

CHAPTER 1

THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE: REMEMBERING LIS LANGE, 1961–2025

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Any human life is a unique combination of bone, flesh and spirit. For Maria Lis Lange (or just Lis as she preferred), the bone—the structural frame for her vital life—was provided by her outstanding career as a professional in higher education administration and policy development. For someone who believed, along with Hannah Arendt, that education ‘is the point at which we decide whether to love the world enough to assume responsibility for it’ (in Lange 2012: 4), it is no surprise that Lange chose to devote her working life to higher education.

Her career commenced at a particularly intense moment for higher education policy in South Africa. The new democracy was determined to use education to provide the high-level technical skills needed (as global policy templates insisted) to be competitive in the global economy while at the same time, specific to its moment and context, addressing the challenges of racial inequality that threatened to hollow out the promise of a hard-won democracy.¹

1 See, for example, Department of Education (1997a), especially the contrast between the democratising statement ‘the task of higher education is to support a healthy public opinion and vibrant public debate by developing a culture of critical discourse in society’ (60) and the

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Lis began her administrative career as liaison officer in the Centre for Science Development (CSD) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 1997 and from 1999 to 2000 worked for the National Research Foundation (NRF), the new organisation which subsumed the funding arm of the HSRC. From there, she moved on to spend a full decade in the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the new agency tasked with both monitoring the performance of the higher education system (through its practice of institutional audits) and providing either solicited or unsolicited advice to the minister of education. In the latter role the CHE sought to create, through its seminars, publications and the promotion of debate, something of an open deliberative space, situated somewhere between government and higher education institutions themselves, that would also accommodate and represent the views of students and academics.

Initially hired as a project manager in 2002, she quickly demonstrated the drive, commitment and capacity to become Director of Monitoring and Evaluation at the CHE (2003–2006) and later, Executive Director of the Higher Education Quality Committee (2006–2010), acting briefly as its Chief Executive Officer (2007–2008). In each of these roles she demonstrated, as Saleem Badat put it in a personal communication with me in October 2025, ‘great intellect, innovative and incisive social thinking, social commitment and a capacity for hard work’.

From these ‘external’ or oversight roles over the system of higher education as a whole Lis moved on to take up different ‘internal’ positions at three universities, first at the University of the Free State (UFS) (2011–2018), after that, at the University of Cape Town (UCT) (2018–2022) and, finally, at Stellenbosch University (SU) (2024–2025). In these posts she was well placed to experience the frictions that occur when, as the saying goes, the ‘rubber hits the road’ and the ideals of necessarily abstract policy encounter the recalcitrance of the real.

emphasis on human capital formation in which the ‘first and foremost’ challenge is ‘human resource development ... the mobilisation of human talent and potential through the training and provision of person-power for the changing labour market’ (54).

Lis assumed her role as Senior Director of Institutional Research and Academic Planning at the UFS following two major upsets: the 2008 Reitz video initiation incident and the 2010 SASCO-inspired disruption of intervarsity games between UFS and North-West University, which led both to the suspension of the SRC and calls for the resignation of Vice-Rector Jonathan Jansen (Soudien 2010a; 2010b). Here, she set out to address the crucial problems in UFS's institutional and academic culture, focusing particularly on the ways in which curriculum could be used (as the 'Soudien Report' put it) as 'a tool of exclusion' (Department of Education 2008: 90).

After failing to be appointed as rector at UFS, Lange moved sideways to become Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at UCT despite vocal resistance from the university's Black caucus, which advocated for the appointment of one of its own members. Despite initial support from UCT's vice-chancellor, Mamokgethi Phakeng, the relationship soon soured. Lis's professionalism, honesty and forthrightness proved too much for someone who brooked no disagreement and who could never accept criticism, however necessary. Lis was pushed by the chair of council to forsake her intention to seek the usual second term as DVC and was forced to resign months before the expiration of her existing contract. The 'Independent Investigation into UCT Governance' would later find that her contract had been 'irregularly, improperly, and unlawfully terminated' (Mpati et al. 2023: 173). She moved on to what proved to be her ultimate position as special advisor to Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Learning and Teaching at SU. Such were the formal structures (the bones) of her life and career.

