

A REFLECTION ON CHARLES H. LONG: RESISTING AND SHORT-CIRCUITING THE DISCOURSES OF EXCLUSION IN THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ADMINISTRATION

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The new universities, as research institutions, implied a new structure in the order of knowledge on both theoretical and practical levels. The meaning of nature and human effort as work and culture form the contours of a new debate within the structures of knowledge itself. The urban setting is the context for the setting forth of this debate as theoretical and practical as the city is a microcosm of the communicative systems of material and ideational exchanges which are national and international in scope. *Research as a defining characteristic of the university implies a theoretical "world" capable of providing the clues and traces which would enable this new world to become inhabitable and beneficial to the human community (my emphasis).*

--Charles H. Long, "The University, "The Liberal Arts, and The Teaching and Study of Religions"

Today, how can we not speak of the university? I put my question in the negative, for two reasons. On the one hand, as we all know, it is impossible, now more than ever, to dissociate the work we do, within one discipline or several, from a reflection on the political and institutional conditions of that work. Such a reflection is unavoidable. It is no longer an external complement to teaching and research; it must make its way through the very objects we work with, shaping them as it goes, along with our norms, procedures, and aims. We cannot not speak of such things. On the other hand, the question "how can we not" gives notice of the negative, or perhaps we should say preventive, complexion of the preliminary reflections I should like to put to you. Indeed, since I am seeking to initiate discussion, I shall content myself with saying how one should not speak of the university. Some of the typical risks to be avoided, it seems to me, take the form of a bottomless pit, while others take the form of a protectionist barrier.

--Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in
the Eyes of Its Pupils"

I recall¹ the late Charles E. Winquist fondly saying of Charles H. Long that "his power comes from his presence." Those who knew and worked closely with "Professor Long" understand what this means. There was a tangible, intense power to how he engaged with people, institutions, and the world-at-large – an ecstatic modality bringing his thinking into conversation with the complex reality around him. He wasn't just curious; he was radically curious about all of it, which meant that even an everyday activity, such as going to breakfast with him, became an intellectual journey.

There also was something *intangible* and equally intense about the "power of his presence," too. "Professor Long" (I never felt comfortable calling him "Chuck") was my graduate advisor, teacher, and co-director for my dissertation at Syracuse University in the Humanities Doctoral Program (HDP) and not *religion*. I emphasize this for a reason. When my application for the doctoral program in religion was under consideration, I had the strong support of Charles Winquist, graduate studies director, whom I had met while an MA student in literary studies at the University. He appreciated my interest in thinking theoretically about religion, in particular he encouraged, at the time, my post-Althusserian approach to religion and culture as it related to ideology critique. Unfortunately, as I heard it sometime later, there was a departmental admissions committee concern about my research interests and approach as they related to the graduate religious studies curriculum . . . and we'll just leave it at that.

As I was told, while this departmental level admission review was unfolding, Charles Long was out of town and not in the early deliberations, which allowed Winquist time to debrief him upon his return about my application situation, which didn't look promising. He asked Winquist, "Why would he want to study in this department?" It was a very good question given my interests at the time and subsequently. So, Long, as the director of the HDP, seeing a promising graduate applicant, called me and asked if I wanted to pursue my studies in an interdisciplinary humanities context – a context that would allow me to eventually bring together literary studies, philosophy, religion with critical theory.... and even post-Althusserian ideology critique.

¹ This essay is drawn largely from my memories and experiences in the Humanities Doctoral Program at Syracuse University in the early to mid-1990s when Charles H. Long and, subsequently, Charles E. Winquist were directors.

The meeting that I had with Long the next afternoon in his office on the second floor in Huntington-Beardsley-Crouse (HBC) to finalize my acceptance in the HDP and the continuation of my teaching assistantship in the University's writing program was life-changing. I remember talking with him for quite a while . . . about my plans and a raft of other topics, including my experience giving two recent conference presentations at Michigan State University and SUNY Stony Brook. For perhaps the first time in my experience at the University, I had someone genuinely interested in my interests or that I had interests, which was a very different experience for a graduate student. There was no requirement at that moment to shape an intellectual interest to fit with someone else's next book project or some other sundry expectation.

Long's invitation and acceptance set me on my life's journey in the humanities . . . without boundaries, more or less. Ironically, that fall, I became an *ex-officio* member of the vibrant graduate student community in religion and developed important and enduring friendships and intellectual collaborations. In a strange way and in a prophetic way, I fit in better and, perhaps, more significantly as an *outsider* or as a *para/student*² than an insider in religious studies, discovering that any department, school, institution, or community is bigger than any one or two or three individuals and their rhetorical or personal preferences. In short, Long was absolutely correct. The HDP was the institutional space to do the kind of work I was interested in pursuing and, as a bonus, my new graduate student community had no problem with my intellectual project and how it related to religious studies. We constructively debated our way through it all to the point of postmodernism.

