

BUT THEN THERE'S ALWAYS FISSURES BETWEEN THE ROCKS; THERE'S ALWAYS SPACE FOR CHANGE': AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHLEEN LYNCH.


'Mas sempre há fissuras entre as rochas; sempre há espaço para mudança': uma entrevista com Kathleen Lynch.

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RESUMO

Kathleen Lynch é Professora de Estudos de Igualdade (Emérita) na University College Dublin (UCD). Ela desempenhou um papel central na criação do Centro de Estudos de Igualdade (1990) e da Escola de Justiça Social, ambos da UCD (2004/5). Ela é autora de muitos livros e artigos sobre todos os tipos de questões de igualdade e justiça social, especialmente na educação e, mais recentemente, sobre a relação entre cuidado e justiça. Nesta entrevista, ela fala sobre as experiências e ideais que moldaram seu trabalho como acadêmica ativista: desde seus anos de formação no oeste da Irlanda até sua colaboração abrindo espaços para a resistência à injustiça, como o Centro de Estudos de Igualdade e a Escola de Justiça Social da UCD. Ela também discute algumas das motivações por trás de seu trabalho sobre cuidado e desigualdade afetiva, incluindo seu livro mais recente: *Care and Capitalism* (2022). A entrevista foi realizada em abril de 2018 e posteriormente revisada para se obter maior clareza.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ativismo. Desigualdade afetiva. Cuidado. Justiça social.

RESUMEN

Kathleen Lynch, Profesora Emérita de Equality Studies en University College Dublin (UCD), jugó un papel importante en el establecimiento del Equality Studies Centre en 1990 (Centro de Estudios sobre la Igualdad) y de la School of Social Justice (Escuela de Justicia Social) en 2004/5, ambas en UCD. Es autora de varios libros y artículos, especialmente en el terreno de la educación, la igualdad, los cuidados y la justicia social. Su más reciente libro, *Care and Capitalism: Why Affective Equality Matters for Social Justice*, fue publicado por Polity Press en 2022. En esta entrevista, habla sobre las experiencias y los ideales que han dado forma a su trabajo como activista intelectual: desde sus años de formación en el oeste de Irlanda hasta su colaboración abriendo espacios para resistir la injusticia. También comenta algunas de las motivaciones detrás de su trabajo sobre la desigualdad en el cuidado y el afecto. La entrevista fue realizada en abril de 2018, y posteriormente revisada para mayor claridad, de ahí que aparezcan referencias a hechos posteriores, como la pandemia de *Covid*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Activismo. Desigualdad afectiva. Cuidados. Justicia social.

ABSTRACT

Kathleen Lynch is Professor of Equality Studies (Emerita) at University College Dublin, UCD. She played a leading role in establishing the UCD Equality Studies Centre (1990) and the UCD School of Social Justice (2004/5). She has authored many books and articles on all types of equality and social justice issues, especially in education, and more recently on the relationship between care and justice. In this interview, she talks about the experiences and ideals that have shaped her work as an activist scholar: from her formative years in the West of Ireland to her collaboration opening spaces for resisting injustice, such as the Centre for Equality Studies and the School of Social Justice at University College Dublin. She also discusses some of the

motivations behind her work on care and affective inequality, including her most recent book: *Care and Capitalism* (2022). The interview was conducted on April 2018, and was subsequently revised for clarity.

KEYWORDS: Activism. Affective inequality. Care. Social justice.

INTERVIEW¹

Authors: Kathleen Lynch and Rubén Flores.

1 Growing up in the West of Ireland

RF: How would you describe your background?

KL: I'm from the west of Ireland, from County Clare. I'm from a farming family, the 2nd youngest of five children.

RF: How was it like to grow up in the West of Ireland?

KL: As children, we helped our parents working on the farm; it was hard work at times but satisfying. It gave us a sense of our own value, and the value of manual work for producing food. But there was fun too and politics too. Sometimes people think that farmers (peasants as they were often called by academics!) or indeed labourers, and others who do manual work for a living, are quintessentially unintellectual and non-reflexive. This was not my experience. While my family and our neighbours had little spare time for developing their ideals, there was a strong intellectual culture around where I lived. People were very politically aware, and politics were a frequent topic of discussion, civil war politics especially, but also the politics of community development focused on enhancing the quality of life and incomes of people in rural Ireland.² People worked collectively on projects. For example, our old primary school was converted to a community centre, where people met to discuss local issues, organise social activities and talks, rehearse plays, teach music and dancing etc. My parents would have an active interest in the local community: it was assumed that when you had sufficient to live on yourself you would serve others in greater need. My father was a founder and first vice president of Clare Cooperative Marts, which still operates as a farmer-owned cooperative.

¹ A Spanish version of this interview is available in the journal *Zona Franca*.

² Muintir Na Tíre was the Irish Christian Community Movement, similar to other Christian Community Movements in Europe that has been supported by the Catholic Church from the 1930s. It promoted the social, cultural and economic welfare of people in rural areas (see Riley 1967). It was also about mobilising people in community development projects, and cooperatives, in ways that would help prevent the spread of communism and socialism on the one hand and totalitarianism on the other. Though the latter was never stated as a purpose, it was implicit. It has similar ideological and political origins to other community development and cooperative projects in Europe, such as the Mondragon Cooperatives established in the 1950s in the Basque Region.

RF: So, your parents were involved in the community?

KL: Yes, especially my father, as my mother was too busy with both farm and care work. I was born in the 1950s and rural Ireland was poor. Most people were small farmers, unskilled workers and labourers; they had no tractors or machinery. I wouldn't romanticize life, but cooperation and the *meitheal* culture was there.³ Though my family were bigger farmers than others, there was no sense of being in a position of power, because we weren't. We needed help at times like all our neighbours

RF: So, you had already an interest in social questions.

KL: I was very aware of social class differences and gender as a very young child. Gender inequality was deep-rooted. It was a patrilineal society (in our case the original family farm had been male entailed by my father's grandfather), so boys mattered more than girls. There were four girls in our family and one boy; it was assumed my brother would inherit the farm.

