

CONCLUSION

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What Lis taught us

This *Festschrift* seeks to honour Lis Lange not through a soft commemoration but through sustained engagement with the intellectual, ethical and political demands that shaped her life's work. Read together, the various tributes confirm that Lis did not merely occupy the university or its bureaucratic machinery but struggled within it, against it and through it, refusing the comforts of abstraction or procedural compliance. What emerges from these pages is the portrait of a scholar-administrator (Badat; Higgins) whose fierce loyalty lay with the academic project as a site of struggle for social justice, epistemic freedom and public reason.

Lis will be remembered for her singular capacity to inhabit and not merely occupy what many contributors describe as a near-impossible position, namely that of the intellectual bureaucrat (Luescher) or intellectual administrator (Jansen). She understood administration

not as a neutral technical exercise but as a deeply political, moral and intellectual undertaking (Jansen & Goliath; Mkhize). Whether building national quality assurance systems, steering university councils, or responding to institutional crises, she treated bureaucratic form as something to be worked on rather than simply worked within. For her, rules, metrics and systems were never ends in themselves; they were unfinished instruments to be repurposed, resisted or dismantled when they threatened to hollow out the intellectual life of the university.

A defining thread that runs through all the tributes collected here is Lis's uncompromising critique of managerialism and the institutionalisation of transformation as empty ritual. She consistently warned against the reduction of social justice to demographic arithmetic, compliance checklists, and performativity. In her view, transformation had been stripped of its intellectual and moral force (Lange 2010; 2013; 2014) so that what had once been a radical project had instead become 'frozen in numbers' (Lange 2013: 5). Against this she argued that the genuine work of transformation lay in the academic project itself: in curriculum design, pedagogy, knowledge production and the conditions under which understanding becomes possible. Anything less, she insisted, was theatre.

Considered in their totality, the three sections of this *Festschrift* construct a richly textured portrait of Lis as a figure who consistently defied easy categorisation, being at once scholar and administrator, saboteur and builder, insider and dissenter. Across the various tributes, a second common thread is the complexity of her identity as intellectual bureaucrat, of someone who did not merely occupy institutional roles, but who reimagined them as sites for translating ethical commitments into practice. This duality is not presented as mere contradiction but as the defining condition of her work, as an ongoing, often difficult effort to hold together the demands of governance and the imperatives of critical thought. Each tribute affirms that Lis's life was animated by a deeply rooted commitment to social justice, forged in her early experiences of repression in Argentina and carried through into her engagements with South African higher education.

The three sections of this *Festschrift* vary in emphasis, thereby deepening and complicating our understanding of her. Loosely organised around the progression of Lis's career, the chapters leverage Lis's insider-outsider perspective on higher education. Section A provides insight into Lis's background, influences and early career roles at national higher education agencies. These chapters demonstrate her 'outsider' approach to driving systemic transformation through regulatory frameworks.

As a system builder, she employed her intellectual influences, especially her Arendtian scaffolding, as a means to defend the university's role as a site for political pedagogy and critical citizenship against the thoughtlessness of neoliberal managerialism. While reinforcing these ideas, Section B shifts the focus to Lis as institutional 'insider'. Here, the authors delve into her identity as an intellectual bureaucrat, offering a situated and relational portrait of Lis's leadership, her institutional interventions, her resistance to managerialism, and her pedagogical commitments. Through these reflections, the section captures her profound internal battle to inhabit institutional machinery while maintaining the critical reflexive integrity required for radical transformation. Section C foregrounds Lange's philosophical engagement with Hannah Arendt and her radical critique of transformation as a hollowed out project. It emphasises her vision of the 'university on the boarder' and what is required to reconcile the stable building of institutions with the open-ended capacity for new political beginnings.

The picture that emerges is one of Lis as a figure of 'ferocious integrity' (Jansen in this volume: 170), someone who refused and resisted the empty forms of compliance and institutional convenience. Across the tributes in all three sections, she emerges as a relentless critic of the 'simulacrum' of transformation (Baudrillard 1994: 1; see also Chapter 4 of this volume: 66), of the manner in which bureaucratic routines can hollow out political and moral purpose. And yet, her critique was never nihilistic. Lis paired critique with construction; she challenged the corporatisation of universities while actively building

alternative systems, policies and pedagogies that could sustain a more just and intellectually vibrant academic project. A rare quality indeed.

