

CHAPTER 6

THINKING WITH LIS LANGE: INTELLECTUAL BUREAUCRATS AND THE UNFINISHED UNIVERSITY

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Thinking with Lis Lange and the paradox of the *Festschrift*

This essay, written as a contribution to the peculiar genre of the *Festschrift*, is not an attempt to memorialise Lis Lange through a comprehensive intellectual biography. One paradox of the *Festschrift*, which is usually published upon the retirement or death of an individual, is that it may attempt to stabilise a life of thinking into a tidy and coherent intellectual portrait. Yet, scholars like Lis are never tidy thinkers. Her ideas were forged in their context, in dialogue, in argument, as provocations, reflections on her practice, in struggles with herself and in conversation with literature and philosophers, so that the process often mattered more than what ultimately appeared in print. My experience of Lis, of working with her, thinking with her, writing with her and fighting with her, reflects this so well.

Just as she was finally afforded *timeless time*, that precious time to think, write, and argue when awareness of time itself is suspended, away from the relentless institutional demands that had marked most of her career, she fell ill and died. For decades before that moment, the thinking that Lis and many of us around her tried to engage in had to be squeezed in between committee meetings, deadlines, crises of governance, endless emails, and the everyday intellectual and bureaucratic labour of reimagining and rebuilding higher education for a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa.

With this tribute I try to engage the genre of the *Festschrift* in a slightly different way by recovering something of the contexts and struggles of thinking with Lis as I experienced them. That means reflecting on a relationship—intellectual, institutional and personal—that unfolded over nearly a quarter of a century, from 2002 to 2025, across policy work, scholarly debates, collaborative research and writing, institutional reforms and the everyday politics of university life.

Between the academic project and the human project: intersecting terrains

Over time, Lis's work and my own came to occupy two closely intersecting domains. Although our worked overlapped on questions of governance, quality, equity, institutional culture, academic freedom, community engagement and the broader public purposes of the university in the context of the post-apartheid transformation and democratisation of South African higher education, we approached these questions from rather different intellectual starting points and perspectives.

In my understanding of Lis, her scholarship was animated by a deep concern with the ethical and political responsibilities of the university as public institution. For example, she asked what knowledges universities should produce in societies characterised by inequality and historical injustice. As such, her core concern was

with the academic project as she understood, named and defined it in the context of her work with Jonathan Jansen at the University of the Free State (UFS). Her intellectual approach in turn resonated strongly with the South African Marxist tradition of critical-historical social analysis rooted in the work of Harold Wolpe as extended into the study of higher education by scholars such as Saleem Badat (e.g. Badat 2010). It also drew on the sociology of knowledge and strands of critical university studies, each contributing their own, if differently articulated, Marxist inflections. Typical of this approach are her publications on the purpose(s) of the university and its transformation in the South African context; on community engagement, curriculum and knowledge transformation; and, following the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall movement, decolonisation. While she initially wrote in the mode of a critical-reflective practice, she gradually found herself in deeper philosophical waters.

To be honest, I was less interested in her later writing about epistemology, curriculum and pedagogy. In terms of the 'UFS Strategic Plan, 2012–2016' (UFS 2012; 2015), if her scholarly preoccupation was with the academic project and its focus on the performance of academics and students and campus academic culture, mine was the human project, with its emphasis on confronting prejudice, fostering a culture of inclusion, and community service and engagement (UFS 2012; 2015). I also told her bluntly that, as far as I was concerned, her cherished distinctions, such as the difference between 'knowledge for transformation' and 'knowledge of transformation' (Lange 2014; see also Chapter 4 in this volume) were little more than the kind of irritating semantics that added little while obfuscating the real issue, which was the need to move away from wish lists and crisis management to knowledge-based management in higher education (Lange & Luescher 2016: 126–130). For her, however, they reflected a serious attempt to grapple with the epistemic dimensions of institutional change.