I also saw how women had no time to rest, as they were farmers and the primary carers of the family. The gender inequalities and the class inequalities were rarely spoken of as injustices, though my mother did mention them at times, especially as she got older. For the greater part, inequalities persisted through being kept silent in rural Ireland.

Despite the class, gender and other divisions, my parents were quite egalitarian in other ways. We were not brought up to think that one human being was better than another. My father despised the pretentiousness and snobbery of the post-independence Catholic middle class to which he belonged (in sociological terms) and articulated that very strongly.

RF: It was an intellectually rich background, right?

KL: We read and were encouraged to read, especially by my mother. There were intense debates in the family about politics and social issues. In his own way, my father was a critical thinker. He never took the narratives of those in power as truthful. Though he and I were diametrically opposed in our political views, I think I learned to question everything from him. My mother always encouraged me.

RF: How was the intellectual context when you were growing up?

³ The Irish term *meitheal* originally referred to groups of people (generally neighbours) coming together to collectively complete a task. It happened in different ways but especially where work had to be done quickly by hand and needed a team of people to do it. Such tasks as saving the hay in summer, making a reek of hay for the winter to feed cattle and sheep, or cutting and saving the turf for firewood, or threshing corn in the autumn and putting it into barns for winter often involved a *meitheal*.

KL: A conservative nationalism was aligned with strong anti-intellectualism in Ireland, something Joe Lee (1989) and Tom Garvin (2004) have documented, and, as Tom Inglis observed in *Moral Monopoly* (1998), these traditions were augmented by an orthodox Catholic religiosity: people who were critical, in any field, were seen as disloyal, even dangerous. As Anne Boran (2021) has written, those who publicly subscribed to communism, in any form, paid a high price in Ireland. Dissenters were very visible, as Ireland was and is a small country.

2 Becoming a social researcher

RF: And the move to the social sciences?

KL: The move to the social sciences was not something my family expected or wanted. They worried I would not get a 'proper' job! But I had decided I would do a degree in social science and that is what I did.

I chose Sociology and Social Policy as my subjects and did my degree in Dublin. In the early 1970s, many of the senior academic positions in the social sciences, psychology, education and politics in Irish universities were held by Catholic priests. There were very good academics in the Department. But the senior posts that were not held by clergy were held by men (and they were men), who, if not religious, were generally politically and intellectually conservative. The Sociology curriculum would have been dominated by structural functionalism, especially Talcott Parsons. We studied Durkheim in some depth and Weber. There was no mention of gender issues or feminism. And while we did study Marxism and critical theory, we did not study either in depth. Communism was seen as a threat, not a phenomenon that we should investigate. We had a book on our course — I kept it for posterity — that listed all the reasons we should reject communism. This was meant to be part of the sociology course. I only read Marx's work in the original when I was doing my master's degree and again when I was doing my PhD.

And I did social work as well. I undertook different placements including one in a mental hospital for three months and in a remand home for girls in Scotland for an entire summer. I thought that social work was going to be about radical action. But it wasn't. While placements were important learning experiences, I learned quickly that social work involved managing the injuries of the state and even rationalizing its neglect and abuse.

RF: How drew your attention to questions of care?

KL: In the final year of my degree, I lived in a children's home. I was invited to live there (on a voluntary basis) and help care for the children as I had done a placement there the previous year. It was there I learned the truth of the song, '*Hearts starve as well as bodies: give us bread, but give us roses*'. I spent many nights listening to children speak of their loss, as the love of their parents that was not forthcoming for all kinds of reasons. You ask me about my education? I would say, much of it happened outside university. I will mention two experiences that stand out.

At the end of my first year in College, I worked in a fish processing plant in the Shetland Islands to earn money for college. There were a variety of labour issues in the factory, one of which was that women did not get the same wages as men for the same work. In protest, a group of us engaged in a lightning strike (there was no trade union in the factory) by walking off the factory floor before the end of the shift. This was at 3.45am. At 8am the four 'ringleaders', including myself, were fired. It taught me the importance of trade unions at an early age.

Another significant learning event involved my brother. He wanted someone to go with him on a bus trip travelling over Europe as he had a keen interest in history; it was the year after I finished my degree. One of the places we visited was the Dachau concentration camp, near Munich in Germany. It had a lifelong effect on me. I was overwhelmed by the scale of the organised brutality and the suffering. The images kept flashing back, the gas chambers masquerading as shower rooms, the false 'welcoming' platform, the places where people were shot, the pictures of people starving, humiliated and in despair. While I had read about the war, I had never *felt* the horror of the holocaust in this way. I saw how evil can be normalised and made invisible. It taught me to speak out, not to be a bystander, to challenge injustices as they emerge.

When I finished my undergraduate degree, I didn't know what to do. I knew I would never do social work. I got a job as a research assistant in the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in St. Patrick's College of Education (now part of Dublin City University). The ERC focus was on developing standardised tests for Irish schools. I learned a great deal there about human intelligence and testing. When I saw the arbitrary ways in which tests were devised, items taken in and out of tests so that they would make the same discriminations as prior tests and/or teacher evaluations of pupils, I became very sceptical of all kinds of psychometric testing and classifying people in such an arbitrary way. I even wrote an article critiquing them. Although it was a permanent job, I left after one year.

As I was interested in critically examining social life in Ireland, I started a research master's degree in sociology and taught part-time. Though my MSc thesis was recommended for a PhD (after some revisions), I decided to leave academia. I was 25 and had become very sceptical of academic life. There seemed to be an awful lot of research measuring and documenting poverty, but no sense of urgency about challenging the structural injustices underlying poverty, or other inequalities. I was young, and academia seemed so stuffy and staid, so I left.

I wanted to engage in something more meaningful. A friend of mine was working in a hostel for homeless teenage girls in the city centre. The work seemed to have a purpose. I lived and worked there for two years as a 'housemother', what is now called as 'social carer'.

RF: How was that experience?