What does this narrative have to do with the tangible/intangible dichotomy? Long's power of inquiry was tangible insofar as it followed a quasi-Eliadean methodology, emphasizing an historical and cultural context amplified by existential elements. It was intangible insofar as it erupted from a radical curiosity, a radical curiosity that could quickly identify and differentiate between spaces for inquiry and spaces for silence and silencing—spaces that I am sure he negotiated his entire life in the academy and beyond. I'll return to this later, but for now I will take up a phrase Long used that afternoon when I was formally admitted to the HDP. As I was leaving his office, I thanked him for accepting me into the program, renewing my teaching assistantship, and listening to my plan for research—which

² My first book, *Para/Inquiry: Postmodern Religion and Culture* (Routledge, 2000), which evolved from my dissertation on "para/sacrality," was partially shaped by this institutional and social experience of being *alongside* various modes of thought and engagement as a "para/student."

changed substantially over my time in the program. He said, "That's what I'm all about. No *discourses of exclusion* here." This rang in my ears. Discourses of exclusion? Shutting out? Shutting down? This, for me, was an inflection point. Discourses of exclusion accurately described my time up to that point at the University, especially in the English department which had rightly earned a national reputation for being a highly contentious or, even, toxic space.³ Long, through his administrative capacity, had executed an institutional *short-circuit* and averted *my* educational shutdown.

In the graduate educational process/procedure/ordeal, learning and demonstrating the various disciplinary mechanisms was and always will be required in odd and sometimes coercive ways. However, the condition of "no discourses of exclusion here" also requires something else – the ability to activate one's radical curiosity. This obligation to honor the radical imagination applies equally to students and faculty. No one understood this better than Long . . . in teaching, scholarship, *and* administration. This didn't mean that he agreed with everything or withheld his withering criticism of an argument or interpretation. He did, however, engage and think a matter through and wrestle with whatever possibilities an idea or text or proposition or policy offered.

As we began assembling this special section on Charles H. Long's work and legacy, I decided to share these narrative threads . . . to share these because it collectively captures a series of moments in which Long did something quite remarkable. Remarkable not because it benefitted me personally (although I will always appreciate his support then and now), but for its absolute generosity. Long wasn't a defender of post-Althusserian ideology critique in 1989 or, later, of "postmodern pyrotechnics," as he described the second half of my dissertation. He was generous when it came to the exploration of ideas or, more simply, *thinking* or, in Lyotardian terms, the honor of thinking – even in an administrative context. Someone or anyone should have a space to think. It may not lead anywhere or it could lead somewhere. Who knows? For Long, these were open questions and should remain open questions. Discourses of exclusion, on the contrary, *claim to know in advance* and shutdown possibility and limit thinking to a custodial disciplinary or bureaucratic operation. Sometimes the shutdown isn't even that sophisticated, as I experienced many times as a junior faculty member at a small college where the importance of research and publication was

³ See Steven Mailloux. *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501728433>

culturally diminished. These particular shutdowns often come with a dull, blunt violence – petty and vindictive and at the hands of individuals who see someone’s success as a criticism of their own lives and ill-considered choices. The banality of evil? Not quite that dramatic . . . the banality of mediocrity perhaps? The shutdown, however and wherever it takes place, can proceed through innumerable channels, institutional, professional, and personal. It is something about which we all need to be highly vigilant and ready to short-circuit.

The good news is that Long’s “no discourses of exclusion” zone has intermittently remained open over the years for me, but not without constant struggle. The dissertation I wrote that one religion professor said was “too much like a book” was published by Routledge after I followed the editors and readers advice and made it “less of a dissertation and more of book.” From there, I wrote three more books, edited six projects, published sixty or so essays and have two more manuscripts in process. Long’s legacy for me and many others is his generosity and tenacity for living and thinking in a space of non-exclusion, which many of us who worked with him strive to keep open in our scholarship, teaching, and administrative roles.

As academics, we focus, not surprisingly, on scholarship and teaching, primarily. There is, however, another context in the academy. One that sometimes receives too little attention from scholars . . . largely because it is viewed as the “darker side” of higher education – administration. While the essays collected in this special section focus on Long’s disciplinary research and teaching, I will reflect further on his work as an administrator, generally. Unfortunately, Long never wrote a book on higher ed leadership or published on curriculum design and innovation, with the possible exception of an oddly organized essay entitled “The University, The Liberal Arts, and The Teaching and Study of Religion,” which I will discuss later. He did, nonetheless, provide a “text of practice” that I will refer to directly and indirectly.