More important is the fact that these structures provided the context and occasions through which an intellectual self-fashioning took place, one that put flesh on the bones of her very particular career as 'scholar-administrator' (as Badat aptly put it in his personal communication with me in October 2025), someone who used the act of writing not just to report or convey information in administrative terms, but to critically think it through. This was the critical-intellectual

process she referred to when she described taking ‘my intellectual self out of my managerial self’ (Lange 2016b: 177). Commitment to this process meant that her thinking was always agonistic, in the classical senses of the term; athletic thinking, shaped in and strengthened by the various contests it engaged. The main political and intellectual challenge would come from the new public-management criteria which it was her professional task to implement as director of the CHE’s Higher Education Quality Committee.

South Africa rejoined the international higher education community just as a new, globally templated and World Bank-approved audit culture came into being aimed at disciplining universities into accepting the new rallying calls of ‘innovation [and] entrepreneurialism’ (Lange 2023: 62) while ‘backgrounding’ postwar commitments to the massification of higher education articulated around ideas of democracy and the public good. Lis, alongside her colleagues at the CHE, Saleem Badat, Mala Singh and Thierry Luescher, set out to meet the challenge of this restrictive audit culture head on, taking advantage of the fact that South Africa distinguished itself though its explicit constitutional commitments to academic freedom and by openly asserting the need for higher education to be used to foster the critical citizenship that was essential for the flourishing of its new democracy. Her particular goals were to ‘use a monitoring system to help institutions and the higher education system to become more reflective’; to ‘make possible the realisation of a progressive link between evaluation and democracy’; and, ultimately, to enable South Africa to realise a ‘post-managerialist’ model of higher education governance (Lange 2006: 50; Lange & Luescher 2003: 84; CHE 2016: 125). All in all, this implied that policy and monitoring should be used to foster democratic deliberation through the provision of systematic knowledge rather than allowing it to impose market discipline on the university, its academics and its students. A second (and related) contest emerged from her hands-on experience inside the specific institutional cultures of UFS and UCT. Each of these, in their own ways, forced into vivid focus a key word in

South Africa's higher education lexicon, namely the idea and practice of 'transformation'.

Against what threatened to become a very inert notion of 'transformation' as simply referring to racial representation in superficial, quantitative terms that would be easy to comply with for auditing purposes, Lis was characteristically fierce in her determination to insist on the real 'conceptual and political complexity' of the term (Lange 2014: 3). She similarly showed her mettle in refusing to equate the new (post-2015) key word 'decolonisation' with a reductive racial nationalism while at the same time insisting on the need to confront the reality and force of continued white privilege. A related but more complex challenge existed, she insisted, one which was to be found in 'confronting where we went wrong as a civilisation and being ready to educate for a wholly different future' (Lange 2021: 295). Above all, this would mean actively confronting all the concessions universities had made to the now dominant neoliberal culture, notably the fact that universities had come to 'actively participate in every aspect of logarithm capitalism', from submission to the dictates of the global university rankings systems to the drive for the digitalisation of teaching and learning, in the process 'failing in their duty of care for young adults' (Lange 2023: 61).

Against these concessions she argued for a new 'political project for the university', one in which it would become 'an active agent of change ... in looking for solutions and alternative ways to the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other' (Lange 2023: 62). Facing the challenge of what such a fundamental change in our thinking about higher education would involve might well constitute the legacy of her work for the next generation. Her formulation of it takes us to the heart of a third major contest in policy, namely the agon over the place of the humanities in higher education.

