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Equality and Social Justice:  
The University as a site of struggle

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Equality Studies Centre, UCD School of Social Justice

in


Key words

Neo-liberalism  
Higher education  
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Introduction

Despite the proclaimed allegiance of most countries to the principles of equality enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights, inequality is a pervasive feature of the global order. Yet, it is important not to be overwhelmed by the scale of global injustice. In every country there is resistance to power and privilege, with people working at many levels to create more equal societies.

In this paper we will summarise the reasons why we came to establish Equality Studies in UCD almost 20 years ago as one way of responding to injustices (for a more detailed discussion see Lynch, 1995), and why in 2005, we further institutionalised an academic space for this work by forming a School of Social Justice, and a network of scholars from across the University who are committed to research and teaching in social justice to form the Egalitarian World Initiative (EWI) network www.ewi.ie . We begin by explaining why universities have a particular remit to challenge injustice and why it is important for them to retain that responsibility in a market-led era in higher education.

The Public Interest Role of the University

Over the last decade, universities have been transformed increasingly into powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged (Davies et al., 2006; Rutherford, 2005). Commercialisation has been normalised and granted moral legitimacy

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1 This paper is a collective effort. We would not have had the time to write it without the support and care of our colleagues in the Equality Studies Centre. Sincere thanks to John Baker, Sara Cantillon, Judy Walsh, Pauline Faughnan, Elizabeth Hassell and Phyllis Murphy.
(Giroux, 2002), and its operational values and purposes have been encoded in the systems of all types of universities (Dill et al., 2005, Steier, 2003). Moreover, both the pace and intensity of commercialisation has been exacerbated in (Bok, 2003, Henkel, 1997). Yet, universities are quintessentially public interest institutions (Harkavy, 2006).

This is not to deny that universities have often failed to honour their public interest inheritance. They have been embedded with professional interests, often doing little to challenge the evident social closure practices within powerful professional groups (Hanlon, 2000). In their internal operations, they have been both hierarchical and patriarchal (Morley, 1999; Saunderson, 2002; Reay, 2004). Certainly, it is hard to argue that universities were models of enlightened organisational practices even prior to the endorsement of neo-liberal values. While there have been critical voices in higher education, challenging its pedagogy and its exclusivity, it is also true that they have been minority voices, often working against the tide even in the pre-neo-liberal days. This has also been our own experience in trying to establish Equality Studies in UCD (Lynch, 1995).

Yet the university remains a site of social struggle; it is one of the few institutions in society where there is an opportunity for people to think critically and to document that critique in writing and in teaching. It is a space where one can exercise intellectual autonomy, no matter how circumscribed that might be in an age of market-led research funding. Academics are granted the freedom from necessity to write and to teach, so there is a choice whether or not to use that freedom to act.

Why Equality Studies – the educational case

The setting up of Equality Studies (1990) and of the School of Social Justice (2005) were strongly influenced by the fact that while many faculties and fields of scholarship address issues of equality and social justice, and there are some subjects that address specific group-related inequalities including Disability Studies and Women’ Studies, there are very few schools or centres that focus all their research and teaching on equality issues in a holistic way. Clearly, working to promote equality is not a ‘profession’ in any traditional sense of that term. Yet people within different occupations, especially those working in civil society organisations, but also those in statutory and multilateral agencies that are fighting for social justice and equality, need research support and education. There was and is a need to create a scholarly space for equality activists. The university seemed an ideal place to do this although there was, and still is, opposition to the ideal. Some see the university as a place to educate the elite, while for others, critical education is peripheral to the production of a new generation of market-led professionals. The experience we have in Equality Studies shows however that the desire to create a better world for all of humanity is strong among university staff and students’, albeit one that is not culturally supported in an age of commercialised education.

Why Equality Studies – the academic case
Universities and higher education institutions are not neutral agents in the field of academic discourse. Like all educational institutions, they work either for ‘domestication or for freedom’ (Freire, 1972). They can indulge in banking education that controls and domesticates thinking in the practice of regurgitation and regulation, or they can engage in critical education that challenges both teacher and student to engage in praxis. Universities are also projects in the making, places in which academics can either become agents of history or docile subjects (Davies et al., 2006).