I have already described the HDP at Syracuse University as an interdisciplinary or, more accurately, a multi-disciplinary space. The HDP was active and fairly well enrolled until a faculty committee recommended its exit along with other graduate programs in the late 1990s or early 2000s as part of the University’s “right-sizing” initiative, which, I believe, as an institution, it came to regret. The program, for many years, consistently attracted students from a wide range of disciplines and some from the social sciences and professional fields. In the late 1980s, with the hope of revitalizing it, Long was selected by the dean of Arts and Sciences (a philosopher) to be the new

director. Historically, the program was a vestige of a previous organizational structure . . . from a time when departments such as English, philosophy, and religion didn't offer their own doctoral degrees. The HDP served as an umbrella mechanism for these and other departments to enroll doctoral level students and, by proxy, offer a terminal degree. As a result, the HDP suffered from curricular bloat with something like fifty-four additional credit hours beyond the master's degree, two required languages, and five comprehensive exams. It was referred to as the "eternal program" by faculty and students alike from inside and outside the program. With all of its faults, however, it was one of the few, if not the only space in which to do interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary work, which, if I may ungenerously say, may help to explain why a faculty committee ultimately terminated it.

When I joined the HDP, it had this vestigial framework with few, if any, pre-requisites or course sequences. Many of the students in the program were from music and fine arts since that particular department did not offer its own doctoral degree. Over time, the HDP became temporally navigable for these students by allowing them to select graduate level courses from either art history or music history, with a course or two in aesthetics from philosophy. For me, this wasn't going to be an option and Long worked with me to create a specialized course plan or path that included literary studies, legal studies, religion, philosophy, composition and rhetoric, and human geography. Rather than taking an assortment of courses based on what was available in any given semester, Long organized my course selection with "intention," which included the opportunity for independent studies with faculty he felt would contribute to my interdisciplinary studies, namely the late Bill Readings who at the time was at the Université de Montréal. He also directed and scaffolded my courses so that I progressed from higher 500 level courses to 600 and higher level courses. Over all, his approach was to fit my courses with my wider research interests . . . covering gaps and allowing more in-depth study. In other words, he carefully constructed my plan of study in dialogue with me.

While I was completing my better structured and personally organized course plan, Long continued to make changes to the HDP. For instance, French and German were required languages, without exception. Even the art history and music students, to my knowledge, couldn't substitute Italian. I recall discussing this with Long and telling him that French is fine, but that I would need to take more time for German and the completion of a reading comprehensive course offered in the summer. Following his "student-centered" approach to program administration, Long asked what other language made more sense given my

research. “Clearly, Spanish” I answered – since I was planning a Borges and postmodern literature chapter. With that rationale Long amended the language requirement to include two languages “directly related to a student’s program of study.” So, after that change, I assume that for the first time in the history of the program someone studying Italian opera could have Italian as a translation area.

“Intentionally” planning a course of study rather than foraging for one or modifying a graduate language requirement seem simple enough. However, in the context of administrative culture they are not simple at all, especially if “precedent” is the explanation or *rationale* for the *status quo*. First, any change in policy or curriculum requirements requires some rationale, e.g., accreditation standards, staffing issues, financial, etc. Occasionally, the rationale could be predicated on advancing “student-success” or creating a policy-reality that better serves the educational interest of the student. Second, there is a more fundamental barrier to effecting a change in academic policy . . . the lack of an ability to see, as Long notes, a “new world” that is more “inhabitable and beneficial to the human community.”⁴ This, above all other bureaucratic obstacles, is the greatest to overcome.

Near the final section of “The University, The Liberal Arts, and The Teaching and Study of Religions,” Long provides a lengthy passage from Jacques Derrida’s 1983 *Diacritics* essay entitled “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” (see also the epigraph excerpt) Long’s purpose, following Derrida, is to underscore not only the historical and cultural basis of “reason,” but that reason in turn serves very specific institutional, political, and cultural “goal-oriented”⁵ concerns. For Long, the university is more than a community of scholars and their practices; it is a “community of thought”⁶ and as such “[it] would interrogate the very basis of reason, the arche and radicality of the grounding of reason itself.”⁷ In this sense, engaged administration interrogates the *arché* of the academy – the goal-oriented and reason supporting and reason serving institution in all its forms. Long’s reference to Derrida is telling in several ways. First, Derrida’s essay begins by asking how we should not speak about the academy or what the limits are of how we have historically spoken about the academy. Second,