Lis had the opportunity to wrestle with this question as a participant in the Academy of Science 'Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, prospects and strategies' (Lange & Singh 2011: 34–57). Here, she brought to bear the two sides

of her training as a historian: the selection and identification of the documents constituting an archive, and a scrupulous form of critical attention to their specific formulations. In this case, the archive in question consisted of both the global and local archives of higher education policy.

As has been noted, policy in South Africa differed from its global counterparts in articulating two somewhat contrary currents of opinion regarding the goals of higher education. These affected the framing of the question of the humanities in different ways, resulting in a different placing of the humanities in policy. The first of these was virtually a replication of the global current: the insistent call for human capital development around the rallying cry of innovation, as championed by the Ministry of Science and Technology. In practice, this translated into a call for a deliberate reduction in the number of students in the humanities (and, to a lesser extent, in the more instrumental social sciences) in the hope that this would automatically translate into an increase in the number of students enrolling in STEM subjects (particularly engineering), accompanied by reduced research support and funding for the humanities.² In terms of policy conceptualisation, the focus on innovation meant downgrading the humanities predominantly to a 'support role as a handmaiden of innovation-framed natural sciences and technology' (S&T) (Lange & Singh 2011: 52). The second current was, as noted earlier, largely absent from global policy. Here, the call to arms (as voiced by the Ministry of Education) was for transformation, not innovation, which meant a 'strong focus on the development of democracy and social justice, [with] the education of critical citizens as a specific role of higher education' (Lange & Singh 2011: 52). In practice, this focus sought to address the massive legacy of racial discrimination in South African higher education. Institutionally, it resulted in the merger policy (intended to at least offset the massive funding differentials

2 The chapter cites an input into the OECD's 2006 review of the National System of Innovation, which asserts that 'the "Engineering gap" will not be solved as long as there are more enrolments in the humanities and commerce disciplines than in Engineering' (Lange & Singh 2011: 48).

between historically Black universities [HBUs] and historically white universities [HWUs] while preserving the elite conditions for research excellence); the reconsideration of curricula (including the promotion of African languages, literatures and cultures; the development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems [IKS] as a kind of compromise-formation with the demands of innovation); and, above all, a commitment to substantial growth in the number of non-white students and academic staff in the system. Thus, against the demands from S&T, it was insisted that enrollment in the humanities should remain at 40% of total enrollments.³

With the clarity of the historian's critical perspective, a striking feature of the whole policy-generating process was the lack of effective consultation with practising academics from the diverse fields of the humanities. Consequently, policy was developed through a process that was more or less closed off from any active deliberation with those most concerned, which consequently resulted in the humanities becoming something like the 'absent centre' of policy discourse: while forming the central *object* of discussion, the humanities were never a full *interlocutor* in it.⁴ As Lis put it with all the historian's cutting politeness, the policy imaginary in South Africa was marked by a 'lack of serious intellectual engagement' (Lange & Singh 2011: 55).

I use the phrase 'policy imaginary' in a more or less technical sense⁵ to refer to a shared understanding in society that justifies and legitimates common practices, with the caveat that this common sense may have no foundation in fact, however widely shared. The term is

3 It is beyond the scope of this tribute to consider the interesting ways in which the transformation agenda was taken up (and later operationalised) in the Charter for the Humanities project, composed in the same period as the Consensus Study. For brief and divergent discussions of the two, see Higgins (2013) and Pillay (2013).

4 The one deliberative initiative, the NRF's 2003 project, Shifting the Boundaries of Knowledge, was severely limited by its a priori commitment to understanding the humanities through 'conceptions of national priorities conceptualised through an innovation and competitiveness prism' (Lange & Singh 2011: 47). See also Higgins (2013: 77–97).