KL: It was very educational. The hostel was like the children's home, the same issue of bread and roses. You need bread, but somebody needs to nurture you and love you too. The teenagers had huge care deprivations. Yes, class and gender-based poverty was a defining condition of their lives, but most of the girls had no one to look after them in a hands-on-day-to-day way, someone who would always be there, and would always stand by them. The hostel was my first experience of domestic violence; many of the young girls had experienced extreme abuse and violence, including sexual abuse and the violence of prostitution. I learned an awful lot there, especially about myself. I learned how middle class I was. I learned about my assumptions and how wrong a lot of them were. I learned about the absolute indifference of a lot of official Ireland to what happened to very vulnerable people, especially young women and men who were very poor.

3 The confluence of experiential and the theoretical knowledge

RF: You've always combined activism with the academy.

KL: Having the freedom from necessity to think and to write, was such an extraordinary privilege, I felt a duty to be engaged and to share my expertise and knowledge with activists who did not have the time or other resources available to academics. Sometimes I was involved in issues related to my subject, advocating for greater equality in access to education, and sometimes on unrelated issues such as tenants' rights.

But I also saw activism as a way of learning, a way of knowing the world. Academic knowledge of in/equality is only one kind of understanding; there is also experiential knowledge, the knowledge of first-hand experience, particularly of injustices. Both inductive

and deductive theorisations about injustice are abstractions; they can become reified and irrelevant. Unless theories of justice are informed by those living the reality of daily injustices, there can be misunderstanding and misrepresentation.⁴ The learning that comes from feeling the pain, disrespect, shame and suffering of racism, classism, disablism or sexism etc. is not there. Unless you are living with injustice, you literally do not *feel* it. You may know something theoretically, but your knowledge is far from complete. Being with and learning from the Other and the Outsiders is a very fruitful way to get to know the world; it forces you to rethink your academic theories and propositions. It is not easy because the language of every day experience is very different to academic language.

RF: Could we explore a little bit your trajectory as an activist?

KL: Because I lived on a farm, I felt a strong affinity with nature and animals. Because I spent a lot of play time with animals while in primary school, I could see that they suffered fear, pain and anxiety. I protested to my parents about this in my own childlike way and won some small concessions on how animals were treated. This was my first activism!

I saw that women were second class citizens, as were labourers and those who owned no land or property. This did not tally with the rhetoric of 'Do unto Others as you would have them do unto you'. Like many young people I saw the contradictions between the principles of Christian teaching and the practice of those who claimed to be Christian. I called out what I saw as hypocrisy, even though nobody heeded me. The views of a young girl did not count.

The experience of Dachau always made me think of what injustices society is trying to hide. As I grew older, I became very interested in left-wing politics. I identified with James Connolly, the Irish revolutionary, his commitment to gender equality, and his ideals of a socialist republic. But there was no organised feminist politics here in Ireland when I was a child or a teenager. It was only when I got involved in the Women Studies Forum in UCD in the early 80s that I had the opportunity to learn from feminists.

People often ask: "Did you plan to be an academic?" I never thought of being an academic as a teenager or even in my 20s. And no one suggested it to me. Rural women from the West of Ireland were not expected to become academics!

⁴ John Bissett's book *How to Live: An Ethnography of Class and Gender in a Public Housing Estate in Dublin* (2023) is a good example of a community activist scholar documenting public housing from the inside. It is fundamentally a critique of extant publications by academics on public housing in Ireland.

When I entered UCD, I did not intend to stay because I didn't find the university system inspiring. I didn't want to spend my life working in a place where people were not enthusiastic or inspirational. If I were to stay, I wanted to engage in activism *within* the academy too. I began to think about how the university could be a site of resistance to all types of injustices, something that eventually led to the development of Equality Studies (Lynch 1995).

RF: Where did you find inspiration?

KL: I had read and heard much about Dr Noël Browne, a medical doctor and former Minister for Health, who was deeply committed to social justice owing to the trauma and poverty experienced by his own family. His book *Against the Tide* (1986), published around the time I was thinking about starting Equality Studies in UCD, it really encouraged me to keep going, not to be afraid to go 'against the tide'. And his failures taught me the importance of having supportive colleagues as well.

In terms of intellectual resistance, I was inspired intellectually, in my early years, by the writing of Eric Fromm and The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. I felt there was something radical about their idea of linking normative thinking with analytical and transformative thought and action. Then, later I got to know Antonio Gramsci, especially his idea of the war of position; his optimism inspired me, as did Bourdieu's work on education and culture. Marx's early work on ideology and its relationship to structures were important to me too. I got to know Paulo Freire's work when I started to work full time in education. He was really inspiring. It was only when I went to work in Equality Studies that I got to really know feminist philosophy, politics and sociology.

RF: Could you tell me a bit more about your encounter the idea of transformative knowledge?

KL: I had read the work of Marcuse, Adorno and Erich Fromm as a master's student. I was inspired by their ideas about what it meant to know and the responsibility of knowing. As I read, I realised how little I had been allowed to know when I was young. I literally felt a great liberation in reading critical theory. I did not want others to be deprived of knowing, especially not knowing their place in the world and those who exercised power over them. If you did not know where you were and who exercised control over you, then how could you change it?

Paulo Freire had a huge influence on me. I read and re-read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1998 [1968]) in the mid-1970s. And I began to think, "This is the way I think". This is how oppressed people think. They do internalise the oppressor; they are not allowed

to think for themselves. Gramsci's concept of hegemonic consciousness helped my understanding of what it means to know. Much of education is purely instrumental, based on a banking idea of education; students often see their degrees as a deposit on which they can earn a return, a good job and good pay, a passport to privilege. Education could be different and could contribute to people transforming and empowering themselves from the inside out; it could facilitate a reflexive and other-centred mode of thinking, and it could enable people to critically engage with all ideas and institutions.

People know their own world even if they have no time or language to name it. Enabling them to come out of their silences matters, enhancing and enabling their consciousness and articulation of what is unjust and needs to change. I don't see how you can get the kind of political engagement necessary for radical egalitarian change without enabling people to know the world, and how and where power is exercised within it. While knowledge alone will not be sufficient to enable action, it lays the foundation for longer-term thinking and action. As an activist scholar, you can lay out your table of ideas and understandings, so people are fully informed and see what speaks to them. As an educator you let people know there are many possibilities. You give back to them in a new way, in a new language perhaps, what they know already.

