CHAPTER 9

# FOUNDING A SPACE OF EPISTEMIC FREEDOM

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> It is the responsibility of institutions, and especially of academics and students, to sustain the moment by making knowledge the permanent object of collective reflection if South African universities are to address the unrealised aspects of institutional transformation.
>
> [T]he very notion of transformation in South Africa entails keeping on asking about the subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation in each area of society where it is proclaimed or sought.
>
> What I am proposing here is to explore not the limits of politics, but on the contrary, its possibilities.
>
> — Lis Lange

## Introduction

Although Lis Lange is primarily known for her contributions to the field of higher education, her intellectual habits and published work never failed to betray her first discipline, History. I first met her on

the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2011 on one of those occasions when she could momentarily set aside her administrative role in order to pursue her scholarly interests. If I recall correctly, she presented a talk on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) and the question it poses concerning the relationship between thinking and ethical responsibility, a question I would later come to understand as central to Lis's identity as a scholar. Shortly afterwards I approached her with the request to supervise my PhD. A brief teaching stint in the Department of Philosophy at the UFS had awakened my interest in the institutional and political dimension of philosophy as an academic discipline. With a growing sense of unease, I wondered: what ethical thinking or notion of responsibility informed the praxis of teaching philosophy at South African universities? Lis was intrigued by the possibility of exploring the question but quickly made another suggestion. Instead of an abstract, purely theoretical project, why not consider the question in relation to a particular institution's history? Why not investigate the intellectual history of a particular department of philosophy? That was Lis the historian, and although I was certainly no historian, she made a compelling argument. If you want to investigate the relationship between philosophy and politics, why not ground the question in a concrete historical context? For reasons that need not detain me here, I only finished the PhD much later and under a different supervisor. I did however follow through on her suggestion and focused on the intellectual history of the Department of Philosophy at the UFS. This not only opened up the discipline of philosophy to me in new and unexpected ways but also forced me to situate my discipline within the history and politics of South Africa in a way that I had resisted in the past. I will forever be thankful to Lis for this. Her emphasis on the historical dimension of a question that intrigued me will remain my most enduring impression of her approach to any subject.

I believe it was also an essential part of her pedagogy, and while it was undoubtedly a result of her abiding love of Marxism, it also related to her sustained interest in the work of Arendt. In delivering the

Daantjie Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Memorial Lecture at Rhodes in 2016, she drew on Arendt's understanding of action and politics to broaden the conception of academic freedom (Lange 2016b), while in another publication she explored Arendt's thought on education to develop the notion of a 'political pedagogy' (Lange 2012). She often spoke about her desire to write a book about Arendt and Marx's respective conceptions of alienation. In honour of her intellectual passions, I want to use this opportunity to engage another theme from Arendt which also speaks to the question of politics, education and transformation, namely revolution and the problem of the founding.

I decided on this theme in response to Jansen and Goliath's contribution to this volume (Chapter 5) in which they helpfully identify four areas of critique that feature prominently in Lis's writing on the university and academic values: (a) the depoliticisation of concepts; (b) the conversion of concepts into 'bureaucratic knowledge'; (c) top-down authority structures that exclude campus citizens from participating in the shaping of institutional knowledge; and (d) the reduction of our understanding of academic freedom to 'the absence of outside interference'. These criticisms share a concern with the distortion that occurs in the confrontation between political action and institutionalisation; more specifically, in each case there is an intimation of the way in which the radical moment of questioning, deliberation and decision-making, that is, of action, is forestalled, betrayed, prohibited or transfigured into its opposite. In other words, the moment of politicisation seems to contain within itself the seed of depoliticisation. Here, I explore this dynamic in Lis's work and with reference to Arendt's investigation into revolution and the problem of the founding. I suggest that Arendt's attempt to conceive of an alternative form of political authority offers a language that allows us to make explicit a concept that Lis continuously traces in her thinking about epistemology in relation to transformation. I argue that it is possible to derive an alternative conception of 'epistemic authority' from Lis's work, one which responds to the demand to found an enduring space of epistemic freedom, that is, a space where knowledge

can become 'the permanent object of collective reflection' (Lange 2017: 50).