In my understanding, Lis's intellectual instinct was always to start by assuming a normative position and then to engage the political economy of higher education from that position, starting with its

historicity and working her way forward, past the present and projected into the future. If over time her core discipline became the sociology of knowledge and the political economy of universities, influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, Ronald Barnett and others, my focus was really the politics, policy and polity of higher education, drawing on the work of Philip Altbach, Burton Clark and Saleem Badat. Consequently, my own intellectual instinct has often been to explore the silences between positions and to work my way up from the grounded experiences of the everyday in steady-paced, analytic contemplation. We agreed on the importance of history and historical trajectories, and on the intellectual labour, emotional toll, and political work that would be required for the realisation of radical transformation and substantial democratisation. If her perspective was epic, mine was emic; if her focus was on centring knowledge and curriculum, mine was on the student and staff experience and governance in higher education; while she insisted on giving direction, I focused on facilitating articulation.

Our disagreements also reflected our deeper methodological differences. Lis approached the university using as her primary sources of reference conceptual arguments, theory and policies, and only in the second instance the evidence produced, for example, by the audit reports or the monitoring system she had contributed to devising for the higher education system. This reflected a macro-level perspective on institutional systems, knowledge systems, curriculum and policy discourses. My own work, drawing on ethnography, policy analysis and higher education sociology, sought to understand universities from within their everyday institutional life.

While these very different approaches produced creative tensions and complementarity, they also reflected different intellectual temperaments and would frequently lead to my resignation. I appreciated the occasions when she reflected on and expressed these differences in our perspectives, in the process clarifying her own position on matters I cared deeply about. One example of this is a passage from her epilogue to my first book, *Student Politics in*

Africa: Representation and Activism (2016) and is worth quoting her at length:

There are two points of interrogation, raised in some of the chapters of the book, which in my view are worth pursuing. First is the issue of the theorisation of student activism, politics and governance and the extent to which a grounded theory approach that tends more to the classification of behaviour than to the theorisation of the student and student collective organisations, is actually useful to give account of a phenomenon that has sociological, economic and political dimensions that extend well beyond the university itself. [...]

Second, is the notion of the responsibility that universities have in the development of citizenship. The authors generally argued for the university as a space of citizenship education, yet this space seems to be understood mostly as that created by participation in university governance. More systematic and detailed research is required on the areas of participatory decision-making that matter for citizenship development. More importantly these analyses do not focus on the possibility of curriculum and pedagogy, the actual space of teaching and learning, as being a locus of citizenship education, not as indoctrination but as praxis in understanding, judging and acting. It is possible that given the varied levels of participation of students in university politics, the issue of citizen pedagogy needs to become more central in our way of thinking about student politics (Lange 2016a: 250).

Both comments are, of course, very astute and accurately reflect how and where our approaches did not intersect at the time. That said, two years later and despite our differences, my appreciation of Lis's intellectual astuteness inspired me to design a very different project

to study student politics (Luescher et al. 2022) and to support others who were more interested in how students are or are not involved in curriculum change (Mugume 2025). Despite our differences, we shared many fundamental assumptions and commitments—most of all, that the university as an institution is worth fighting for. It is an object of critique, certainly, but also an indispensable vehicle for social transformation.

Scholarship and policy: our CHE years

As I recall, my first encounter with Lis was in 2002 when I joined the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as its first full-time researcher. The CHE offices in Pretoria, then located next to the Museum of Science and Technology—complete with an astronaut and a space rocket in its front yard—were buzzing with the intellectual and political excitement of reconfiguring and transforming the national higher education system. South Africa was in the midst of a most extraordinary moment and the CHE had been given the daunting task of creating from scratch new systems of quality assurance and accreditation and providing expert advice on proposals not only on how to reconfigure the apartheid map of thirty-six universities into one consisting of twenty-two, but also on the processes that would be needed to govern them.