Much disciplinary education is narrow and only allows students to see or know one paradigm. I studied economics and philosophy, in my early undergraduate years. As time wore on, I remember thinking, the only economics I learned was classical economics. We did not learn that there were many paradigms within the discipline. In both philosophy and economics, we only read the work of white Western men. The work of women and indigenous scholars was not on the curricula.

RF: But you slowly encountered these other thinkers.

KL: It was a slow process. I felt very isolated in Ireland, neither quite belonging in sociology or in education. People in England were very helpful to me. I was invited to give papers on a few occasions by a group of sociologists who founded the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, including Len Barton and Madeleine Arnot. It was at those International Sociology of Education conferences that I met Michael Apple, an educational theorist from Madison Wisconsin. And it was through Mike that I got to know Erik Olin Wright as both were at Madison. When I was finishing my PhD, I spent the early part of 1984 in Madison attending seminars and conferences organised by Mike, Erik, and other sociologists and philosophers at *The Havens Center for Social Justice* (now *The Havens Wright Center for Social Justice*). I have very fond memories of the intellectual dynamism of

The Havens Center, and of Erik and Mike, and of their genuine solidarity with oppressed people. They were deeply committed to changing the world and created space in Madison for many critical scholars for decades. I was invited there as a visiting scholar in the early 2000s and again after the publication of *Affective Equality* (Lynch et al. 2009).

4 Care and normative perspectives

RF: The literature on care stems largely from feminism. Looking back, how do you see this literature stream, of which your work is a part?

KL: Because I was working on *Equality: From Theory to Action* (2004) with John Baker (a political philosopher), Sara Cantillon (an economist), and Judy Walsh (a lawyer) I had to read extensively outside of sociology, especially in political theory, but also in economics and law. It was at that time I started to read the work of feminist scholars, including political theorists, like Joan Tronto and Virginia Held, feminist economists such as Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson, and the feminist legal scholar such as Catharine McKinnon and Martha Fineman. We had intense debates among ourselves when writing *Equality*. One day, John Baker and I had a meeting with Dr Alpha Connelly, a founder of Equality Studies, about the concept of equality. I floated the idea of affective equality as a new key dimension of equality, complementing the redistribution, recognition and representation dimensions, that Nancy Fraser has articulated so well (see for example Fraser and Honneth 2003). John and Alpha liked the idea, so I started to work on it. I did not arrive at this just through academic understanding alone. When I gave papers about equality, especially to community groups, women asked about care. I was also conscious of how much care mattered from my own experience of living with children with care deprivations. It was intellectual and experiential knowledge coming together.

RF: One important feature of the literature on care is that it does not separate description and prescription. How have you navigated this distinction between facts and values that is so prevalent in mainstream social science?

KL: I was always skeptical of the neat distinction between fact and value. What facts you chose to know involves a value choice as do the facts you ignore. Even the methods you employ to do research have value choices as certain methods only reveal some kinds of truths. Also, theoretically, there is no view from nowhere. Even if academics never declare their values, they live by them in terms of what they chose to study, what they ignore, who

they read, who they cite; how they theorise and conduct empirical research is embedded in a set of values about epistemology and the ontology. Take for example, the idea that people act primarily out of self-interest. Yes, people do, there is no question about that; but that is not all. Humans act self-wise, but they also act other-wise; people are relational and moral beings and their feelings and concerns for others can inform their thinking and action.

RF: Your work on affective inequality has been ground-breaking. Could you briefly summarize the idea of affective inequality?

KL: People need love, care and solidarity to survive and flourish just as much as they need food and shelter. To be deprived of love, care and solidarity diminishes life, and when absent completely it destroys life. Affective equality is about maximizing the capacity of peoples *and* societal institutions to create, maintain and resource the affective relations that produce love, care and solidarity. It is also about ensuring that this work is equally distributed between women and men, and across all social groups, so that no one has a life that is so care-demanding that they have no other life outside of caring.

At the intimate level, affective equality is about protecting and enabling primary care relations to ensure they are as nurturing as possible. This means enabling and resourcing the love labouring that non-substitutable affective relations involve. It also involves ensuring that people have the capacity to create nurturing caring relations outside of family, friends and intimate others. Nurturing needs to be resourced and enabled in secondary sites of caring, including childcare centres, hospitals, care homes for older/vulnerable adults. Finally, affective equality is about promoting and sustaining care for strangers in the wider public and political domains, in one's local community, within employments, and at regional, national and international levels.

5 Founding Institutions: Equality Studies

RF: Many sociologists have come to recognize exactly what you are saying: these are not two different spheres; you cannot separate facts and values. Yet mainstream social research has operated for a long time with a very strong distinction between evaluation and description. I was just wondering, how was your relationship with mainstream social research?

KL: It was ambivalent. I felt mainstream sociology was not interested in the questions that concerned me and that is what led me to establish Equality Studies.⁵ There was a strong literature on inequality in sociology (especially on social class and stratification), but what mattered in sociology seemed to be driven by intellectual fashion. First there was a focus on class, in the 1970s, then on, gender the 80s, racism was huge in the research coming from the US, though not in Europe; there was some attention to sexuality and postcolonialism from the 1990s, but never much on disability as a site of injustice, though it is an enormous issue. I felt that disciplines were driven by fashions.

RF: Could you tell me a little bit about the process of founding Equality Studies?

KL: The frustrations I felt were with the university generally, perhaps more than with sociology *per se*. This led me to think about establishing a new field, and a new way of educating and undertaking research. I contacted two other academics initially, Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (Sociology) and Alpha Connelly (Law) each of whom I knew from my activism some years previously. The three of us formed a small working group, The Equality Studies Working Group.

In 1986 the president of the University, issued an invitation to all staff to put forward new ideas for the development of teaching and research in the University. Máire, Alpha and I wrote a proposal for the UCD Equality Studies Centre. It was a long struggle at different Faculty meetings before we got approval to set up the Equality Studies Centre, but we made a start in 1987. It took almost three years for a master's degree in Equality Studies to be approved. There were many objections raised; it was too political; it was too interdisciplinary; it does not exist anywhere else; no one will do the degree and it will waste time and money, etc. We were young, determined and enthusiastic. We had got support from other colleagues, especially John Baker in Politics, John Blackwell in Economics, and Mary Kelly in sociology. We sought out allies at a senior level, including Professor Conor Ward, Professor of Sociology, and Dr Helen Burke in Social Policy. Without their support and that of other senior people, it would have not gone ahead. Eventually we got permission to establish the Centre in 1989 and to start the master's degree in 1990.