I begin by presenting in more detail the problem that Lis grappled with and by situating it within a certain reading of the constitutional dispensation that resulted from the transition to a democratic South Africa. After that, I try to illuminate the problem by focusing on Arendt's discussion of the founding and the alternative account of authority she uncovers through her interpretation of the American revolution. Finally, I argue that Arendt's alternative conception of authority provides a language that resonates with and augments Lis's enduring engagement with the question of transformation in South African higher education.

## The problem

As aforementioned, in reading Lis's work on the university one is struck by the notion that there exists a more-than-coincidental relationship between politicisation and depoliticisation. On this point, the state of affairs in higher education to some extent mirrors the broader politico-juridical context of the country. Although it is debatable whether the transition to democratic South Africa can rightly be called a 'revolution', it is nonetheless clear that a break from the apartheid past invoked a notion of political freedom in the radical sense Arendt ascribes to it, that is, of a new beginning. Sadly, more than thirty years into democracy and in addition to the disconcerting problems of rampant crime and corruption, we have also witnessed how the transformative politics that underpinned the democratic transition have been reduced to clichés and corporate catchphrases.

The reasons for this are, of course, complex, but in a real sense involve the constitutional dispensation as such. Karl Klare (1998) has convincingly argued that the Constitution should be read as a transformative document, which, among things implies that the meaning of rights enshrined in it is never fixed, static or to be taken for granted but instead demands to be continuously interpreted and

developed if we are to give content to the Constitution's more radical aims. This means that the Constitution is not a neutral instrument that can be simply and unproblematically applied; on the contrary, it remains a sight of political struggle. However, as critical legal scholars have pointed out, constitutional supremacy and rights discourse have not engendered a vibrant space of political participation; instead, they have displayed a tendency to prohibit political action and obstruct radical transformation (Van Marle 2019: 110). Ironically, precisely because it entrenches fundamental rights, the Constitution has been conceived as bringing to an end the unruliness of politics. In this view, the existence of a right is assumed to equate its realisation so that its meaning is circumscribed and qualified in a way that constrains its transformative potential (see Christodoulidis 1993). In post-apartheid South Africa, the Constitution is often considered at best beyond the reach of politics and at worst as an instrument for protecting the entrenched privileges of a moneyed elite. For the vast majority of the country's citizens, participation in the public realm has been reduced to the vote, while the more affluent minority have come to embrace a freedom from politics symbolised by a retreat behind high fences, guaranteed not by the state through its monopoly on violence but through the outsourced right to violence of private security companies.

Lis was attuned to a parallel dynamic unfolding in the sphere of higher education. The political transition in South Africa stood in a determined, perhaps overdetermined, relationship to education. On the one hand, the education system was instrumental in maintaining social relations as they existed under apartheid. On the other hand, inasmuch as this posed a challenge to the transformation of society (Jansen 2009), it also contained a promise, for as Arendt (2006: 189) puts it, education is about preparing the next generation for the task of renewing the world. In other words, the question of education and the new beginning that was heralded by the transition to democracy were and remain intimately connected. However, despite notable gains in some areas, the higher education landscape has reflected parallel failures to those visible in the broader political landscape. Although

much of this can undoubtedly be attributed to pathologies inherited from the past, it could also be argued that, in the same way that the combination of constitutional supremacy and rights discourse have induced a sense of political complacency, the new democratic dispensation assumed that the promise of a new education would be realised automatically; in other words, that the language of rights and constitutionalism's structural tendency to constrain the open-ended nature of the political extended into the sphere of (higher) education.

Reading Lis's work, one is struck by the recurrence of this theme. In fact, the four areas of critique that Jansen and Goliath identify in their tribute all in some sense reflect Lis's keen sense of the contradictions, ambiguities and missed opportunities that traverse the discourse and practice of transformation in the higher education landscape (see for instance Lange 2014).

In the Daantjie Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture Lis argues that, with the exception of some remaining possibilities, we are in fact witnessing the retreat, even the inversion, of transformative possibilities:

> [T]he politicisation and instrumentalisation of the university that derives from [the rise of the knowledge economy and stronger forms of accountability between universities, the state and society] has as its interesting contradictory result the depoliticisation of knowledge and of the academic as individual (Lange 2016b: 178).