I entered this buzzing environment, which was directed by the likes of Mala Singh, Sheilah Tyeko, John Carneson, Prem Naidoo and Saleem Badat, as a blue-eyed researcher who had been hired by Badat over a lunch at the Bihari in Cape Town. When I arrived in Pretoria two months later, I was informed that I would be working under the supervision of the CHE's project manager, Dr Lis Lange. My office was right next to hers and through the thin drywalls I could often hear her in one of her productive writing moments. (She would swear to scare the devil away as she typed). Naturally, I was also quite scared of her. From the very first day we started to work on conceptualising a new national system for monitoring and evaluating the transformation

of South Africa's higher education system (CHE 2004b). It was in the drawn-out process of developing this that we first gained respect for each other's strengths. She appreciated my ability to find and work with the complex arguments that were being presented in scholarly literature, policy documents and empirical data. I, in turn, admired her capacity to move effortlessly between the big picture and the minutiae, her conceptual clarity and her ability to think critically and ask the difficult intellectual and political questions, something which is powerfully illustrated in the following passage from the monitoring and evaluation draft framework:

The ways in which evaluations have been carried out and utilised in the last two decades bring up images of Thatcherite control, budget cuttings in the name of efficiency, and a definition of accountability of somewhat Orwellian proportions. Input, output and performance indicators have become straightjackets for reflective policy or intellectual critique, and often one has the sense that if something cannot be counted, it cannot be told either. The technocratic response to this problem echoes the cliché that only what is measured is managed (Lange & Luescher 2003: 5).

Although this brief side-step away from policy discourse—intended to show our critical awareness that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems could indeed conjure up Orwellian notions of surveillance and Thatcherite control—was unfortunately removed from the final version of the discussion document and our first joint scholarly publication (Lange & Luescher 2003), it nonetheless shows how, knee-deep in thinking through higher education transformation policy, Lis remained self-aware, self-critical and connected to world literature and history.

During and after our work on the M&E framework we worked together on many of the other projects that demanded input from the CHE such as the review of MBA provision in South Africa (CHE

2004a) and perhaps most stimulating for me, collecting scholarly reflections on the state of higher education in South Africa, in the course of which I was first introduced to scholars like Jonathan Jansen, John Higgins and Laura Czerniewicz (CHE 2007). After two and a half years of intense collaboration in Pretoria, our touchpoints shrunk fast as I returned to Cape Town to dedicate myself to my PhD and only continued working with Lis and the CHE in a part-time, remote capacity. When I was selected in 2008 to rejoin her full time as research manager of the CHE, she was understandably furious when I had to turn her down at the last minute to join the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where I worked with Nico Cloete, another maverick higher-education-policy scholar of the time. The CHE and UFS would bring us back together again five years later.

Reflecting on the CHE years through a governance lens

If the early 2000s at the CHE constituted what might be called a system-building phase in South African higher education, the 2010s became for many of the scholars, policymakers and administrators of that phase a time of moving on and reflecting on the previous decade's work. A generational change was underway, with Prem Naidoo having passed away, first Saleem Badat and then Mala Singh moving back to universities, and Lis at first holding the fort at the CHE before she, too, moved on to join Jonathan Jansen at the UFS.

The CHE, now under the leadership of Narend Baijnath, called for a reviewing of the state of South African higher education during a time that was, in his words, 'more volatile than ever two decades into democracy' (CHE 2016: 10). Because I had worked at the CHE before, specifically in collaboration with Martin Hall on two major research reports on university governance (Hall et al. 2002; 2004) and had completed a PhD on university governance and student participation in 2009 while also working with a crop of master's students at UWC on a range of topics related to governance, transformation and

democratisation in higher education, I was asked by the CHE's Denyse Webbstock to contribute to the governance theme of that review. I agreed and immediately asked Lis to partner with me on the task.

