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The path of most resistance: Remembering Lis Lange (1961–2025)

Any human life is made up by its unique combination of bone, flesh and spirit.

For Maria Lis Lange (or Lis as she preferred to be known), the bone – the structural frame for her vital life – was provided by her outstanding career as a professional in higher education policy and administration.

For someone who believed, along with Hannah Arendt (as cited by Lange), that education "is the point at which we decide whether to love the world enough to assume responsibility for it", it is no surprise that Lange chose to devote her working life to higher education.[1(p.4)]

Her career came at a particularly intense moment for higher education policy in South Africa. The new democracy was determined to use education to provide the high-level technical skills needed – as global policy templates insisted – to help it compete in the global economy. And at the same time – specific to its moment and context – to help it address the challenges of racial inequality that threatened to hollow out the promise of the long-sought-for democracy.

Lange began her administrative career as a Liaison Officer in the Centre for Science Development (an arm of the Human Sciences Research Council) in 1997, and, from 1999 to 2000, worked for the National Research Foundation, the new organisation which subsumed the funding-arm of the Human Sciences Research Council.

From here, Lange spent a full decade in the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the new agency tasked with both monitoring the performance of the system (through its process of institutional audits) and seeking to provide either solicited or unsolicited advice to the Minister.

In this latter role, the CHE tried to play an essential role in a fledgling but ambitious democracy. It sought to provide – through its seminars, publications and promotion of debate – something of an 'open' deliberative space, situated somewhere between government and higher education institutions themselves, also with room for the views of both students and academics.

Initially hired as a Project Manager in 2002, she quickly demonstrated the drive, commitment and capacity to become Director of Monitoring and Evaluation at the CHE (2003–2006) and later the Executive Director of the Higher Education Quality Committee (from 2006 to 2010) (also acting briefly as its Chief Executive Officer from 2007 to 2008).

In each of these roles, she demonstrated (in Saleem Badat's words) "great intellect, innovative and incisive social thinking, social commitment and a capacity for hard work" (Badat S 2025, written communication, October 18).

From this 'external' oversight role over the system as a whole, Lange moved on to take up several local 'internal' positions inside the system, and notably at the University of the Free State and the University of Cape Town.

In these 'internal' posts, Lange was well placed to experience the frictions that occur when (as the saying goes) the 'rubber hits the road' and the ideals of necessarily abstract policy engage with the recalcitrance of the real.

Lange assumed her role as Senior Director of Institutional Research and Academic Planning at the University of the Free State (UFS; 2011–2014) following two major upsets: the 2008 Reitz video initiation incident and the 2010 SASCO-inspired disruption of intervarsity games between UFS and North-West University (which led to the suspension of the Student Representative Council and calls for the resignation of the Vice Rector, Jonathan Jansen).[2,3]

Here she set out to address the crucial problems in UFS's institutional and academic culture, coming to focus particularly on the ways in which the curriculum could be used (as the Soudien Report put it) as "a tool of exclusion"[4].

Failing appointment to the position of rector of UFS, Lange moved sideways to become Deputy Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2018.

The appointment was made despite vocal resistance from the University's Black Caucus (which preferred one of its own members for the post). However, despite the initial support from UCT's Vice Chancellor, Mamokgethi Phakeng, the senior executive relationship turned sour.

Lange's professionalism, honesty and forthrightness proved to be too much for someone who brooked no disagreement and did not accept criticism, however necessary.

Lange was pushed by the Chair of Council to forsake her intention to seek a usual second term as DVC and forced to resign months before the expiration of her existing contract. The Independent Investigation into UCT Governance later found her contract to have been "irregularly, improperly, and unlawfully terminated"[5].

Lange moved on to what proved to be her ultimate position as Special Advisor to the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Learning and Teaching at Stellenbosch University.

Such were the formal structures (the bones) of her life and career.

More important is the fact that these structures provided the context and occasions through which an intellectual self-fashioning took place, one that put flesh on the bones of her career as (in Badat's apt phrase) a "scholar-administrator" (Badat S 2025, written communication, October 18). For Lange was someone who used

the act of writing not just to report or convey information in administrative terms, but to critically think it through.

This was the critical intellectual process she referred to as the taking of "my intellectual self out of my managerial self"[6(p.177)].

Commitment to this process meant that her thinking was always agonistic, in the most classical senses of the term: it was an athletic thinking, shaped in and strengthened by the various contests it engaged.

The main political and intellectual challenge came from the very New Public Management criteria which it was her professional task to implement as Director of the CHE's Higher Education Quality Committee.

South Africa rejoined the international higher education community just as a new globally templated and World Bank–approved audit culture came into being. Its central task was to help discipline universities into accepting the new rallying calls of "innovation [and] entrepreneurialism"[7(p.62)] and to "background" the initial postwar commitments to the massification of higher education that has been articulated around ideas of democracy and the public good.

Lange – alongside other colleagues in the CHE, such as Saleem Badat, Mala Singh and Thierry Luescher – sought to meet the challenge of this restrictive audit culture head-on, taking advantage of the moment in which South Africa distinguished itself by making explicit constitutional commitments to academic freedom and openly asserted the need for higher education to be used for fostering the critical citizenship essential for the new democracy to flourish.

Her particular goal became to "use a monitoring system to help institutions and the higher education system to become more reflective"; to "make possible the realisation of a progressive link between evaluation and democracy"; and, ultimately, to enable South Africa to realise a "post-managerialist" model of higher education governance.[8-10]

All in all, this implied that policy and monitoring should be about the fostering of democratic deliberation through the provision of systematic knowledge rather than through the enforcing of market discipline on academics and their students.

A second (and related) contest emerged from her hands-on experience inside the specific institutional cultures of UFS and UCT.