She goes on to argue that this depoliticisation has 'infected' the notion of academic freedom itself in the sense that that freedom has increasingly come to mean the *right to disengage* from the political fight against those processes that would undermine it, whether it be interference from the state or the more insidious process through which the university is reshaped in accordance with the values of the market (see Brown 2015). That said, what concerned Lis most was the way in which this development had foreclosed deliberations on 'knowledge—its constitution, effects, distribution in society and its

power' (Lange 2016b: 178). In this context, Lis proposed to augment the traditional liberal notion of academic freedom with reference to Arendt's understanding of action. To follow her argument here, it is necessary briefly to summarise Arendt's understanding of action in relation to freedom.

For Arendt, freedom corresponds to a fundamental aspect of the human condition, namely the fact that we live as speaking and acting beings among other human beings, each capable of setting in motion through speech and action a new course of events with radically unpredictable consequences. She refers to this as the condition of human plurality, which she further elaborates on through the notion of natality, that is, the fact that humans have the potential of beginning something new simply by virtue of being themselves a new addition to the world. This entails, as she puts it, that 'freedom is given under conditions of non-sovereignty' (Arendt 2006: 162–163). In other words, freedom is not the absence of coercion; neither is it a form of sovereign control. It means entering an existing 'web of human relations' (Arendt 1998[1958]: 182–183) in which the individual's words and deeds will reverberate unpredictably, for better or for worse.

Arendt contrasts action (freedom) with labour and work. While labour corresponds to the condition of biological existence and its inescapable cyclical process of growth and decay, work corresponds to the human condition of 'worldliness', that is, to the need to build an artificial, inhabitable world of durable objects. And while both labour and work are primarily instrumental, action is revelatory in the sense that speech and action reveal to others who we are—as opposed to words and deeds which unintentionally 'produce' meaningful stories that only become intelligible in retrospect. Lis emphatically argues that academic life amounts to participating in the constitution of the public world and the disclosure of the self through action. In this way, she rejects the received liberal understanding of academic freedom as the freedom to remain outside of politics and calls for 'an active affirmation of our teaching as part of the construction of a public space' (Lange 2016b: 185).

I want to elaborate on what it means to consider teaching as part of the construction of public space. It is easy to take this concept at face value, but once we consider teaching a form of *action* in the very specific sense in which Arendt uses this term, it gets more complicated. For, action, Arendt tells us, is not sovereign; it does not consist in mastering a situation; it does not produce objects through the manipulation of material in accordance with a model. That would be what she calls *work*. In a certain sense, action always means not quite knowing what we are doing. Action is also not about applying strength and is therefore the antithesis of violence. Acting in concert with others generates *power* for as long as the action lasts. An example would be the public gatherings in the USA in response to the President Donald Trump's violent crackdown on immigration. Although the simple act of congregating and marching through the city is powerful, the power only lasts as long as the action continues; it does not leave behind physical monuments. Yes, it produces stories that commit events to memory, but it does not construct or build something in the same way that work does. There is of course the ubiquitous view of teaching as 'moulding the young', but whatever the value of such a practice may be, it would contradict an understanding of teaching as *action* since it entails viewing students as material to be shaped in accordance with a pre-given model. For Arendt at least this would destroy precisely what is revolutionary in every child, namely its ability to renew and set right a world that is per definition always exposed to ruin. So, what would it mean to consider teaching a form of action that participates in the construction of public space?

Judging by the tenor of Lis's argument, she has in mind more than the fleeting moment of action; as if teaching can possibly also create something more durable. To understand this, I turn to Arendt's investigation into the bourgeois revolutions of 18th-century Europe. I argue that her analysis of the problem of the founding as exemplified by those upheavals holds important insights for our attempt to think through what it might mean to consider teaching as a form of action that builds without foreclosing the radical open-endedness of the political.

## Arendt on the problem of the founding

As with much of her other work, Arendt's interest in revolutions and the problem of the founding should be read in the context of her sustained attempts to understand under what conditions totalitarianism became possible and what resources politics might contain to prevent totalitarian regimes from arising in future.

