, and the extent to which that network will provide real access for the excluded and disadvantaged, will be determined by the *information policy* choices now beginning to be made at both national, and perhaps more importantly, local level.

This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive and it should be noted that other working papers in this series are already identifying policy perspectives supplementary to the approaches considered here. Overall, there can be no doubt that the issue of social exclusion is an urgent one: the pace of social change continues to accelerate and, if unchecked, will continue to multiply social division. Exclusion thus challenges public agencies like the library service to produce policy and practice which will challenge social division and create a harmonious, diverse and more equal civil society where access to knowledge is a fundamental right of social citizenship. If the public library can rise to this challenge it might begin to successfully reinvigorate and reinvent itself. If it fails, then the public library too, like the poor and excluded communities it exists to serve, might find itself consigned to the margins of the “information” society in the twenty first century.

Notes

1. Although the Thatcher administration in the UK, and the Reagan presidency in the US, along with other regimes influenced by the “New Right” obviously broke with this social democratic consensus.
2. Castells, for example, argues that the “rise of informationalism in this end of millenium is intertwined with rising inequality and social exclusion throughout the world” (Castells, 1998, p.70)

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