

CHAPTER 7

THE UNIVERSITY IN CRISIS TIMES: A NOTE OR TWO ON LIS LANGE'S INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Introduction

This tribute reflects on Lis's contributions to the post-apartheid higher education system based on my interactions with her when we both served on the council of Nelson Mandela University. Her presence mattered to me because in her intellectual approach to university governance she combined structural and sociological approaches. Lis belonged to the first generation of post-apartheid higher-education-sector administrators who were tasked with transforming the system to serve the needs of a democratic society through institutions such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE). Like many of her peers, Lis's roots were in the leftist intellectual communities that, in South Africa, emerged from the broader anti-apartheid movement.

The cohort of administrators Lis belong to was tasked with the historic role of transforming the apartheid higher education systems in line with the new democratic society. We can call them a generation of 'intellectual bureaucrats'. I would argue that the character of the intellectual bureaucrat was produced by the very nature of the

transition from the anti-apartheid struggle itself. The networks of 'young' activists, scholars and organisers that until then had been conscientised and organised in various structures or who had formed part of the broader diasporas of experiences connected to the South African situation were called upon and deployed to those institutions that needed to change. Little has been written about this first cohort of intellectual bureaucrats in the South African public service system at large even though it was a critical period for the creation of post-apartheid systems.

On reflection, the period of transition from 1994 into the early 2000s was a period of managing change within the constraints placed on the new democratic state by inherited fiscal, structural and other governmental deficits. The new cohort of bureaucrats found itself in the unenviable position of having to engineer constitutionalism and to create transparency and accountability in public institutions that, although relatively functional, were under financial pressure and steeped in the logic of apartheid. As critical intellectuals they recognised that building credible democratic institutions would require Weberian standardisation and bureaucratisation in order to protect the integrity of the qualifications system going forward. As a result, they adopted the language and frameworks of policy, rules and process, which inevitably introduced rigidity in the systems. At the same time, however, they also produced far-reaching transformative policies that over three decades has produced a system that Verwoerd would not have recognised given its demographics, mandate, and the content of its scholarly interests.

These intellectual bureaucrats therefore left a somewhat contradictory imprint on higher education. On the one hand they made a significant contribution to the democratisation of higher education. On the other hand, they introduced forms of bureaucratisation and varying degrees of corporatisation into the higher education system that continue to shape the present governance culture. They empowered university executives over the professoriate and in turn, the power of councils over university executives. These power

configurations have emerged as sites of conflict and, quite frankly, serious professional stress within universities. Procedural stringency has become a permanent substitute for conflict resolution as universities struggle to meaningfully translate the egalitarian ethos of the anti-apartheid struggle into higher education systems. In my engagements with Lis, I often sensed that she was dismayed by the unchecked bureaucratisation of the system. What produced some kind of professional affinity between us on the NMU council was that both of us were acutely aware of the extent to which the overarching global forces of capitalism and neoliberalism had become driving forces of the contemporary university, corroding the very intellectual fibre of the institution. What mattered to both of us were the continuation of the intellectual traditions of South Africa's once radical political culture and the possibility of mobilising that legacy in defence of the critical intellectualism of the university and as a form of pushback against the anti-intellectualism-by-bureaucratisation that had come to define our understanding of governance in post-apartheid higher education.

Meeting Lis Lange

I met Lis for the first time when she joined the Nelson Mandela University council where I was serving as representative of the academic staff. While I knew of her by reputation, I had never met her personally. When she arrived at her first council meeting, I immediately recognised her and felt a sense of relief as I anticipated that her left-wing politics might offer a credible counter discourse to the business-sector-oriented frameworks for corporate governance such as the 'King IV' which had been universally adopted as governance discourse and universal standard for all South African institutions.

In 1993 and with progressive intentions, Nelson Mandela asked retired Judge Mervyn King to produce a new set of principles for corporate governance that would align with the new, democratic South Africa (Judin 2020: 167–172). Since then, a series of 'King reports' have become deeply entrenched across the public sector as the discursive

guiding standard for the ethics of governance. Given the depth and critical nature of South Africa's political traditions, it is peculiar that the King principles, which were intended to reform apartheid-based corporate boards, so quickly became the guiding light for ethical conduct across other sectors. Normative ethics and the sagacity of great philosophical and humanistic traditions were sidelined. Instead of connecting with the profundity of traditions such as the dictum of the Hippocratic Oath, 'first do no harm', codes of governance and their associated ethics were superseded by abstract notions of 'accountability', 'transparency', 'oversight' and 'risk management'.