There is no space here for a reconstruction of the wide-ranging argument Arendt develops in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948). Briefly, her view is that totalitarianism was the result of a particular attempt to deal with the loss of traditional forms of authority in the 20th century. A constellation of factors, including the rise of capitalism, the scientific revolution and successive bourgeois revolutions undermined the notion that the stability of the political realm was underpinned and stabilised by a transcendent authority. These developments also precipitated 'world alienation', that is, the decline of a common world of objects and institutions that mediates between a plurality of people. The totalitarian regimes that arose in Germany and the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20th century attempted to fill this void and the 'abyss of freedom' it opened with an appeal to the inexorable unfolding of history. Darwinian racial science in the case of Nazi Germany, and dialectical materialism in the case of the Soviet Union, both appealed to history as the unfolding of a logical process which not only explained the past and present but also allowed for the prediction of the future. For Arendt, the notion that history followed an inevitable course, either to ensure the ultimate triumph of some superior race or towards a classless utopia, amounted to the repudiation of human freedom, that is, of what she called 'natality', the fact that each human being was a new beginning and therefore capable of interrupting a given course of events thereby beginning something new. In her view, the appeal of totalitarian regimes to the authority of History was consistent with the Western philosophical tradition's suspicion of human freedom and the political realm in general. It was this ingrained suspicion of politics coupled with the breakdown of traditional forms of authority that led

to the doomed attempt to 'escape from freedom into the "necessity" of history' (Arendt 2005: 95).

Arendt turned her attention to the great bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th century precisely because they had to contend with the consequences of the loss of traditional forms of authority. Formulated differently, these revolutions posed the problem of freedom, that is, the problem of beginning something radically new, in the starkest possible terms. By casting off monarchical rule and setting out to found new republics, both the French and American revolutionaries had to confront the problem of the founding or the question of how to re-establish political authority. Arendt believed that the way in which the American revolution specifically overcame this problem spoke to the political troubles engendered by modernity. In her well-known essay on education (Arendt 2005) she explicitly links the tension between, on the one hand, the revolutionary act of beginning something new and the need for durable institutions to, on the other hand, the question of education. I would argue that Lis's thinking about the university and the question of transformation can also be located within this nexus of issues.

Revolutions confront us head on with the arbitrary and groundless nature of political action. Both French and American revolutionaries explicitly understood their repudiation of the *ancien régime* as an absolute break with the past. As a consequence, what up until that point had been a strictly theoretical problem, i.e. the problem of founding a new political order *ex nihilo,* suddenly became an urgent practical problem (Arendt 1990[1963]: 204–206). The crucial difficulty was the perceived need for a so-called 'higher law' that could ground and legitimise their actions. As Arendt notes, due to the weight of their inherited tradition of political thought, revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic could only conceive of the 'higher law' (political authority) as located in a transcendent source, a source outside the flux and uncertainty of human affairs. The problem was that their own revolutionary action had made precisely this conception of authority untenable. In the process of confronting this difficulty and engaging as

equals in collective deliberation about the nature of political authority and the organisation of government, these revolutionaries recovered an ancient experience of political freedom, of directly participating in the constitution of the public realm. She argues that the rediscovery of this experience of action made the search for an absolute, transcendent source of authority not only untenable but also undesirable for it would undermine the very space of freedom, the possibility of actively participating in politics, which the revolution had opened up (Arendt 1990[1963]: 182–194). The problem was how to maintain this space of freedom. The need for an institutional framework that could outlast the always-fleeting moment of action, for an architecture that could structure and give durability to the space of freedom, remained urgent.

Arendt further excavates the problem with reference to the distinction between liberation and the foundation of freedom. Although liberation from an oppressive or illegitimate authority is an essential component of every revolution, liberation in itself does not necessarily establish a lasting space for freedom.

As we have learned from the history of postcolonial Africa, liberation all too easily gives way to autocratic regimes that close off the space of freedom, while the revolutionary spirit just as often dissipates in the unyielding language of law and bureaucracy. As Arendt sees it, the problem of the founding therefore involves the paradoxical task of preserving the revolutionary spirit, that is, of thinking together structure and event, stability and change, in such a way that future generations may also experience the freedom to actively participate in the constitution of the public realm. The specific resonance with Lis's position and her critique of the discourse and practice of transformation should be clear. At stake here is the question of how action can construct something that is at once durable and dynamic, stable and open to change. This returns us to the question I posed earlier, namely how could teaching conceived as *action* construct a lasting epistemic space? How can and should we, in the context of the university, negotiate between the seemingly conflicting registers of change and durability? Before I offer a tentative response to this

question, it is necessary first to pursue Arendt's line of thought a little further.