With the postmodernist turn and the rise of neo-liberal politics, it seemed intellectually vagrant and academically suicidal to establish a Centre for Equality Studies in University College Dublin in the late 1980s. Yet it was precisely these challenges that inspired us to act. The normative intent of the word ‘Equality’ sat very uneasily with the relativism of postmodern thinking. It smacked of that old authoritarianism that was associated with the certainties of grand narratives and with colonising cultural and political relations. Marxism’s rejection of the normative approach to the analysis of oppression was a further disincentive to engage with normative questions. In establishing Equality Studies, we were mindful of these debates and of the binaries embedded in social scientific analysis between the empirical and the normative. We did not see the two as separate spheres and made a conscious decision to marry positivist research traditions with normative analysis in both the teaching and research of the Centre (Lynch, 1995; Baker et al., 2004).

While the scientific, including the sociological, must be distinguished from the political (Martinelli, 2008), there is a need to allow spaces for more than professional sociology or policy sociology (or the professional and policy-led dimensions of any disciplines) to thrive. There is a need to make spaces for the sub-altern within disciplines (Burawoy, 2005), and between disciplines. There must be a space for academic knowledge to learn from experiential knowledge, with its complex positive and normative dimensions, especially in the study of injustices.

Questioning the binary between positive/normative is also necessary because so much research in the social sciences and cognate areas, including law and education, is profoundly unitary in terms of the normative and the positive (Sayer, 2006). When scholars write of ‘discrimination’ in law, ‘exploitation’ in sociology or ‘marginalization’ in education, they are not just describing a phenomenon, they are also naming it as undesirable because it undermines the well being of particular groups of people. They are making a normative judgment as well as an empirical statement, even if they do not explicitly name their normative position. Taking a ‘critical’ approach to scholarship promotes a particular normative position and set of values that makes the very critique of oppression, and indeed, the enterprise of much academic work, meaningful. Yet even for those who do not subscribe to critical perspectives and lay claim to independence, the normative is encoded in every publication and every lecture. While objectivity is vital for scientific analysis and for choosing the appropriate instruments for research.
investigation, there is an implicit normative dimension to the knowledge act because there is no view from nowhere.

In establishing Equality Studies, the goal was to do things differently in the university, not just by linking the positive and the normative, but by democratising the social relations of education and of research production and exchange. Inspired by the Freirean (1972) methods of dialogical teaching and learning, and by feminist and disability scholarship’s challenge to employ emancipatory research methods (Oliver, 1992; Harding, 1991) we tried to open us new types of spaces for both doing research and for teaching (Lynch, 1999, Baker et al., 2004).

The rise of neo-liberal policies internationally in the post-1990 era, and the emergence of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ in Ireland made social justice and equality issues appear anachronistic in an era glorifying choice and consumption. It remains a struggle academically and politically to survive as the market model of funding bears down on our actions and planning especially in recession. There is no security for those who resist power, and in that sense the Equality Studies Centre will always be open to attack. The lessons of survival and resistance need to be relearned as university regimes change. There is no possibility of standing still.

**Equality Studies and Social Justice – Keeping a place in the university**

Apple (2007: 168) claims that ‘If you want to interrupt the right, study what they themselves did’. While the setting up of Equality Studies, and of the School of Social Justice, was inspired by a Gramscian-informed understanding of the role of culture and ideology in the realisation of change, and by the Freirean recognition of education’s lack of neutrality, it was also inspired by lessons learned from the success of Thatcherism in the UK. One of the major achievements of the Thatcher era was that not only did it change the terms of political discourse in the UK, it successfully institutionalised neo-liberal beliefs and values in law and public policy.

While writing and teaching is the tool of the academic who wants to act for global justice, there is a need as Harkavy (2006: 7) has observed for ‘strategic organisational innovation’. There is a need to institutionalise ideals in the structures of organisations not just in their language or written policies, no matter how essential the latter may be. One of the reasons inequalities are often difficult to challenge is because they are institutionalised in the categories of everyday life (Tilly, 1998). By the same logic, if egalitarian changes are to be instituted, they need to be institutionalised in categories, positions, processes and systems that are built on egalitarian and social justice principles. And there is a need to promote the understanding of how to operationalise these principles over time. It was with the understanding that institutions tend to outlive their incumbents, that we set out to institutionalise a physical and intellectual space to promote research and teaching on equality and social justice. While it was necessary to have programmes of education and research in the short term, in the medium to long term it was necessary to have institutional status.
Much of the struggle over the last 20 years has been about achieving institutional status and recognition. It began by creating spaces and titles that only got recognition *after* they were created: an ‘Equality Studies Working Group’ in 1986 and an Equality Studies Centre in 1990. The Equality Studies Centre was never given departmental status, despite repeated requests, but it was accepted as an operating academic unit within the University. It operated under many constraints, including having to report annually on its achievements to Academic Council, something not required of recognised departments, and it was and is in a constant state of struggle for funding. However, the status (albeit marginal) given to Equality Studies in 1990 created the space for further engagement and action.