My experience across the higher education system had left me concerned by how institutions tasked with advancing scientific inquiry, intellectual rigour and the courage to explore ideas had subordinated their ethics and governance practices entirely to the corporatism and sterility of bureaucratised ethics. Little room was left to explore the extent to which professional domains could derive their principles of governance from the heartbeats of their own social mandates. The result was a foreclosure of thought when it came to what governance in a post-apartheid university system could look like. Given the regularity with which crises seem to beset South African university councils, it is clear that something is lacking in our very conception of university governance. Readings (1996: 3) has described the shift in the accountability practices of the contemporary university as one that posits

the administrator rather than the professor as the central figure of the University and figures the University's tasks in terms of a generalised logic of 'accountability' in which the University must pursue 'excellence' in all aspects of its functioning. The current crisis of the University in the West proceeds from a fundamental shift in its social role and internal systems, one which means that the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured.

The work of academics is now measured no differently than that of individuals at a production line, encoded and decoded in the audit culture of corporations and its language of ‘excellence’, ‘metrics’, ‘strategies’ and ‘targets’.

To me, Lis’s appointment to the NMU council signalled an opportunity to challenge this corporate-culture creep that had been sucking the life out of universities. Her presence deepened the intellectual gravitas of the council and affirmed me in my own thinking and contributions. Over time she came to represent the legitimacy of the voice of the critical intellectual who refuses to cede ground to the de-intellectualisation of governance discourse in the university. In what follows I reflect on some of her work that she shared with me.¹

Governance as defence of the academic project

To her work in council, Lis brought frankness of language, theoretical insight and moral observance. We shared the principle that university governance was in itself an intellectual endeavour and not something that could or should be reduced to compliance.

With her extensive experience in executive management and in higher education policy, Lis was able to engage the challenges faced by the university and the sector at large and to produce insights that were both practical and theoretically informed.

On a personal level, I often sensed in her language and tone a kind of urgency; recognition of the fact that we cannot imagine a transformed university in South Africa as long as we do not adequately situate its local crises within the multiple crises currently facing humanity. I found resonance with the way she grappled with the problems of the university and the way these problems were amplified by the interaction of their local context with powerful historical and global structural forces.

1 For the purposes of this tribute I am citing from the versions of papers Lis shared with me personally. Sharing with a colleague one’s incomplete or still evolving thoughts is in itself a very important act of scholarly engagement.

For those of us who are concerned with how the university can operate justly given the complexity of our times, governance begins with the university continuously interrogating the purpose of its existence and what sets it apart from other institutions. From such ongoing deep reflection flow the technical, bureaucratic and operational *raison d'être* of councils who in turn exist to hold universities accountable. Accountability of the executive, sustainability of operations, engagement with internal and external interest groups and stakeholders, strategic planning, auditing of systems, oversight over finance—all these functions are ultimately geared to defending the university's capacity to execute its mandate to address the big questions. The outcomes of governance, including clean audits, must be viewed as processes in service of the university's capacity to further knowledge and to enable the institution to do the unpredictable work of searching for answers to the big questions. Such an approach would position bureaucracy in the service of higher ideals and refuse to succumb to the tendency for bureaucracy to hijack the intellectual life of the university. The complexity of the university's location in the Global South, the persistent economic inequality, our struggles against the marginalisation of our knowledges, and our political and social turbulences demand a multiplicity of intelligences in our organisational approaches to the university and its role in our societies.

On council, it was therefore not surprising that on many occasions Lis and I found ourselves on the same side of issues, both big and small. Even where we did not share the same view or interest in subjects, what mattered to me was her overarching ideological commitment to the university as fundamentally a community of scholars whose primary role was to engage ideas in the service of justice. In this way she insisted on connecting broader theoretical and scholarly concerns with the practicalities of governance. At stake is the question of the university *as* the question of humanity itself. This is why Lis and I preferred directness over the generic language so often used in meetings. Clarity of expression, of one's intention and what one

stands for, even when it is at odds with current opinion, unburdens the mind and heart of those who feel compelled to act in the name of justice. The sharpness with which Lis took on matters in council matched my own.

Beyond council, she and I also engaged on the much broader question of transformation. My own interest had been theorising the ascendancy of the Black professional classes and our entrenchment in South African universities. My concern has been with the rising authoritarianism, corporatisation and the narrowing of transformation to demographic deracialisation rather than with the broader question of Black social emancipation. The question for me has been why the growing class of Black managers in the university system has consistently demonstrated a preference and affinity for corporatisation over democratic practices. When did corporatisation stop being used as an aid to transformation, and when did it become a modality for entrenching professional interests? In a relatively liberal democratic environment, why does the university's organisational culture so often tend to mimic state administration, specifically its cultures of deference to authority, rather than advancing and defending the idea of the university as a critical space for those wishing to research and learn? This slide of the Black managerial class towards corporate authoritarianism and intellectual conservatism at a time when the sector is increasingly financially precarious does not bode well for a project of substantive transformation.