RF: And the master's programme is still there.

KL: Yes, the MSc and the Centre are still there. We wanted a Centre that would be different, that would teach and research in a more emancipatory way (see Lynch 1999).

⁵ For an account of the intellectual background and the process leading to the foundation of Equality Studies, see Lynch 1995.

RF: In that respect, do you think the Centre has achieved its goals?

KL: I think we achieved quite a lot. From the outset the policy was to educate activists for equality and social justice, and those who wanted to become activists. We encouraged these types of students to apply and gave applicants credit in the application process to all forms of equality-related activism. Of course, not everyone was an activist but that was the goal. We also ran outreach programmes for those without degrees (the Certificate and Diploma in Equality Studies); people could transfer from these to the degree. We were successful in attracting community activists.

There was a lot of idealism built-in the running of the programme including the fact that the degree was awarded as an honour's degree without distinctions. We taught during the day and in the evening, as most students who applied were mature and needed to work. Gradually we built up teaching and research. Many people contributed to its success; a huge amount of voluntary effort was involved from colleagues in UCD, colleagues in other universities, inside and outside Ireland, people in civil society and statutory bodies.

RF: What about the School of Social Justice?

KL: When a new president was appointed in 2004, several 'departments' were amalgamated and renamed as 'schools' in UCD. There was a danger that Equality Studies would be amalgamated with a bigger and more conservative school. As Women's Studies faced similar challenges, Equality Studies and Women's Studies agreed to form a new *School of Social Justice*. This proposal was accepted by the new President and Registrar. We wanted Disability Studies and Development Studies to join us, but they chose not to. The School of Social Justice was very successful for ten years. We developed a joint undergraduate degree in Social Justice with the Law Faculty. It was offered as a minor subject option with the Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL) degree initially. Social Justice can now be studied as a joint Major with a range of other subjects.

In 2014-15 a new UCD president was appointed who was not supportive of a separate School of Social Justice; neither was the Head of the College where the School belonged. Also, a number of academic and administrative staff in Social Justice wanted to amalgamate with Social Policy and Social Work as it was a bigger school with more resources. Social Policy and Social Work had a very different ethos to Social Justice; it had a strong professional orientation, training social workers; while individual staff were committed to social justice, research and teaching to promote social justice was not its primary remit.

Those of us who had struggled for 20-30 years to make Equality Studies, Women' Studies, and Social Justice happen opposed the move (as did many graduates and international scholars who wrote to the University opposing the idea). There was no obvious reason to close the School as it was very successful in terms of the University's own benchmarks, including recruiting students, getting research funding, public profile, outreach activities and activism. Despite pleadings sent to the head of the college of social sciences, the president, academic council and the governing authority, the school was closed in summer 2015. The political climate of rising neoliberalism among academics and senior management was not favourable to Social Justice; it became the third strand of a much bigger Department.

6 Neoliberalism and Academia

RF: And you have written about the rise of neoliberalism in academia, right?

KL: Neoliberalism has really entered academia through the practice of *New Managerialism* (Lynch, Grummell and Devine 2012). It has exacerbated the inherent individualism of academia, where everybody thinks they're a star or a potential star! You need to act collectively to resist powerful forces like neoliberalism and I think academics are not good at that.

RF: Neoliberalism is huge in Ireland. But I think British academia has gone much further in the direction of neoliberalism.

KL: There's been some resistance here, exercised through the trade unions. The problem is however that there are many people who benefit from new managerialism. There is an intense competitiveness to neoliberalism, as Bröckling (2015) has documented. It offers 'success' to the 'meritorious' and that is a big incentive to some in academia. In a neoliberal era, being ambitious is virtuous even if it is entirely about self-promotion. The ideology of the career is far more powerful at the individual level that it was 20 years ago.

RF: You're very critical of the idea of career.

KL: If you set out to have a career in an academic field (or in any profession) as a primary goal, then realising your ambition in terms of status or power and/or money will be the primary focus. But if you have an ideal and a belief as a scholar, and you want to achieve something for the good of society and the world through your research and teaching, that's a completely different way of looking at your position. It's about having an ideal, a belief in

something that matters beyond yourself. It is literally about being a public servant, working for the collective good, in so far as one can ever know this. I fear we have lost a lot of sense of public service in academia as it has become commercialized.

When you get a post in any public service, you are not educated as to what being a public servant means. I am not saying people who work in universities, or the public service generally are not entitled to reasonable incomes, salaries, security etc.; quite the contrary, they are. But those of us employed in universities are public servants; we have duties of care and concern for others that do not apply in for-profit businesses. Being a public servant is something we must learn to be, through education and practice. It's not something that happens automatically. Yet, there is no plan in place to create the mind-set and practice required for being a good public servant.

7 Ideals and social research

RF: Let us go back to the theme of ideals. Looking back, what would you say are the big ideals that have guided your life?

KL: You can create goodness in life. We can make the world a better place. My background is Catholic, and while it has many limitations, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' is a message that I have always taken seriously. Of course, I often don't know what to do, or how to do it, but being open to learning and dialogue helps. You cannot rely on yourself. Listening and learning is part of the process and recognizing you can be wrong. I see life as the pursuit of some concept of the good.

Everything I have studied and read about social life shows that if people are more equal in economic, political, cultural and other social relations, the better life is for the collective whole. So that's the logic. Everyone and every sentient being deserves to have a decent life, to be respected. I would think about that every day.

There's a lot of unnecessary suffering in life, some suffering may be inevitable, but an awful lot of human suffering is not necessary, nor is the suffering of animals or other creatures. A lot of harm is preventable.

RF: What role do you see for social research within this process?

KL: Social research is wonderful if it opens up the world. Good education and good research are like opening new windows on the world. You're in big round tower, and as you

open more and more windows both you and other people can see the world in all its 360 degrees. That's how I see the best of research.

