A bird's eye view .....Resistance in Academia.


Pat O’Connor, University of Limerick

This is a paper of a working sociologist and is primarily aimed at a sociological audience. It illustrates the importance of continuing critical analysis and reflection by those working within the structures of Higher Education. In it Pat O’Connor highlights the position of women as academics and as professionals, working in academia in Ireland. She draws on her considerable experiences and observations of three Irish academic organisations in which she has worked over the past 30 years. These observations concentrate on the position of faculty women working within these institutions.

Attention is drawn to the contradictory position in which faculty women find themselves. As academics, they are ‘simultaneously part of a privileged class and subordinate to men within this class’ (90). Even yet only just over a quarter of faculty in Universities are women- in stark contrast to the situation in primary level teaching where the majority of teachers are women. Indeed the proportion of women who are at Professorial level within the Universities is virtually identical to the proportion who were there before the Marriage Bar was lifted in 1973. Pat O’Connor draws our attention to the persistence of gender inequalities within academia. Thus, research indicates that women academics continue to be paid 10% less than their male counterparts, even after accounting for variables such as research output, career breaks, academic discipline and so on.

However, while she refers to her reasons for writing the article, as well as the methodological base on which it rests, this piece primarily focuses on the types of resistance faculty women engage in, within the contradictory positions they occupy. She identifies seven types of resistance to male dominance within academic life, and outlines the limitations and potentials of each of these.

The first type of resistance she outlines is the apparent acceptance of a current social order with its existing norms and practices, while concurrently utilising teaching material and pedagogic styles so as to develop a radical critiques of the social order in students. Thus, the job of change is passed onto a new generation.

Creating and maintaining a separate space for women involves becoming more visible. O’Connor argues that where such separate spaces were perceived as trivial, they provoked little opposition. However, when they constituted a structural challenge, then women’s professional identities were undermined in varying ways, both personally and professionally, through consistent lack of resources and trivialising the subject matter. At the same time however: ‘The sheer existence of Women’s Studies was perceived as a source of resistance within academia’ (92).

Challenging the opposition between work and family ‘constituted a potentially more transformative type of resistance’ (93). She outlines the manner in which family-friendly policies have a limited impact on faculty members because of the assumptions that often go hand in hand with academic work. However, notwithstanding the unchallenging nature of unpaid leave and informal arrangements negotiated with individual heads of departments, she argues that highlighting the ambivalences that surround an equality based on traditional male terms forms a potentially strong source of resistance.

For many women the key issue is tackling the ‘enemy within’ and ‘creating a subjectivity formed around a will to resist’. This type of resistance may be shown by individuals who are committed to their organisations, but also to particular causes (such as feminism) that are, ‘possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organisation’ (94). These individuals, some feminist and some not, brought about change through a series of ‘small win’ situations.
Resistance became more overt when it was reflected in naming non-woman friendly aspects of organisational culture, procedures and practices. This however was sometimes perceived as an inability to accept authority. Those engaged in this kind of activity were often undermined, and described as ‘not being ‘team members’, thus increasing their structural vulnerability. (95)

The final two types of resistance identified were a positive strategic approach and the use of negative power, mainly through whistle blowing and industrial action. The former involved identifying allies in senior positions. These were mostly men at the top of organisations, who because of their seniority, were less threatened than those working in more junior positions. ‘Such support was reinforced by their ‘buying into’ a ‘female’ agenda through participation in gendered projects to raise the profile of their area’ (96). Their support was reinforced by the support of women working in administrative areas. Finally, Pat O’Connor argues that using negative power such as whistle blowing is a potentially strong transformative type of resistance, albeit one that is usually fraught with professional risks. Finally ‘Industrial action is seen as the most potentially transformative type of resistance’ (98) although she recognises that it can be very difficult to get a predominantly male union structure to support initiatives which are likely to predominantly benefit women. Quite simply, the members frequently will not stand for it.

This article is an important and timely one that also highlights the significance of the price that is paid for participating in resistance, in personal as well as career terms. It contributes to the debate on gender equality within higher education in Ireland, from the perspective of a renowned academic and respected researcher on gender relations in Ireland.

Other recent material that focuses on women in higher education in Ireland:

……