In realising change, there is a need to identify the interstices that Habermas noted, those places between spaces that allow for change and resistances to occur at different times. Times of transition within institutions are times that offer opportunities for resistance, for finding spaces to create new initiatives. While times of transition are also times of social closure, re-regulation and control, when those in power set out the terms of change and try to control its scope and impact, the transition itself creates instabilities. New orders are created and spaces are opened up to establish new programmes and initiatives if there are the resources to fight for these at the time. There is a very real sense in which these times of transitions involve what Gramsci defined as ‘wars of position’.

We used the uncertainty of transitions, in 1990 and 2004/5, heralded in each case by the arrival of new executive Presidents, as opportunities to both initiate Equality Studies and to propose changes in courses, programmes and activities in the University. At each time, the proposals were met with oppositions, counter-resistances, not necessarily from central management, who were less concerned with their ideologies than with their likelihood of success, but by colleagues in other departments and schools, sometimes for ideological reasons (dislike of all things critical or socially engaged) and sometimes for fear that the programmes we offered might jeopardise their own subject or department. There is a lengthy correspondence in our files and emails on these challenges; having a team of colleagues who were committed to the project, and who had a clear vision as to our role and purpose was crucial.

Institutional change offers threats as well as opportunities and these have also to be managed. In 2005 the principal threat was that of closure and amalgamation into a larger ‘established discipline’. We refused to accept this and demonstrated (using the market rhetoric of the new regime) that the Equality Studies Centre was a ‘brand name’ and necessary for survival. We also used data which we had accumulated (ironically, due to accountability demands over the years) to demonstrate our ability to set up a school. We knew that we had to get ‘school’ status if we were to survive, as schools were going to have legal status under the new statutes. It would be more difficult to disestablish a School than a programme of studies or a Centre because of its institutionalised standing.
Media Matters

The mind is a site of struggle and control of the mind is central to all campaigns (Castells, 2000). It is not surprising therefore that controlling consciousness has been a deliberate project of powerful capitalist interests over the last 30 years both inside and outside the academy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Harvey, 2005). While academics can exercise some influence (more than they think) within the academy in framing minds and public consciousness, the media remain a hugely powerful ideological force outside the university with the capacity to either undermine or support critical thinking. The media is also a space over which academics generally have little control.

Throughout the development of Equality Studies, we were aware of the political reality that truth is increasingly what the media define as true. The media is a space that academics who think critically and differently have to engage with in order to survive. By 2005, when the most recent wave of changes occurred, and the university moved into restructuring along neo-liberal lines, there was a sustained attempt to force Equality Studies to integrate with (in our view to be subsumed by) bigger departments in the College of Human Sciences. At this time we had a well established reputation, not only for research and teaching but also for engaging with civil society and statutory agencies, both nationally and internationally. Our alumni and supporters included a number of well-known activists and commentators. Both the alumni and others who believed in our work lent their support to our position in a number of occasions, both privately and in public. An unsolicited opinion piece in the leading Irish broadsheet, The Irish Times, praising our work was the clearest example of this in September 2005. The opinion writer pointed out in his column that he had been asked to come out against Equality Studies by a staff member from UCD; this undermined those who opposed us internally as they appeared ‘disloyal’ to the university by writing secretly to the press about internal UCD matters. There was some negative media analysis as well in more conservative newspapers although not in 2005 at the time of most restructuring. The most recent was in the Irish Daily Mail (August 11th 2008) (a UK subsidiary) where a full page piece referring negatively to Equality Studies, Women’s Studies and Sociology was headed ‘Queer Studies’.

Even though we did not have to mount a media campaign to retain Equality Studies per se in 2005, we were prepared to do this. As almost all of us had been engaged on issues at different times on the national media (including current and former students), this not only gave us social capital through media networks, but symbolic capital within the university; we were known to be media aware. Moreover, closing down the only Equality Studies Centre in the country would not look good for the University (so the fear of bad press was a motive to allow us continue) and as we were a small Centre by UCD standards, we were not a major target for mergers by the new administration.
Challenges – Disciplinary Issues

Equality Studies experienced the same difficulties that Women’s Studies, Disability Studies and all interdisciplinary fields experience, it was and is not seen to be ‘pure’ scholarship; it is tainted by diversity and tolerated on the boundaries of the academy. Although there is recognition internationally of the central importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research (Nowotny et al., 2001), there is little status attached to such new areas of scholarship in most established universities\(vi\). Fields of study are indeed allowed to emerge but the core activities of the university centre around ‘established disciplines’. The history of our experience in this respect is salutary.