For Lis, more so than for me, the invitation to research and write the chapter on governance in the CHE's twenty-year review provided an opportunity to critically reflect on her time at the CHE. On the one hand, she was able to confide in me her disappointment with the way things had unfolded at the CHE and how an opportunity presented by Badat's departure had been missed, resulting in the appointment of a short-lived new CEO and key intellectual projects such as the council's work on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and government regulation as well as policy initiatives and other developments going astray. At the same time, she was excited to be at the UFS and, for the first time in her professional life, to be a member of a university executive, which, for her, meant being in a position to put everything she knew universities should be doing as far as the academic project was concerned, into institutional action. At the UFS, she was part of the small inner circle of critical intellectuals including André Keet and Melanie Walker who supported Jonathan Jansen, the charismatic vice-chancellor and rector who was deeply committed to the UFS transformation project. On the other hand, she also used the opportunity of co-authoring the chapter to reiterate her critical thinking about the kind of system-building she had been so closely involved in. In the process of writing, we pondered for a long time how to respond to Nico Cloete who, in his usual impertinent way, used to say that 'Saleem and the guys at the CHE' had created a wet blanket that suffocated real academic work (referring to the system of quality assurance, auditing and monitoring, and the bloated university administrations that had been created and put into place). Had the new institutional arrangements, national policies and systems devised by the CHE had any positive transformative impact? Lis reflected on this as follows:

South Africa's policy makers and implementers as well as universities struggled in many cases with the tensions and

contradictions between their political convictions and the neoliberal whiff of their choice of policies and instruments. The tension of using ‘conservative tools’ to achieve progressive ends was intensely debated on the occasion of the celebrations of the first decade of democracy. Yet, this does not mean that it was totally inconceivable to develop entirely new local alternatives to the global offering. But the reality is that neither universities nor the government did so (Lange & Luescher 2016: 122).

In a later publication I reformulated this response much less generously (and more in keeping with the debates we had had) to say that ‘the expectation by some policymakers that it would be possible to use “conservative tools to achieve progressive ends” for transforming the post-apartheid higher education sector thus proved to be hopelessly naïve’ (Luescher et al. 2021: 107). The process of working together on the chapter provided us with a way to find each other intellectually in a new space and with new respect, with me working through twenty years of policy and Lis taking on the big-picture work and combining it with all her knowledge and the relevant data from more than a decade at the CHE. Eventually, when in 2014 the opportunity presented itself to work with her again, I accepted and joined her again in the buzzing space the UFS had become.

Regenerating a university in ashes: an intellectual bureaucrat at the UFS

Intellectual friendships are rarely built on agreement. If anything, disagreement was one of the defining features of my relationship with Lis. One area of recurring tension was our different approaches to student politics and student affairs. Lis often regarded my research on student politics and activism as a somewhat immature scholarly preoccupation, something one had to eventually grow out of. The extension and application of that work into student affairs was, in one

of her more memorable formulations, ‘the work of plumbers rather than intellectuals’. But, of course, as far as the study of student politics was concerned, history would have the last laugh. #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall erupted and student politics suddenly became a topic that no researcher in higher education, including Lis, could ignore (Lange 2019a; Lange 2019b; Lange et al. 2021; Lange 2025).

By the time I joined her at the UFS she was Acting Vice-Chancellor: Academic Affairs and the university was recovering from the tragedy of the Reitz incident. As at the CHE, it was an extraordinary moment to arrive at a university that had been de-legitimised at all levels, from an audit report evidencing a practice of apartheid-style racial and linguistic segregation (CHE 2008a) to a ministerial report that raised the question

how an institution of higher education, which is supposed to be about broadening young people’s minds and preparing them for engaging with social and intellectual differences in people, could produce this level of narrow-minded mean-spiritedness (Department of Education 2008: 23).

She immediately tasked me with the following responsibilities: to build institutional research capacity, to review the quality of student affairs, and to assist with changing the language policy.

Lis was never a pure academic for any extended period. On occasion she called herself a higher education manager *and* researcher in higher education (Lange 2016c). Yet, at the UFS I came to realise that she was neither a manager nor a researcher but rather an intellectual-bureaucrat. The ‘intellectual bureaucrat’ is a peculiar invention of and figure in the modern university and refers to someone who works inside the bureaucratic machinery of the institution while refusing to surrender the critical distance of the intellectual. Much like Weber’s official, this figure inhabits the discipline and responsibilities of bureaucratic office while at the same time, like Gramsci’s organic intellectual, critically reflecting on the historical and political forces that

shaped the very institutions they serve. Accordingly, Lis's thinking did not emerge from outside the structures of higher education but arose from within the very work of building, transforming and governing them, constantly moving between meaning and machinery. Lis was the very embodiment of this figure. As an intellectual bureaucrat of the highest order she preferred to work close to the top of the institutional hierarchy, exercising office with legal-rational integrity, while longing to step outside the machinery in order to analyse its historical logic and political economy, to reflect on the socio-political consequences of her work and to theorise the meanings of her work and the task ahead.