If you are doing good research, especially research that exposes injustices of power and wealth, you will always be on the outside. Academics must stand apart from power, whatever the power is. That is what worries me about research funding; almost all major funding is provided directly or indirectly through governments or corporations. It is tied to the interests and institutions of power. Social scientists should be more like artists: the great artists in history have often been on the periphery of power. We should be always probing, and always questioning ourselves and the vested interests that might undermine the integrity of our research. Academics, like all others, are blind to our own power.

RF: And do you ever feel in the periphery of social research?

KL: I do, much of the time. Although I work in the university I often feel like a stranger, especially since it has become more corporatized. I suppose being an academic means being on the edge, living in a borderland. I would see academics as being more like writers and artists, except that we are very fortunate artists if we have jobs. We are granted the freedom to be scholarly, but we don't always use it.

RF: The freedom of having time to write can be fruitfully linked to some kind of social commitment (without ignoring the value of the search for knowledge for knowledge's sake).

KL: I think so. Otherwise, why work in the university. If you're always going to be a mouthpiece of the government, or of some multi-national then it makes sense to be employed by them. If your scholarship is driven by funding from very powerful interest groups, your academic freedom is compromised (see Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). When I started out in academia, academics weren't particularly well-paid. Now tenured academics have relatively high salaries, and professors in Ireland have very high salaries; they are part of the elite whether they see it that way or not. That's where Gouldner's statement about how your domain assumptions impact on your paradigmatic assumptions comes into play: how you live every day, where you live and socialize, where you send your children to school etc. influences your paradigmatic assumptions (Gouldner 1970). As Bourdieu (1990) observed, your habits of living impact on your '*... dispositions through which schemes of thought are formed and transformed*'. I don't know how the university, or any individual can personally get outside those habits or dispositions without entering into living, sharing and learning with those who are outside the privileged milieu. What I called research coalitions

(Lynch 1999) help. Let me give an example, my own experience of Irish Travellers.⁶ Although I knew several Travellers personally (I'm godmother to Traveller children) I never knew their culture or their extent or the scope and scale of discrimination against them. It was only through dialogue, having them as visitors in my home and attending events with them, that I realized how little I knew. It became clear that the only people who could speak about Travellers were Travellers. This led to a teaching initiative the UCD on Travellers Rights, Nomadism and Culture taught directly by Travellers in 2013/14 and a similar initiative in the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, a year later. The University of Limerick (UL) created an academic post in Traveller Studies in 2022.

RF: When did you start working with Travellers?

KL: I have known some Traveller families personally all my adult life. But it became a political issue for me in academia about 25 years ago. It was very strange go to conferences where papers were presented by settled people *about* Travellers but there were no Travellers present. It was as if white people were the only ones talking about colour-based racism.

Being an expert on 'the Other', minority or outside group is often problematic; you can take away people's voice inadvertently. An expert academic can claim she/he knows the outsiders' world better than they know it themselves. The academic career is built on writing about the excluded group, but the 'Other' remains subordinated, just as they were before there were outsider experts. It is a type of colonization. Cathleen O'Neill, a working-class community activist, and I wrote about this issue with respect to research on social class (Lynch and O'Neill 1994). It's impossible to get outside your own world, no matter how well-intentioned you are, but you can have the humility to recognise your own ignorance. That's something I learned slowly.

8 Bringing about social change: Some lessons learned

RF: Could I ask you about some of the lessons that you have learned while trying to bring about social change?

⁶ "Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority who, historical sources confirm, have been part of Irish society for centuries. [...] Their culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an important factor, distinguishes them from the sedentary (settled) population. [...] Travellers, as individuals and as a group, experience a high level of prejudice and exclusion in Irish society." Irish Traveller Movement, <https://itmtrav.ie/what-is-itm/irish-travellers/>

KL: You must never give up. That's the most important thing. You must never give up. To avoid despair, you must anticipate and accept defeat, learn from it, and, of course, celebrate successes.

Another lesson I learned was that realizing social change is a collective effort, always. Being part of a committed group is crucial, and it helps if this group is a mix of idealists and dreamers, as well as strategists and pragmatists. And you must keep thinking ahead. Social injustices evolve in form and kind; you need to be on the lookout for these. Any movement must be part of creating history, not just reacting to the agenda of others. Part of this is anticipating resistance, especially counter movements and responding in time. You can never rest on your laurels and assume you have arrived.

The most important thing is to persist and hold on to the dream. And when you meet opposition, which you will, seek out new avenues for action, new allies; you'll always find new ways and new people, new collectivities with whom you can work. There are side roads you can take when the main road is blocked. When we were starting Equality Studies, people would say. "You couldn't have that in the university. You couldn't have a course on sexuality, or a course on class and politics, or on feminism". I can't tell you the number of things that we were told we couldn't do.

To bring about change, you need to have a belief in something and to accept that there will be opposition, and there may be a price for pursuing this. You need the solidarity of others, to recognise when you are wrong and learn from people along the way. And you just keep going. There are always lots of other people around who think like you. It just takes time to create those allies and alliances.

RF: What lessons have you learned about the nature of politics?

KL: I don't feel I'm an expert on politics though! Obviously, resources, planning, campaigning, getting people out to vote, informing people, countering lies etc. are all crucial. But I also think that ideas matter. I believe in creating spaces where ideas can be developed that can change public and political discourses. You need physical spaces, intellectual spaces and virtual spaces, where ideas and movements can grow and develop. And you need to keep those spaces open. There are always small spaces and times, interstices where resistance to injustices are possible and fruitful. It is very important to be aware of those spaces, resource them and keep them open.

Take the *Marriage Equality Campaign*,⁷ which I wasn't directly involved in. It was a huge organizational success, but it was also a success that was built over many years of intellectual campaigning by different groups. The UCD Equality Studies Centre was a safe intellectual space (among many others, especially Women's Studies Centres and programmes) for opening debates around the issue of sexuality and gender and linking these to the right to have love and care. We helped normalize the language of affective equality in national fora.⁸ *Love Equality* became a motto of the Marriage Equality campaign. Maybe we contributed in some small way to put the idea out there that people had the right to love and care regardless of their sexual orientation. Publicizing new ideas and languages changes public discourse. It takes time but it contributes.