The established faculties of the university (which were assimilated into Colleges in 2005) did not regard interdisciplinary programmes as ‘pure’ enough in academic terms to house them when they were first established so Equality Studies (and other similar groups including Disability Studies and Women’s Studies.) was faculty-homeless for several years until an Interdisciplinary Faculty was established in 2003. When, in the autumn of 2004, the new president and his ‘team’ began to ‘rationalise’ (a euphemism for close down) a number of faculties and departments, the Interdisciplinary Faculty to which we belonged was closed and Equality Studies was relocated to the College of Human Sciences. In all over 90 departments in the University were reduced to 35 departments and renamed as ‘schools’\(vii\). There was considerable pressure on Equality Studies to join established single-discipline schools at this time. The likelihood that we would be minor players in large and otherwise monodisciplinary schools further motivated us to push for the establishment of an interdisciplinary institutional space within the new university structures, in the form of the School of Social Justice. This idea was accepted in principle after making a strong written case to the President as to the importance of social justice in the history and future of the University, and fighting for the school at numerous boards. In addition, we used the university’s own ideology, which promotes the idea that UCD works for the entire community, to challenge our closure\(viii\); it was an exercise in legitimation (Thompson, 1990). However, Women’s Studies was the only Centre that agreed to join the new School Social Justice. The Disability Studies Centre joined Psychology and The Development Studies Centre joined Politics although we had asked them to join Social Justice\(ix\). In each case, the titles of the new schools did not reflect the merger, a further indication of the institutional hostility to interdisciplinarity. Politics was renamed as the School of Politics and International Relations and Psychology retained its name with no mention of Disability Studies.

In the neo-liberal age, fear plays a major role in controlling and regulating academic staff (Boden and Epstein, 2006). Moreover, because academics are taken over on a daily basis with anxieties about productivity within an intense system of surveillance, they disavow their own docility (Davies et al., 2006). And fear was a major reason why academic staff did not want to join Social Justice not just because it was seen to be a school without an ‘established’ disciplinary centre, but because colleagues believed that such a school would be closed down in time. However, fear was not the only motivation. Some of
those we invited to join us made it clear that they did not wish to be part of a school based on the principle of social justice. The division between the normative and the positive was a priority value in the minds of many colleagues; Equality Studies and Social Justice had broken a taboo by aligning the normative and the positive and this continued to be unacceptable.

**Challenges - Academic Capitalism**

While academic life has always been highly individualised and driven by personal interests and ambitions, it was not always as driven by academic capitalism as it is currently (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Even not-for-profit higher education programmes have been forced to be a domain of market activity in recent years. And under the globalised (and highly unscientific) league table regimes promoted by commercial interests, universities do not determine the conditions of their own appraisal (Marginson, 2006). Educational programmes that service low income communities, or research that is of value at national level, do not feature on university rankings. And as the experience of Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Rutherford, 2005) and multidisciplinary programmes and Women’s Studies in many countries show, what is not counted can be closed. There is a serious threat to critical thought posed by marketized higher educational systems (Webster, 2004); it is a challenge Equality Studies has to confront. However, history is there to be made, it is not pre-given. Being aware of the dangers and challenges facing the project is a key factor in survival and progression.

**Facing up to Regulation and Counting**

By definition, the Equality Studies Centre and the School of Social Justice have to be socially engaged. Their work has a public dimension in terms of research partnerships and in terms of researching with and educating those who work in social movements for social justice. Yet if academic productivity is being measured by a narrowly construed bibliometric measure, public service engagement is precluded. The devaluing of dialogue with persons and bodies other than academics effectively privatises learning among those who are paid-up members of the academic community be it as students or academics. The lack of dialogue with publics, apart from one’s peers, also forecloses the opportunity to have hypotheses tested or challenged from an experiential standpoint. It limits the opportunities for learning that occur when there is a dialogue between experiential and theoretical knowledge.

There is a strange irony in a narrowly framed peer review system focused on bibliometric measurement as it provides disincentives to challenge ill-informed absolutisms and orthodoxies. In effect there is no incentive to publicly dissent through engaging in public debate, yet the university is the very institution that is charged with the task of dissent and engagement. The reward system of academic life means that the ‘good’ academic is encouraged to become a locally silent academic in her/his own country, silent in the public sphere and silent by virtue of dialoguing only with academic peers, preferably outside one’s own country. This silencing is also a product of the positive/normative
split, and the pressure on academics to eschew normative values if they are to demonstrate their credibility as legitimate scientists. Challenging the silencing is part of the struggle.