Together, we lived through #FeesMustFall at the UFS and the traumatic Shimla Park incident and its aftermath (Luescher et al. 2017; Luescher et al. 2022). In my time at the UFS, this was the defining moment, and it planted the seeds for much of my later work at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). For Lis too, the UFS was an extremely generative place to work and write at. She was able to put her knowledge of national policy, systems, structures and processes into institutional practice and still found time to reflect deeply on many of the matters she had been involved in over the years. She loved it in Bloemfontein and loved the academic project she was invested in. And she was deeply disappointed when, following Jansen's departure, she was not given the opportunity to lead the institution forward (Luescher 2016).

Snakes on the mountain trail: UCT and its aftermath

If, for many students, academics and managers coming to the University of Cape Town (UCT) would seem like a dream come true, for Lis it was not even a second choice. Her first choice, as she very clearly told me, had been to stay in Bloemfontein and lead the UFS. When this did not materialise, she chose instead to be close to her family who happened to live in Cape Town. Of course, Lis had everything and more that UCT needed from a deputy vice-chancellor of teaching and

learning. What she was not prepared for was the toxicity she would encounter there.

It began with her appointment, when she unexpectedly found herself cast a respondent in a trial that, had it succeeded, would have made her as much a victim as those who had brought the challenge. For, if the university had in any way bungled or mismanaged her appointment process, then not only the other applicants but she herself would have been wronged. The trauma that followed has been well documented in the Mpati Report, the university's inquiry into executive relationships and resignations during the narcissistic reign of UCT's disgraced tenth vice-chancellor and the deceitful chair of council at the time (Mpati et al. 2023). Lis, exonerated by the report, nonetheless left UCT in April 2022 before the end of her first term and three years before I rejoined my alma mater. For once, she had already left by the time I arrived at an institution.

As she told me, despite the sour start she had come to like it at UCT. She would have loved to continue in her role but had left as 'malign interests in wanting to push Lange out converged' (Mpati et al. 2023: 99). In several meetings I attended over the year preceding the writing of this tribute, I heard of initiatives she had started, her energy and elan, and how her sharp intellect and deep understanding of higher education policy, systems, structures and processes had been appreciated by some. However tragic the moment, for a person of Lis's calibre it was not going to be difficult to find a place to continue her work at; in the end, it was her health that would take its toll on her.

Conclusion: the unfinished university

Those who worked closely with Lis will recall not only her formidable analytical clarity and commitment to transformation, but also the integrity and courage (and colourful language) with which she spoke her mind. When I refer to her as an 'intellectual bureaucrat' it is with the highest appreciation, as someone who develops, transforms, and manages institutions while never ceasing to think critically about

them. Although inhabiting the complex combination of intellectual *and* bureaucrat was never easy, Lis lived and thrived in the tension between critique and complicity, between the demands of leadership and the responsibilities of intellectual reflection.

As much as we differed, Lis and I did not need to have ongoing conversations about what the transformed university should ultimately look like. On this, our views were compatible and complementary, grounded in the idea of the university as institution in service of society; an institution in the service of transformation and substantive democratisation. I shared her conviction and passionate belief that the unfinished university (and all of them are) in all its contradictions was an institution worth fighting over and for. Indeed, I believe that what she meant was that the university, particularly in societies marked by deep inequality such as South Africa, Argentina and Mexico, is always unfinished; that it is an institution that needs to be constantly remade through struggle, argument and imagination. Like a true student, the university is forever in the process of becoming.

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