5 I have in mind a variety of theorists, ranging from Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser to Jürgen Habermas and Cornelius Castoriadis. The formulation here draws particularly on Charles Taylor's wording in 'On Social Imaginary' (<https://web.archive.org/web/20041019043656/http://www.nyu.edu/classes/calhoun/Theory/Taylor-on-si.htm>).

particularly useful because it provides a way of understanding the unity of the humanities that policy so conspicuously failed to grasp. For, it is precisely this imaginary—in the larger form of the social imaginary—which forms the primary ‘object’ of investigation in the humanities (just as the external world is the primary object for those working across the natural sciences). The social imaginary is the ensemble of received ideas, narratives and linguistic forms in addition to all the social, artistic and cultural representations which together constitute the common sense, real world of human interaction and agency. Or, as Lis put it, ‘the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other’ (Lange 2023: 62), a formulation which owes much to her favoured thinker Hannah Arendt’s contouring of experience and action in her fundamental study, *The Human Condition* (1958) and her philosophical imperatives ‘to think what we are doing’ and to never cease to combat what she called ‘thoughtlessness’, the ‘complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty’ (Arendt [1958]1998: 5). While such a combat certainly becomes the historian’s task when dealing with a discursive archive such as the one representing the policy imaginary of higher education, it also helps us to understand what the work of the humanities is (or can be) in practice, which is very different from what received ideas in policy insist it is or should be when it comes to pedagogy and knowledge production.

To return to the figure proposed by Lis, the possibility of doing real work in the humanities means above all considering and absolutely rejecting the status of ‘handmaiden’ as proposed or imposed by policy. Historically, the troubling figure of the ‘handmaiden’ first appeared in the Biblical context where it referred to the personal servant (more precisely, slave) of the mistress of a household, later to adopt the more metaphorical significance in which Lis used it to suggest a dedicated stance of appropriate humility and above all submission to the will of another, the divine (in religious discourse), the ‘economy’ or ‘the nation’ of the policy imaginary.⁶

6 Compare, for instance, the move from the literal to figurative meanings of ‘handmaid’ between Genesis 16 verses 1–4 and Luke 1: 38.

To be anybody's handmaiden, then, is to suffer a radical lack of autonomy, whether willed or unwilled. It is the very opposite of the critical consciousness which a training in the humanities seeks to enable, the 'habits of mind' (as the socialist critic Raymond Williams put it), which 'are all set against any and every pronouncement of a singular or assembled authority' (Williams 2001: 276). These habits are developed through such simple scholarly practices as the questioning of sources, reading contextually and comparatively and, above all, acknowledging that critical understanding depends on recognising the imperative to interpret rather than paraphrase what one is reading.⁷ The critical thinking which the humanities as a whole seeks to provoke is not and cannot be that of any handmaiden. If anything, the attitude it promotes is one of defiance to established authority rather than unthinking submission to it. In that sense, the humanities may prove to be (to use a usually pejorative term in a positive way) *insubordinate* in all the ways that prompted Lis's tentative voicing of her suspicion that

the narrowing role of the Humanities within the NSI could also be interpreted as a not unexpected fate for disciplinary areas which claim to be the guardians of critical and emancipatory knowledge within any kind of statist project (Lange & Singh 2011: 55).

What forces drove this essentially insubordinate thinking in Lis? What nurtured the capacity for such combative, agonistic thinking? It was powered, I think, by that inward spirit which anyone who encountered her would instantly recognise in the fierce flash of her gaze. This was a person, the eyes told you, who was honest, direct and deeply motivated by an indomitable political will for social justice. That spirit was no doubt forged by the hammer-blows of growing up during Argentina's 'dirty war', later refined by her formation as an academic. As Rachel

⁷ For extended argument in this regard (also emerging from the work of the Consensus Panel), see Higgins (2013: esp. 174–179).

Stewart, her former partner, put it in a personal communication with me in October 2025, ‘Lis didn’t spring up from South African soil. It was her Argentinian experience which radicalised her.’