Combined, these tributes show that Lis was never simply a participant in institutional transformation but always one of its most incisive theorists and practitioners. She understood the university as a space of ideas and conscience and as existing for the public good. Her life's work can be read as an effort to align the university's structures with that vision. The interplay between the common themes and the distinct emphases of the three sections in this *Festschrift* ultimately reveals a scholar-administrator who lived her contradictions productively by turning them into the very basis of her intellectual authority and institutional impact.

The intellectual resources Lis drew on for this struggle were formidable. Trained as a historian, she brought to her thinking and work a deep suspicion of presentism and an insistence on tracing the *longue durée* of institutional power. Policy, for her, was never innocent; it was a text to be read, interpreted and challenged for what it enabled and what it foreclosed. Her sustained engagement with Arendt further sharpened this disposition. Drawing on Arendt's distinctions between knowledge and understanding, action and work, Lis insisted that the university is not merely a site of skill acquisition but a fragile public space in which judgement must be formed and responsibility taken. Teaching, administration and governance were therefore inseparable from political life.

At the same time, none of the tributes romanticise this position. On the contrary, they make visible the personal and professional cost of Lis's refusal to adapt to institutional comfort, foregrounding the personal sacrifices and institutional conflicts that accompanied this refusal, complemented by accounts of her collegiality, mentorship and capacity for reasoned debate. Together, they suggest that Lis's 'toughness' and her kindness were not opposites but part of the same ethical orientation: a commitment to truth-telling and intellectual seriousness that demanded both rigour and care. Her intellectual ferocity, directness and intolerance for pretence often rendered her

‘difficult to work with’ in hierarchies that have increasingly become attuned to corporate sensibilities. She sacrificed conventional academic rewards—publication counts, promotion cycles, secure leadership trajectories—in order to do the slow, grinding and often thankless work of institutional rebuilding. That she persisted nonetheless is one of this *Festschrift*’s quietest but most powerful lessons.

Much like Lis’s own work, the tributes to her leave us with many unanswered questions about the university and its future. Indeed, her work was largely structured around the unanswered questions elicited by the failures of institutional transformation and the emergence of the decolonial turn. She argued that the very notion of transformation in South Africa requires a permanent process of questioning. Across different registers—policy analysis, philosophical reflection, institutional narrative and personal testimony—the tributes return again and again to a shared provocation: what would it mean to take the university seriously again as a moral and intellectual project? What would follow if we refused the safety of managerial vocabulary, the anaesthetic of metrics and the temptation to confuse movement with change?

What emerges from an integrated reading of this collection is a portrait of Lis as a thinker of productive incompleteness. The unanswered questions are not gaps to be filled but the very medium of her intellectual practice: they demand continued engagement, contestation and imagination. Her legacy, as these tributes jointly suggest, lies not only in the frameworks she built or the critiques she advanced, but in the discipline of questioning she bequeathed—a discipline that insists on confronting the limits of knowledge, the contradictions of institutions and the ethical demands of transformation without retreating into easy answers. Lis’s work is repeatedly described as ‘unfinished’ not only because of projects curtailed by her early death, but because her intellectual stance deliberately refused closure.

In her later work, she increasingly gestured toward the idea of the ‘university on the border’ as an institution defined less by certainty than by constitutive self-doubt. This was not a call to abandon rigour

as much as a call to refuse the self-assurance of knowledge systems that have ceased to interrogate their own conditions of possibility. The border, in this sense, is an ethical stance: to remain restless, unfinished, and accountable to those on the underside of history.

If this volume succeeds, it is because it does not close that border. Instead, it keeps Lis in motion—arguing, unsettling, demanding more careful thought and more courageous action. The best tribute, as she herself would have insisted, is not reverence but continuation; to take up the hard work of thinking, understanding, judging and acting within institutions that too easily forget why they exist.

In that spirit, this *Festschrift* does not conclude Lis Lange's work. It hands it back to us.

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