## Arendt's alternative account of political authority

Arendt notes that the revolutionaries themselves seemed unaware that their conception of a 'higher law' located outside the sphere of politics undermined the very space of freedom their actions had brought into existence. She reaches this conclusion through her interpretation of the celebrated wording of the American Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.' The appeal to self-evident truths belied the radical nature of the revolutionary project, which was revolutionary precisely inasmuch as it relinquished the safety of indisputable truths. She notes as contradictory that if the truths were truly 'self-evident', the founders would not have needed to agree on them by adding the 'we hold'. Self-evident truths transcend the mere political character of any collective commitment; they are 'irresistible' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 193) and therefore do not require agreement. For Arendt, the power that brought into being the American republic and the authority that gave it durability was precisely constituted by the *action* itself, by the collective agreement expressed through the act of saying 'we hold', which, she comments, is 'the perfect way for an action to appear in words' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 130). As Bonnie Hönig (1991: 101) explains, the declaration should be considered a particular kind of performative speech act similar to a promise in the sense that it is speaking, the speech act itself, that brings the republic into existence. The existence of the republic is maintained in the same way that a promise is a form of action that endures beyond the moment of its enunciation. In this way, Arendt offers an alternative account of political authority as one in which the source of stability can be located in the action itself. As she puts it:

> What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more

> precise, that beginning and principle … are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world (Arendt 1990[1963]: 212).

In this way, the American (unlike the French) revolutionaries all but unknowingly overcame the intellectual legacy that led them to believe that the foundation required an appeal to a source of authority outside the space of politics. The meaning of their actions, opaque to themselves but clearer in hindsight, suggest an alternative theory and practice of political authority.

But of course, things are never quite that simple. For, as Arendt shows, the crucial legacy of the American revolutionaries remained obscured by the appeal to absolutes ('self-evident truths') which subsequently became cemented in the American political imagination. Formulated differently, the radical moment of a new beginning, a moment of transformative politicisation, gave way to depoliticisation. Consequently, in the American context the pursuit of public happiness was reduced to a pursuit of private happiness. The freedom to actively participate in the public space was displaced by a notion of freedom as freedom from politics, that is, an anti-political concept of freedom.

## Finding an alternative account of epistemic 'authority' in Lis's work

Lis's thinking about the university is characterised by the attempt to conceptualise academic freedom as a specifically political act and not simply as the right to disengage from politics. I want to suggest that in the process, particularly in her work on the academic curriculum, she implicitly articulates an alternative conception of epistemic 'authority'. In the remainder of this tribute, I elaborate on this with reference to Arendt's alternative conception of political authority as discussed

earlier. I focus on her chapter in the edited collection *Philosophy on the Border* (Praeg 2019) in which she discusses transformation of the academic curriculum with specific reference to a review of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in the Faculty of Humanities at the UFS in 2014.

I will not repeat Lis's account of the course of events in detail other than to note the following aspects of the background of that review process. By the time Lis joined the UFS in 2011 as head of the Directorate of Institutional Research and Planning (DIRAP), the curriculum at the UFS had already undergone marked changes in response to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) instituted in 1995. As she notes, the NQF in effect encouraged the modularisation of the curriculum and the notion of credit accumulation. The UFS embraced this change because it allowed the university to address financial challenges. As she notes, by 2011 this had 'dismantled any notion of curriculum as a coherent organisation of knowledge' and 'the task became one of restoring the importance of the idea of disciplinary knowledge as well as rules of progression and combination into the design of the academic programmes' (Lange 2019a: 76). I mention this because it speaks to a concern with the architecture of the curriculum, or to invoke the language of Arendt, there was a sense in which curriculum work engaged the problem of the founding, that is, of creating a durable institution. The political dimension, in the broad Arendtian sense of public deliberation, was intended as a feature of the process from the start, since as Lis (2019a: 77) notes, '[t]he aim was to generate strong academic engagement with the curriculum revision process'. This could be interpreted as the intention to create a space for the cultivation of a more positive understanding of academic freedom—not the negative freedom to be left to your own devices, but the freedom to participate in a process of creating something new. Lis's reconstruction of events speaks to a tension between an openness to change and self-reflection on the one hand and a determined concern with structure on the other.