Each of these (in their own ways) forced into vivid focus that key word in South Africa's higher education lexicon: the idea and practice of 'transformation'.

Against what had become a very inert notion of 'transformation' as a simple numbers game, easy to tick off (or not) for superficial auditing purposes, Lange was characteristically fierce in her determination to insist on the term's real "conceptual and political complexity"[11].

Similarly, Lange showed her mettle in refusing to equate the new (post-2015) key word of decolonisation with a reductive racial nationalism while fully accepting the reality and force of blind white privilege. A deeper challenge, she insisted, was to be found in "confronting where we went wrong as a civilisation and being ready to educate for a wholly different future"[12].

Above all, this would mean actively confronting all the concessions universities had made to the now dominant neo-liberal culture, and notably the fact that universities have "actively participated in every aspect of logarithm capitalism": the submission to the dictates of the global university rankings system and the drive for the digitalisation of teaching and learning, particularly with its risks for universities of "failing in their duty of care for young adults"[7(p.61)].

Against these concessions, she urged a new "political project for the university", one in which it becomes "an active agent of change…in looking for solutions and alternative ways to the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other".[7(p.62)]

Facing the challenge of what such a shift in higher education thinking would involve might well constitute the legacy of her work for the next generation.

What was it that drove this capacity for such combative, agonistic thinking? It was powered, I think, by that inward spirit which anyone who encountered her would instantly recognise in the fierce flash of her gaze.

This was a person, her eyes told you, who was honest, direct and deeply motivated by a spirit of an indomitable political will for social justice.

This spirit was initially forged by the hammer-blows of growing up during Argentina's 'dirty war' and was later refined by the terms of her formation as an academic. As Rachel Stewart, her former partner, put it, "Lis didn't spring up from South African soil. It was her Argentinian experience which radicalized her" (Stewart R 2025, oral communication, October 20).

Lange was born into a conservative family in Buenos Aires in 1961. Her father was strict, but always encouraged her independent intellectual development, something which her mother (although never being able to complete her own philosophy degree) also nurtured. She was initially schooled in (and internalised) the firm commitments to the values of learning, truth and community spirit endorsed by her Catholic Dominican school. By the time she was 15 (in 1976), a long-prepared coup (aided and abetted by the USA) deposed Isabel Perón and placed a military *junta* in power.

Under the guise of its innocuous-sounding National Reorganization Process, the Junta soon added and put into practice a new concept in the vocabulary of state terror: *los desaparecidos*, disappearance. This referred to the taking of people from their homes, offices or the streets without formal arrest, and then, without trial or judicial procedure of any kind, detaining, torturing and very often murdering them, secretly disposing of the bodies to leave no evidence behind (most notoriously by dropping them from airplanes into the sea, alive or already dead). The number of those 'disappeared' in this fashion between 1976 and 1983 is estimated at around 30 000.

The practice was intended to cow the civilian population, particularly as its targets were most often not the *subversivos* themselves (trade union or political activists) but ordinary and often upper-middle-class citizens, with a special focus on secondary school teachers, university professors and (disproportionately) Jews.[13]

Imagine growing up in a social world in which anyone in your circle could be 'disappeared' from one day to the next. Imagine the anxiety of a teenager at school or in a university system in which your teachers or professors were regarded by the government as "poisoning young people" and therefore as potential targets for disappearance. For, as Brigadier-General Vilas declared (on 5 August 1976), until "we clean up the university system…we cannot achieve a victory"[14(p.179)].

Two responses are possible in such a world: to be cowed or to resist.

Lange chose the path of most resistance.

Inspired by the weekly demonstrations in front of the presidential building, the *Casa Rosada,* by the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (women silently protesting the disappearance of their children that started in April 1977) and angry with the Church for siding with the brutal regime, Lange joined the Maoist-influenced Revolutionary Communist Party, consequently running a significant risk of being disappeared herself.

After studying Classical History at the University of Buenos Aires, where (as she later put it) "both the books and the professors were banned"[15], she won a scholarship to the safer and more open atmosphere of the Colegio de Mexico. Here, in 1988, she completed a master's degree in African Studies.

From there, intrigued by the similarities and differences between South Africa and Argentina, and fascinated by the ways in which its historiography "was competing easily with the best English and French social history"[15], she made her decisive move to South Africa by winning an Oppenheimer scholarship for doctoral studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.

There, she internalised the "brutal intellectual discipline" of social history as taught to her by her "endlessly patient but also endlessly demanding" supervisor, Charles van Onselen.[16] Under this sharp supervision, she honed her academic spirit to that particular fine intellectual edge created by the demands of a social history in which the necessary discipline of fact was always equally informed and complicated by all the demands of theory.

A revised version of her thesis was published in 2003 as *White, Poor and Angry: White working-class families in Johannesburg*, eliciting praise as "modest, painstaking archival work"[17].

From there, Lange became a formidable presence in South African higher education. Perhaps the words of a former colleague at UCT, Loretta Feris, can serve to exemplify the intellectual substance of Lange's contribution to higher education thinking. Recalling the times she would go and talk to Lange "to ask for her thoughts or to test an idea", Feris noted above all how she usually left "not with an answer but with more food for thought… she pushed me to be reflective and thoughtful" (Feris L 2025, written communication, October 16).

To be reflective and thoughtful: not a bad lesson for anyone involved in higher education in South Africa.

Lange died from complications arising from a lengthy struggle with an unusual form of rheumatoid arthritis which attacked and finally destroyed the tissue of her lungs.

She is deeply mourned by her second marriage partner, Jane Bennett; her former partner Rachel Stewart, their adopted daughter Puleng and two grandchildren; her three remaining brothers in Argentina; and her many friends and collaborators in the higher education world she contributed so much to.

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