Lis was born into a conservative family in Buenos Aires in 1961. Although strict, her father always encouraged her independent intellectual development, something which her mother who had been unable to complete her own philosophy degree also nurtured.⁸ Lis was introduced to (and internalised) the values of learning, truth and community spirit in her Catholic Dominican school. At the age of fifteen (1976), a long-prepared coup d’état (aided and abetted by the USA) deposed Isabel Perón and placed a military junta in power which, under the guise of its innocuous-sounding National Reorganisation Process, soon contributed a new concept and practice to the vocabulary of state terror, *los desaparecidos* (disappearance). This referred to taking people from their homes, offices or the streets without formal arrest and then, without trial or judicial procedure of any kind, detaining, torturing and very often murdering them, secretly disposing of the bodies to leave no evidence behind, most notoriously by dropping them, alive or already dead, from airplanes into the sea. The number of those who were disappeared in this fashion between 1976 and 1983 is estimated at around 30,000. The practice was intended to cow the civilian population, particularly as its targets were most often not the *subversivos* themselves (trade union or political activists) but ordinary and often upper-middle-class citizens, with a special focus on secondary school teachers, university professors and (disproportionately) Jews (Osiel 2001: 122).

Imagine growing up in a social world where anyone in your circle could be *disappeared* from one day to the next. Imagine the anxiety of a teenager at school or in a university system in which teachers and professors were regarded by the government as ‘poisoning young people’ and therefore as potential targets for *disappearance*. For, as Brigadier-General Vilas declared (on 5 August 1976), until ‘we clean

8 Biographical details are drawn mainly from Lange (2016c).

up the university system ... we cannot achieve a victory' (in Aguila 2006: 179). Two responses are possible in such a world: to be cowed or to resist. Lis chose the path of most resistance.

Inspired by the weekly demonstrations in front of the presidential building, the Casa Rosada, by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo—women who were angry with the Church for siding with the brutal regime and who silently protested the disappearance of their children that started in April 1977—Lis joined the Maoist-influenced Revolutionary Communist Party, consequently running a significant risk of being disappeared herself. After studying Classical History at the University of Buenos Aires, where (as she later put it) 'both the books and the professors were banned' (Lange 2016c: 5), she won a scholarship to the safer and more open atmosphere of the Colegio de Mexico where she completed a master's degree in African Studies (1988). From there, intrigued by the similarities and differences between South Africa and Argentina and fascinated by the ways in which South Africa's historiography 'was competing easily with the best English and French social history' (Lange 2016c: 5), she made her decisive move to South Africa by winning an Oppenheimer scholarship for doctoral studies at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits). There, she internalised the 'brutal intellectual discipline' of social history as taught by her 'endlessly patient but also endlessly demanding' supervisor, Charles van Onselen (Lange 2003/2017: Preface). Under his sharp supervision, she honed her academic spirit to that particularly fine intellectual edge created by the demands of a social history in which the necessary discipline of fact is equally informed and complicated by the demands of theory. A revised version of her thesis was published in 2003 under the title *White, Poor and Angry: White Working Class Families in Johannesburg*, eliciting praise as 'modest, painstaking archival work' (Moodie 2004: 454).

From there, Lis went on to become a formidable presence in South African higher education. Perhaps the words of a former UCT colleague, Loretta Feris, in a personal communication with me exemplifies the intellectual substance of Lis's contribution to thinking in higher

education. Recalling all the times she would go to Lis 'to ask for her thoughts or to test an idea', Feris noted above all how she usually left 'not with an answer but with more food for thought ... [S]he pushed me to be reflective and thoughtful'. To be reflective and thoughtful: never quite as simple as it sounds, but nonetheless the critical task for both the humanities and all those who are engaged in South Africa's higher education project.

Lis died from complications arising from a lengthy struggle with an unusual form of rheumatoid arthritis which attacked and finally destroyed the tissue of her lungs. She is deeply mourned by her second marriage partner, Jane Bennett, her former partner Rachel Stewart, their adopted daughter Puleng and two grandchildren, her three remaining brothers in Argentina and her many friends and collaborators in the world of higher education to which she contributed so much.

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