While the generation of intellectual bureaucrats Lis belonged to somewhat naively or pragmatically advanced bureaucratism as a way of producing consistency in a new democratic system, this new class of manager-professionals often wields the inherited bureaucratic tools in ways that restrict democratisation of the post-apartheid university. What has been giving me sleepless nights is evidence that increasingly suggests the merging of state-style and corporate-style bureaucratic models as the final despotic form of the so-called 'transformed' university in post-apartheid South Africa. The commodification of education has been combining with a tendency for performance-based

incentives to become key drivers in shaping the type of new manager being produced in and by the system. I shared with Lis my views on what appeared to me as the conservative trajectory of the system and made it plain to her that I was critical of the way in which demographic transformation seemed to be accompanied by a muting of meaningful, academic debate. For me, Black emancipation in higher education is about the project of freedom and not the creation of professional careers as an end in itself. I suspect that, for personal reasons, a critical engagement with Black management was something she was cautious to enter into with me and I noted that hesitation. The clashes among senior management at the University of Cape Town (UCT) during her term there as Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning spoke to the difficulty of any engagement with the specific dynamics with which Black leadership is emerging and taking power in the system. Perhaps questions regarding the textures of institutional and intellectual cultures under Black management are best left to a new generation of Black academics whose careers are being shaped entirely by and experienced under corporate managerialism.

Lis also engaged the contradictions facing universities in post-colonial Africa (see Lange n.d. b). In the first instance, the contemporary African university only provides a pathway for a small economic and professional elite to join the ranks of the global middle classes while most people on the continent are excluded from universities through no fault of their own. Second, African universities play a marginal role in the global economy and processes of knowledge production (Lange n.d.b). The mission of the postcolonial university in Africa has never been satisfactory resolved. Should these institutions engage in a 'universal' project or one defined by local needs?

On the one hand, the university steps out of itself as ivory tower or as part of a colonial project to respond to the local needs of society. On the other hand, this very inclination is often built on a lack of political independence, on the assumption (and practice) that the role of the university is to support the

state project and not to critique policy decision making or implementation that prejudices the broader community. This university weakens from the beginning its capacity to be a critical actor in social development (Lange n.d.b).

These questions have been tricky to properly address given the financial and other challenges facing African universities in the context of structural adjustment and political authoritarianism (Lange n.d.b). Mkandawire (1995: 79) has referred to the postcolonial African university's loss of a sense of purpose following independence as an identity crisis:

Having achieved their mission—‘meeting the high-level manpower needs of the nation’ (read ‘public administration’)—African universities lost their original *raison d’être* in the eyes of the state and sometimes the public. Compounding matters about the ambiguity of their academic status was the swarm of experts that came along in the wake of the structural adjustment programme and the resumption by donors of control over key economic functions of the nation and the consultancy missions.

The contemporary university and the global polycrisis

My concerns about corporatisation and transformation have always turned on the bigger question of capitalism's ability to reconfigure the very logic of life. Lis's thinking similarly revolved around a critique of capitalism as she grappled with the nature of the university in the context of contemporary technological complexity, neoliberalism and the growing awareness of a planetary crisis. This planetary approach resonated with me because of the influence of Julian Cobbing's ‘big history’ critique of industrial society which he popularised during his time at Rhodes University in the early 2000s. Cobbing compels us to

reckon with the brutal reality that humanity has painted itself into a corner with an unsustainable growth-oriented economic system. As he puts it, '*Homo sapiens*, humans—us, our species are in trouble ... our economic system is unsustainable' (Cobbing 2023: 9). Lis, too, has argued along these lines:

[W]e have reached a limit as civilisation: individually, collectively, ecologically and in terms of knowledge (noetically) defining our ability to interpret and understand the world. In the face of this analysis, rethinking what the university as institution does, its purpose and organisation, becomes urgent and unavoidable (Lange n.d.a).

Her view was that the status quo could not be sustained. 'Our epoch, capitalism as a social system, is self-destroying and taking in its wake people and the planet; the urgency is too great; and the risk of not reacting too high' (Lange n.d.a). For her, the most pressing matter was how to develop theory for understanding the university and its obvious limits and shortcomings in the present: 'We need a more capacious critique of our times if the aim is to effect change in the university and in the society it inhabits' (Lange n.d.a).

