Hamburg Central Library welcomes patrons in many languages and offers free wifi

Since I was 19, I’ve often thought about a student who I’ve never met and whose name I don’t even know. I encountered that young man in the preface of the German translation of Eduardo Galeano’s book *Open Veins of Latin America*. To make the point how widely the book was read and how influential it had been, the preface told the story of a Buenos Aires university student who wanted to read the book so badly but couldn’t afford to buy a copy. So what he did was read the book in bits and pieces by moving from one bookstore to another: in each store, he would pretend to browse, read 5-10 pages until the manager realized that he had no intention of buying and would throw him out. Over the course of a couple of weeks and with innumerable interruptions, the young man read the whole book this way.

As someone who easily gets lost in a book and has often found it difficult to tear herself away from a gripping read – and *Open Veins of Latin America* certainly is – I deeply felt for the student. The story brings home the injustice of unequal access to knowledge. It also made me conscious of a privilege I had taken for...
granted until then: access to a library.

Throughout most of my life I have been fortunate to be affiliated with a variety of institutions that have provided me with access to well-stocked libraries.

In fact, a good part of my life has been spent in libraries. As a university student living in a crowded dorm, the university library was the place where I went to read, take notes, draft essays and prepare for exams. Also as a student, one of my many jobs was as “library assistant”, which involved checking out books to patrons and re-shelving returned books to their proper place. After I graduated and became a university lecturer myself, my regular schedule included “library days” spent on teaching preparation and research reading. When I had a child, our family routine for many years involved visits to the children’s and junior sections of our public library, and selecting a week’s worth of books to take home and read.

Another multilingual welcome sign in Hamburg Central Library, saying “Learn German, meet people – for free”

The many places in which I have lived are partly marked in my memory through the library spaces I inhabited at various points in my life. Some, like the school library in my primary school, consisted of nothing more than a little cupboard; others, major university libraries, were multi-storied buildings filled with dimly lit rows upon rows of book shelves – temples to human knowledge and material reminders of the Socratic paradox that I know that I know nothing.

Today, I rarely set foot in a library. I still read a lot, both for work and for pleasure, but I access books and journals remotely via my computer or e-reader. The transformation of libraries from physical to digital repositories has not diminished the privilege as digital access, too, is tied to affiliation.
At the same time, public libraries are some of the last remaining bastions against the privatization of public space. The experience of the 1970s Buenos Aires university student who could not learn about the ways in which colonialism and capitalism had shaped his country without the money to buy the book has not lost its currency. Enjoyment of life’s simple pleasures – sitting back comfortably to chat with friends, enjoy a book, surf the internet or watch the world go – is ever more tied to one’s ability to consume. Even fundamental necessities such as using the toilet have been privatized and may be restricted to those who can pay.

Against this tide of privatization, libraries have been holding out as ever-smaller islands of public space. Today, most patrons no longer turn to libraries (exclusively) for books but in order to enjoy a free and inclusive public space.

How do you use libraries? And what kinds of inclusive and exclusive practices have you encountered in libraries?