RF: What about the nature of social change?

KL: I always think of Charles Tilly's work on durable inequality (1998). It shows how, when inequalities become embedded institutionally, organisations are built around them protecting them; careers develop around them; futures develop around them, as do power and politics. And then it's very, very difficult to bring about change. You can also see it in the way laws are passed and are so difficult to change. I see social justice as a long revolution in terms of creating an equitable, habitable and loving world.

To have social justice we need to change the definition of politics, from simply being about a politics of self-interest, which is what most political parties offer, to having a bigger vision for politics. Contemporary politics is driven by a very particular model of narrow self-interest, both temporally and intergenerationally, an ontology that presumes there is no relational self to which politics might appeal. Yes, we recognize self-interest, but we must also create a society where there's solidarity, a world where we care for everybody, especially those who are not economically productive.

We must tell a new story for politics, one that is based on a more nuanced understanding of the human condition because most people want security, for their children and for themselves. They want to be free from violence. They want a guarantee that, when

⁷ "On 22 May 2015 a referendum took place in Ireland to amend the Constitution over the legalisation of same-sex marriage. 62.07% of the electorate voted in favour of the amendment." With this referendum, Ireland became "the first country in the world to bring in same-sex marriage by a popular vote." <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0628/973935-marriage-equality-in-ireland/>

⁸ The policy papers we wrote for the *National Economic and Social Forum* on what equality meant were widely disseminated throughout the country. We had included the idea of affective equality in these, namely that equality in the doing, and receiving of love, care and solidarity mattered. Also, our book *Affective equality: Love, care and injustice* (Lynch, Baker and Lyons 2016), was very well received and was nominated as one of the books of the year by the Irish Times.

they get old, that they won't be abandoned. I think that if you create that vision, people will align with that. It is a slow process.

In the 2016 elections in Ireland, the parties in government lost power. They proposed to reduce personal taxes and cut public services. But opinion polls showed that people did not want this; they wanted better public services not tax cuts, even if they would benefit personally from these. It is possible to create a different type of politics. And some countries have done that, more so than others.

RF: You have a very nice metaphor to describe social change...

KL: Yes, I often have an image of the karst regions of the Burren of North Clare, not far from where I was born. It is a vast cracked pavement of glacial-era limestone rocks. There's always fissures between the rocks, places and spaces for change. It is through the little fissures that some of the most beautiful alpine flowers grow in the Burren. The flowers are inspiring. They seem to grow from nowhere. And it's like that with social change. It looks like, oh, it's set in stone, nothing new will be created out of that. But there are always opportunities.

RF: It's very easy to be pessimistic at times.

KL: It's very dangerous to be pessimistic, very dangerous politically. Young people are full of idealism. Adults betray that idealism because they don't offer them a different vision of society. They just tell them that, oh life is hard, this is the way it is, look after yourself. Competitiveness and acquisitiveness are made virtuous by adults; that is quite frightening for young people as they cannot belong unless they 'win' and unless they 'consume' (Soederberg 2014; Zuboff 2019). What I'm saying is we can create a counter-narrative, and a counter-story of solidarity, and care for others, which also means care for oneself. We need to name and recognize our own interdependency and claim its place in politics. As Silvia Federici has observed (2019), care is a prism through which we can reimagine the world and around which new collective mobilisations and resistances can occur. I don't see why we can't create the type of caring-led democracy that Joan Tronto (2013) has proposed.

It's always a struggle to maintain cooperative and caring ways of working and organising politically: conflict must be managed and negotiated, while countervailing forces are ever present. This is something that has been learned from the worker-owner cooperatives established in Mondragón in the Basque country over 70 years ago. Although a world leader in the cooperative movement, with limited wage/salary differentials, it remains a small island in a sea of corporatised capitalism.

RF: What would you say to people that believe that it's very difficult to enact change and there's no point in even trying?

KL: It is difficult but not impossible. To give you an example. In the 1970s, Ireland had a very poorly funded social welfare system and a tiny number of people in higher education. We now have a much-improved welfare system, especially for older people, and one of the highest rates of participation in higher education in Europe, something that was unthinkable, even in the 1980s. Ireland is not by any means an equal society but there were policy changes that reduced inequality, and these didn't come about by accident. There were struggles, some of which were lost, some won. And now there are new challenges, especially with neoliberalism taking hold in political thinking. But it can be and will be resisted. So, when people say "things can't change" I disagree. Changes occurred by activism on many fronts.

So, when people say, "Things can't change", this is dangerous fatalism. It is hard work mobilizing for social justice, it takes time, and it is more tedious than glamorous. And you must fight to hold what you have won in terms of equality, human rights and social justice. It is dangerous to assume that social justice gains are there for all time. People can lose what they have gained if they do not work protect it.

You have to build a vision of what a socially just society is like, from the ground up, listening, learning, taking up what matters to people. It takes time. It takes humility and patience. You'd like it to go faster. Unless people believe in it, and see the benefits of it, it won't last. But I do believe it's possible. Absolutely.

RF: So, Ireland has changed hugely.

KL: Take for example the status of women and of the campaign for marriage equality. The status of women has changed significantly, as proven in the Repeal the 8th referendum.⁹ It is a major shift. In 1993, when homosexuality was decriminalized, it would have been unimaginable that you would have marriage equality in 2015.

Where I see the big challenge now is in economic inequality; wealth inequality is growing globally (Ahmed et al. 2022). Giving women the right to exercise control over their own bodies was not a major cost to the exchequer, nor was marriage equality. *Recognition* and *Respect* are principally about cultural change and that is difficult; however, it can happen without upsetting capitalist interests, which is ultimately what radical *Redistribution* requires — and that is a much bigger challenge given the power of globalised capital.

⁹ This is a reference to the May 2018 referendum on the regulation of termination of pregnancy.

RF: And what advice would you give to people who want to do activism and scholarship, and perhaps combine both.

KL: People who have secure tenured employment in academia have a moral obligation to do it. They have the capacity and the power. The universities (in most countries) will not dismiss you for doing it, and you can do it in your own way, and in your own time. However, it's very hard for people who are in temporary contracts, given the time it takes to be an activist and the emphasis on publications. Ironically, those in temporary contracts are often the most active.