Upon becoming a professional academic it was soon evident to me that the contemporary university was ideologically indifferent: it cares less about the substance and political content of ideas than about the way in which the scholar can be positioned in relation to the university's brand and in service of the institution's public profile and image. As long as the university and its management are not directly criticised, the contemporary university can reward the 'anti-capitalist professor' while continuing to operate comfortably within the existing economy as itself an active agent in the replication of the capitalist system. Readings (1996: 163) refers to this as the

futility of the radicalism that calls for a university that will produce more radical kinds of knowledge, more radical

students, more of anything ... The ideological content of the knowledges produced in the University is increasingly indifferent to its functioning as a bureaucratic enterprise; the only proviso is that such radical knowledges fit into the cycle of production, exchange, and Consumption.

This means that in the contemporary university, the ideological environmentalist and anti-environmentalist can happily coexist, not in the service of pursuing the truth, but because both have markets in which the university can position its work and itself as a brand.

Lis (Lange n.d.a) poses several questions to encourage us to think about how the university might begin to untangle itself from these traps:

- ‘What would it take for the top 1,000 ranked universities to step out, for example, of regulatory rankings systems? What difference would this make to universities in developed and developing economies from a regulatory (credential) and financial perspective? How would the research focus, publication patterns, regime of academics’ appointments, and student selection change if these universities step out of the market?’
- ‘What would be the organisational, curricular and financial implications of rethinking teaching and learning and research at the university around the university’s commitment to help develop an alternative to the capitalist system?’
- ‘What kind of research should the university do, not only to help disinhibit knowledge about technology, but also to use it to create a world that moves exactly in the opposite direction and rhythm to the one we inhabit now? What kind of self-reflection should the older generations embark upon and how, to take responsibility for the narcissistic epidemic; the despair and mental illness which are the extreme negative manifestation, but not the only one, of a society where, as Stiegler said, there are no collective retentions tethering the new generation to its ancestors, nor collective pretensions affirming the possibility of futures together?’

Debates about rankings, incentives and the commodification of knowledge have become stagnant. Lis also asked if the university as a form ought not be abandoned given the destructiveness of the economic system that it feeds on and depends on:

My argument is that thinking through the meaning of our times is a precondition for rethinking the university or abolishing it as a privileged institution for education and knowledge production (Lange n.d.a).

Paradoxically, those who defend the social ideals of the university may very well be ready to see it go. I shared Lis's underlying skepticism about the university as an emancipatory institution in Africa. If the ideal is knowledge, invention and the scientific exploration necessary to provide what Africa requires, which is to reignite a sense of being able to produce relevant knowledge under existing conditions, then the university seems to be little more than a burdensome institution.

From the perspective of university abolitionism, the questions posed by Lis about rankings, curricula, publications et cetera become moot. Instead, we should deconstruct the mandates we have given the university and ask ourselves if they can be socialised or decentralised into more accessible forms. By 'socialised' I mean, can certain knowledges be acquired in society itself? And where the university does offer specialised infrastructure and expertise, can we imagine new institutions built from scratch on the premise of a just meritocracy that selects for true potential rather than ones that are limited to those who can afford the most privileged education or who fit the class profile preferred by the institution? Do we really need undergraduate degrees that take four years, or could we pare down programmes to their core skills and train students faster? Arguably, the institution of the university can be abolished without the abolition of its ideals or its actual purposes in society.

The question of whether the university should be abolished,

especially in Africa, is one that cannot be ignored. How exactly do African societies benefit from the university as an institution? Under corporate, neoliberal conditions, South African universities are increasingly besieged by competitive dynamics and conflicts between various interests. Some of these interests, e.g. those represented by the old white professoriate, use the new corporatism to defend their old networks of accumulation and to seek new avenues of extraction, while the new Black managerial class and professoriate use newly acquired levers of power to secure the continuation of their own careers in a system of precarious fixed-term contracts for executives. Throw in the role of student political formations, fee-burdened parents who see themselves as little more than paying clients, trade unions who both protect increasingly muted academics and defend reactionary agendas, and the growing threat of local business networks that see the university as no more than a site of lucrative business opportunity combined with the weight of the global planetary crisis, and one wonders if the concept of the university is at all tenable in postcolonial Africa (Mkhize 2018).

Lis (Lange n.d.a) noted that instead of resolving social inequality, the university has contributed to deepening it:

There is no available hard evidence that any existing higher education system in the world is helping undo inequality or having a real impact on the decision-making about climate change locally or globally, to mention only two matters. On the contrary, not only inequality is increasing across all regions of the global economy and we have not made a dent on reducing emissions, but many universities are themselves contributing to inequality in terms of, for example, their own conditions of employment, and their lack of intellectual independence or ineffectiveness in terms of climate change policy recommendations, even if the actual focus of the research is on the side of the angels.

In council meetings, I would sometimes sense something like nervous apprehension from Lis when the extent of the issues and contradictions facing universities were laid bare. The version of her talk titled 'Re-engaging governance praxis at African universities' that she shared with me, ends with 'Conclusion?'.

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