The review of the curriculum involved a panel of three academics (two South African, one British) who visited the UFS for four days

at the end of which they produced a report that included their impressions of the curriculum as well as several recommendations. As Lis notes, the panel focused on 'the currency of the curriculum in relation to the state of the disciplines, its pedagogic underpinnings and the kind of graduates it was educating' (Lange 2019a: 80). The critical component of the report and the response it elicited from a group of self-elected academics from the humanities faculty became the focus of Lis's analysis in her chapter titled, 'Curriculum in times of decolonisation: reflections on knowledge, power and identity at the University of the Free State'. I would argue that above and beyond the main argument she develops in her analysis of the UFS academics' response to the report, we can also unearth in her analysis a conception of the tension that marks the founding and which allows us to think together the apparently conflicting elements of, on the one hand, the radical suspension of stability and form involved in questioning and challenging knowledge (a political, and affirmative interpretation of academic freedom), and on the other hand a concern with curriculum as the coherent organisation of knowledge devised to maintain relative stability. To do this, we need to briefly note the panel's most salient critical comments, the response of the group of academics, and Lis's deconstructive critique of that response.

The panel's central criticism is captured in its description of the 'consistent and almost exclusive emphasis in the teaching and examining materials' on '*the delivery of content* rather than on the *cultivation of the higher learning skills* of analysis and argument' (quoted in Lange 2019a: 78; original emphasis). The panel was also critical of the apparent neglect of the 'imperative for instilling in students the values of debate and controversy, and that deliberate fostering of … self-conscious critical enquiry' (in Lange 2019a: 79). The group of academics responded to these observations by contrasting their pedagogic approach with what they perceived to be the panel's approach:

> The report … almost exclusively emphasises the usefulness of knowledge and questioning skills. The opposing argument

> is that it is just as important to instill in students *the relative constant, universal and foundational knowledge, while local issues should be treated as an extension and application of the aforementioned knowledge* (in Lange 2019a: 81; original emphasis).

In her response, Lis argues that the academics' understanding of their own position, which they described as *Problemgeschicht* (the history of ideas), was based on three untenable binaries: ontology/action; constant, universal knowledge/particular, local knowledge, and tradition/dissent. She proceeds to show how each of these binaries collapses under the slightest scrutiny: first, knowledge of a certain discipline is never independent from or unrelated to a certain type of behaviour; second, what the academics view as 'universal knowledge' is itself an instance of particular knowledge, that is, knowledge produced by Western European culture; finally, tradition itself is only thinkable as the history of problems and the varied and contested ways in which they have been solved. Moreover, as she points out, *Problemgeschichte* as a tradition may in fact be better identified with an openness towards the fractures in, and limits of, any given disciplinary tradition. *Problemgeschichte*, as she understands it, means the 'investigation of an epistemic space and the problems peculiar to that place'; for the UFS academics it meant 'the transmission of a canon, of a tradition that the university is responsible for conserving and transmitting' (Lange 2019a: 87). We might add a fourth binary to those Lis identifies in the UFS academics' response, namely, conservation/change. From the above discussion it should be clear that in choosing ontology over action, the universal over the particular, and tradition over change, the group of academics also privilege conservation over change. Although she does not explicitly engage this binary, I would argue that she does so implicitly, or rather that she articulates an understanding of the epistemic space that collapses the distinction between conservation and change.

At this point it is necessary to recall Arendt's alternative understanding of political authority, namely that action itself can be the

principle that grounds it. This challenges the binaries of ontology/action, universal/particular, and tradition/dissent while collapsing the binary conservation/change, or rather, it suggests that change itself is the condition of the possibility for persistence over time. Lis obliquely articulates this idea in her theorisation of transformation where she notes two features of the concept of transformation as it was used in pre-1994 discourse. First, '[it] implied a change in the nature of society that would clearly mark a break with the past'; second, its conceptualisation involved its

> historical and dynamic nature, which obliges all of us interested in and committed to it to the periodic redefinition of the term. Put differently, the very notion of transformation in South Africa entails keeping on asking about the subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation in each area of society where it is proclaimed or sought (Lange 2019a: 86).