There is even a self-interested dimension to activism, especially in the social sciences. While the general public hear regularly the value of medical and natural science research, and business and technological research, they do not hear much praise for the social sciences. We must be our own advocates, and part of that is making our work available and visible through activism, especially in matters of social justice and equality. Scholars who are critical of the abuses of power, privilege and money are easy targets when universities are being challenged by vested interests, as *Scholars at Risk* (2021) documented in their *Free To Think Report 2021*. Critical scholars generally, and those in the Arts and social sciences especially, need the allies that activism gives them.

Also, activism is valuable for the future of scholarship as it improves and enriches understanding; there's nothing quite like a dialogue with people who don't share your assumptions to sharpen your intellect. It enriches the community of scholarship. Scholars have a lot to give educationally outside the university. So why confine lectures/talks to the students who happen to get a place in the university. I see it as part of our civic duty to share our learning. But the universities should recognize it. If the universities don't recognize activism as public service work and validate it, people won't do it.

RF: There would have to be a battle to make the universities recognise that.

KL: I think that's another battle and a hard one for the social sciences, as they are often opening issues the powerful rather keep suppressed. One academic who inspired me on this was RH Tawney, a professor of political theory in Oxford in the early 20th century, and author of books like *Equality* (1952 [1930]) and *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (2015 [1926]). He used to say, he gave the same lectures to the miners as he gave at the university. I believe that is possible. If you understand something well enough, and you want people to understand it, you can explain it in accessible language. I have always tried to

follow this motto. I give many public lectures to groups who do not have higher education¹⁰. You can translate scholarship in a way that is accessible. While it takes time to translate, you learn from the translation as you can have a new dialogue about your ideas with those who are outside the academy. You learn a new vocabulary, and the two vocabularies interpolate, one informs the other.

There needs to be a serious appraisal of what we publish in the universities and how valuable it is. Sharing your ideas through oral and written communication to the general public is a form of publishing.

RF: To activists in general, people who want to change the world for the better, you have already mentioned the need to be persistent,...

KL: And awkward, because people won't like you. It is nice to be liked. But being on the outside, and less than popular, is the price you pay for critical thinking. Many playwrights and artists are in this position. They express ideas that people are afraid to hear but are truthful. I don't think it's our job as academics to be liked. The price for academic and intellectually independent is being an outsider. Sometimes you'll be the flavour of the month, and sometimes not.

To me scholarship is about honesty and integrity. It's about researching uncomfortable truths. Often that involves being sidelined and kept outside. As an academic you must maintain a critical distance from all institutions of power, and people of power. That's our role in society, living in that borderland.

RF: Is there a tension between being friendly and caring and being sometimes confrontational in terms of activism?

KL: It is possible to be confrontational at the level of ideas and institutions, but that does not mean you have to be confrontational at the personal level. It may translate into that; of course, it does sometimes. I firmly believe one should never argue *ad hominem*. Part of an ethic of care is to take on injustices. People who experience injustice may not be able to get their voices heard; academics can be an enabling voice; not taking over but enabling and facilitating. The net impact of this is that it challenges people who are the net beneficiaries of these injustices, and of course they can and do resist. This is evident in

¹⁰ One such event was a lecture I gave on *Affective Equality* in County Mayo in 2012 as the impact of the financial crash was being strongly felt. The talk was about how emigration is a care-based injustice, an example of affective inequality. The hall was full. People knew exactly what I was talking about as the West of Ireland has known the loss of emigration across generations; they felt it again after the financial crash in 2008 when emigration began to rise. I was naming the experience in a new social justice oriented way.

recent attempts by the Israeli government to classify human rights-oriented, civil society organisations working for the rights of Palestinians as ‘terrorist’, including some involved in research.

9 Care and Capitalism

RF: And, to bring this interview to an end, could you tell us a little bit about the motivation behind writing *Care and Capitalism*?

The book works at different levels. The book is an attempt to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and the political resignation to capitalism that is so pervasive. I wanted to help develop a way of thinking outside the logics and values of capitalism. The core of the book is about documenting the challenges and possibilities involved in promoting a care- and social-justice led, as opposed to a capitalist-led, narrative in political and social life. Care relations are unincorporated residuals in Raymond Williams’ terms (1977); they remain outside and, for the most part, in opposition to legitimated cultural and party politics. It is because they have been unaligned and unincorporated that affective care relations matter as potential sites of resistance.

In political terms this is a good time to think differently about politics: affective injustices, or what is known as *the care crisis*, is an everyday concern for hundreds of millions of people throughout the world (Coffey et al. 2020). While recognising the power of capital, it is necessary to move outside capitalocentric thinking if we are to reimagine new sites for realising and mobilising for social justice.

At a theoretical level, I wanted to create a dialogue in the field of equality studies between the work of feminist scholars and other egalitarian theorists, to draw attention to the importance of relational justice and affective equality. And I also wanted to show how relational justice is deeply embedded with relations of re/distributive, recognition-led and representational justice that Fraser (2008) has so clearly documented.

RF: *Care and Capitalism* has a chapter devoted to the care for non-human animals. Could you tell us a bit about your overall concern in this regard?

KL: I love animals, just being with them, looking at them and talking to them. I find them fascinating and beautiful in equal measure. To me they are full of goodness, without malice. I am saddened by the speciesism of humans, and the deep anthropocentrism of much of academic thinking about social and political justice. I know from my own experience of non-human animals (mammals especially) that they suffer and enjoy life in much the same

way as humans do. They experience fear, anxiety, loss, pain, and companionship and affection. Because humans have taken over most of their worlds, we have a duty of care to them. And they deserve to be respected because they have their own purposes and because they suffer just like us.

RF: That takes us back to the farm. You still have that connection

KL: Yes, I love and appreciate the beauty of nature, trees, grass, hedges and flowers. I love seeing things grow and enabling things around me to grow, be they people, flowers, vegetables or other animals and birds.

RF: Which is a good point to bring the conversation to a close. Thank you.

KL: Not at all.

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NOTAS

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