**Conclusion**

The intellectual independence of the university is always at risk given its reliance on external funding. Yet the history of the university grants it the capability to reclaim its own independence (Delanty, 2001).

Rather than being bewildered and overwhelmed by neo-liberal rhetoric we need to re-envision and re-invent the university as a place of scholarly work grounded in the principles of democracy, equality and care that are at the heart of the public education tradition (Harkavy, 2006). And we need to re-emerge from the careerism and docility that is so much a feature of the neo-liberal university to do this (Davies et al., 2006). All of this means that we must reassess our position as critical intellectuals, and face-up to the limitations of the positive-normative divide (Sayer, 2006), especially in the analysis of injustices.

We must also allow space for the sub-altern to emerge both across and within disciplines so that the professional aspects of disciplines do not blind us to the need for engagement with the most significant issues of our time (Buroway, 2004). Creating space in the university for scholarship on equality and social justice demands a dialogue with experiential knowledge holders. Those with experiential knowledge of injustice have much to teach us as theorists and researchers; and through education and research the university can in turn re-resource activists. Having a dialogue means democratising the social relations of teaching, learning, and exchange. While the project is a long-term one, and the revolution is forever in process, it is worth the challenge.

**References**


1 A call to colleagues in 2004 to create a University Network committed to research and teaching on social justice led to a positive response from 75 academics across all colleges of the university and the setting up of the EWI; there are now 120 academic members www.ucd.ie/ewi. Since 2005, we have been offering undergraduate students across the University. We are planning to have a full undergraduate degree in Social Justice within the next three years.

2 While we are not as yet required to be entirely self-financing (although this is quite likely in the future given marketisation) we are, and have been, subjected to constant financial monitoring. We have survived because our student intake has been good, facilitated by the fact that we do much of our teaching in the late afternoon and evening for Masters students in particular. We also give a lot of attention to the quality of our teaching engaging in regular dialogue with students. Our survival was also greatly enhanced by a bequest from a philanthropist, Atlantic Philanthropies, first in the late 1990s when they gave us funding to write Equality: From Theory to Action (2004), and secondly when they funded a chair in Equality Studies in 2003. This funding gave us legitimacy as well as money. A Marie Curie Transfer of Knowledge award to the EWI for 2006-2010 also greatly enhanced our position.

3 We proposed new courses and programmes (first a M.Sc., and Graduate Diploma in Equality Studies, in the late 1980s and 1990 which naturally evolved to a PhD, a Certificate programme, in 1994, and most recently, in 2005, undergraduate optional courses available to all university students in Equality Studies, Women’s Studies and Social Justice) as well as new structures (Working Groups, 1987, Centres, in1990, and networks, the Egalitarian World Initiative (EWI) 2005).

4 Equality Studies led the movement to create the School of Social Justice in 2005 with the support of Women’s Studies. Although the School of Social Justice is one of the 35 statutorily recognised schools within new statutes of the University, this does not mean that Equality Studies and the School are institutionally unassailable. There will be new transitions to be managed in the future.

5 There are 5.5 full-time permanent academics and researchers in Equality Studies representing five different fields of study: economics, education, law, political philosophy, and sociology. There is also a part-time permanent post held by the Outreach Co-ordinator and a range of Marie Curie Fellows, researchers and post-doctoral fellows whose positions are funded by research grants.

6 At a college meeting in Spring 2008 the vice-president for research (who has a medical background) at UCD referred to the non-traditional subjects in the university as those offering ‘funny degrees’

7 The change in nomenclature from Faculties to ‘Colleges’ and Departments to ‘Schools’ was not merely symbolic; it heralded a whole new set of power relations wherein responsibility was devolved to Schools and Colleges and power was centralised in the so-called Senior Management Team (SMT) of the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Heads of the Five Colleges and other co-optees. The changes were institutionalised in new university statutes.

8 The UCD logo is ‘Ad Astra Cothrom Féinne’ which means literally ‘Reaching for excellence (the stars) and working for the entire community’
While a few individual staff from former Centres and Departments did want to join Social Justice, they were strongly encouraged by the university to accept the majority decision.

The place where this was forcibly articulated was at a meeting two colleagues and I were called to attend on July 19th 2005. The meeting was called on the pretext that it was to help us work out a framework for developing the EWI Network within the College of Human Sciences. It turned out to be an *ad hoc* meeting, attended by four senior professors and a few other College staff; it was made clear to us that they were opposed to the work we were doing in the EWI and the new School of Social Justice. We were told we were ‘politicising the university’ and ‘bringing it into disrepute’. Some of those present had copies of letters in hand that they had sent to the Senior Management of the University making formal complaints about our work but we were not allowed to see them.