These remarks echo Arendt's conceptualisation of the 'revolutionary spirit'. For Arendt, the revolutionary spirit contains two seemingly irreconcilable and contradictory elements. On the one hand, a concern with the stability and durability of the new structure, and on the other hand, the 'exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning' (Arendt 1990[1963]: 223–224). Lis's comment about transformation attests to both these elements: the radical break with the past, but also the implicit concern with the future of the new structure; the assumption that a break with the past begets something in need of care and preservation. Such care does not involve safeguarding a fixed meaning; on the contrary, care and preservation entail a continuing interrogation of the 'subject, the object, the means and the motives of transformation'.

Lis transposes this idea to her thinking about teaching, knowledge and the curriculum. Her efforts to rethink academic freedom as active participation in the public realm, teaching as an active affirmation of

our participation in the construction of a public space, and her call for academics to engage in critical self-reflection all speak to the idea of maintaining by augmentation. Hönig (1991: 108) notes that central to Arendt's understanding of authority is the notion of 'resistability'; that within the political realm any appeal to a universal, transcendent source of authority should be resisted. Lis's call for continued self-reflection and questioning of the knowledge of knowledge suggests a similar commitment to 'resistability'.

In Arendt's account, it is precisely this commitment that endows a republic with vigour, while in Lis's thinking about the curriculum, resistance to epistemic closure is the very feature that gives the curriculum structure and resilience. Jacques Derrida makes a similar point:

> The apparent firmness, hardness, durability or resistance of philosophical institutions betrays, first of all the fragility of a foundation. It is on the ground of this (theoretical and practical) 'deconstructability,' it is against it, that the institution institutes itself (Derrida 2002: 10).

Bruno Latour, who is known for his exposure of the contingencies, coincidences and complex networks of co-operation that underly scientific discoveries, recently suggested that the apparent vulnerability of science and truth in a post-truth era is paradoxically the result of a positivist approach to science that ignored the contingency and fragility of 'facts'. By insisting on the neutrality and self-evident nature of 'facts', he argues, the positivist approach to science unwittingly aided the attack on the foundations of knowledge. As Kofman (2018) notes in a review of Latour's *Down to Earth* (2018):

> Latour believes that if scientists were transparent about how science really functions—as a process in which people, politics, institutions, peer review and so forth all play their parts—they would be in a stronger position to convince people of their claims.

Counter-intuitively, it is precisely the commitment to a critique of knowledge that fashions the structures that give knowledge relative stability over time. To be sure, the epistemic space that Lis evokes is not one of completeness or self-sufficiency, which is why she emphasises the need to cultivate a 'sense of incompleteness, precariousness and the need for conviviality' (Lange 2019a: 85). For her, this is the condition for the transformation of the academic curriculum.

## Conclusion

My argument here may have been unduly influenced by my experience of Lis as a friend and mentor, but when I think of her I always think of her ability to simultaneously project two things: a bristling and incisive, sometimes bruising, capacity for action, and a sense of calm and considered building. I think of her as someone who was open to what Derrida describes as 'the radical abeyance and suspense marking a *perhaps*' (Derrida 2002: 67) but also as someone with the courage to suspend the *perhaps*, to calculate when necessary, to take responsibility for the narrowing of possibilities that must always follow a decision.

Her concern about the depoliticisation and bureaucratisation of potentially transformative concepts, her critique of top-down authority structures and her attempts to conceive a more positive understanding of academic freedom all reflect her commitment to keeping the space of action and freedom alive. At the same time, her systematic approach to problems, her painstaking historical reconstructions of a question and her tendency to structure her academic writing by analogy with the successive movements of classical music compositions also betrayed a distinctly architectural sensibility.

Lis, like her intellectual companion, Arendt, was also concerned with the less spectacular virtues of durability and stability. Her approach to restructuring the undergraduate degree courses at the UFS testified to this, as did her conviction that truly radical transformation had to begin with the curriculum.

At a time when powerful new technologies of alienation are being developed at break-neck speed with less and less regard for their consequences, when these technologies are explicitly conceived as miracle solutions to all kinds of societal problems, Lis's insistence on the virtue of continued critical reflection on the knowledge of knowledge may serve as a counterforce to the desire to 'escape from freedom into the "necessity" of History' (Arendt 2005: 95). The large multi-nationals that are steering the development of artificial intelligence would have us believe that super-intelligent machines will soon relieve humanity of the need to think and act, making redundant both education and politics as traditionally understood. It would benefit us to think from time to time how Lis would have responded to this challenge.

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