⁴ Charles H. Long, ““The University, The Liberal Arts, and The Teaching and Study of Religions,” in *Ellipsis . . . The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶ Long, 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

Derrida is critical of the instrumentalization of reason in the academy and various “orientation schemes” driving the academy’s *raison d’être*. And, third, Derrida is looking for a discursive opening to introduce a new university that would be predicated on a “community of thought”⁸ and not scholars or “orientations.” The Derridean and Longian university would be an administrative structure or organizational structure directed toward maximizing and optimizing the intellectual movements or modes of thinking⁹ of the “community of thought.” This, for Derrida, would impose upon the university and academy at-large a “new responsibility”:

It is possible to speak of this new responsibility that I have invoked only by sounding a call to practice it. It would be the responsibility of a community of thought for which the frontier between basic and oriented research would no longer be secured, or in any event not under the same conditions as before. I call it a community of thought in the broad sense-“at large”-rather than a community of research, of science or philosophy, since these values are most often subjected to the unquestioned authority of a principle of reason. Now reason is only one species of thought-which does not mean that thought is “irrational.” Such a community would interrogate the essence of reason and of the principle of reason, the values of the basic, of the principal, of radicality, of the Arche in general, and it would attempt to draw out all the possible consequences of this questioning. It is not certain that such thinking can bring together a community or found an institution in the traditional sense of these words. What is meant by community and institution must be rethought. This thinking must also unmask-an infinite task-all the ruses of end-orienting reason, the paths by which apparently disinterested research can find itself indirectly reappropriated, reinvested by programs of all sorts. That does not mean that “orientation” is bad in itself and that it must be combatted, far from it. Rather, I am defining the necessity for a new way of educating students that will prepare them to undertake new analyses in order to evaluate these ends and to choose, when possible, among them all.¹⁰

What Derrida is describing and speculating about is consistent with Long’s view of a university that is open to various modes of

⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 13, No.4, (1983): 16.

⁹ Long, 111.

¹⁰ Derrida, 1983, :16.

thought and the disruption of discourses purporting intellectual dominance – discourses of exclusion and, even, subjugation. For Long, the best example is the place of non-western religions in a western academic or cultural context.¹¹ How often are these traditions correlated or reduced to Christian systems of thought? Mohammedanism? Or, Buddhism reductions to meditation’s usefulness in making workers more productive? However, the issue of systematic, reason-based or western tradition-based dominance extends well beyond the study of religion to the “rethinking of reason in the university.”¹² The concept or imposition of a “new responsibility” to the “community of thought” returns us to the issue of administration or engaged administration.

In the anecdotal examples of Long’s interventions and administrative short-circuitings of academic rigidity and intellectual narrowness, we see a radical wisdom in his decision-making process. Under his directorship, the HDP at Syracuse reflected his commitment to an openness to various modes of thought. For instance, from Long’s perspective, the program and the university was or should have been a space for unencumbered teaching, inquiry, and research – and those charged or trusted with the responsibility of administrative oversight needed to expand this mission, not contract it. Long’s intervention years ago on my behalf was, for me, a significant intellectual and administrative lesson. While post-Althusserian ideology critique or ideology critique, in general, for example, is not something that I would invest in today (although my work on Žižek addresses it), it was and is a legitimate form of inquiry and completely relevant to the study of religion previously and today. Disqualifying it as an intellectual approach, like disqualifying any intellectual approach, is a political judgment and power move.¹³ In these exclusionary situations it is about preferential force and not about the movement of the community of thought, which, according to Derrida and Long, is something to which we are responsible. I think there is a broader set of lessons here for anyone in administration. Is the organization becoming more open or more closed under leadership? Where

¹¹ Long, 111.

¹² Long, 114.

¹³ The literary studies major at York College of Pennsylvania required students to take one or two “figure/author” courses – most elected for Shakespeare. However, one semester I offered a course on the topic of “Žižek and the humanities.” The program administrator at the time disqualified this course saying in an email to me that “Zizec (sic) had nothing to do with literature.” Through a series of administrative moves, which resulted in five or six students switching to me as their faculty advisor, the course was eventually re-qualified for the “figure/author” mode. Again, an example of “no discourses of exclusion here” meeting an instance of preferential force – even at a small college.

are the discourses of exclusion? Who is being left out? How are people being invited in? What does it mean to belong to an organization? These questions reflect the concern of an engaged administrator and, in the case of Charles Long, they reflect a wider concern about how to make the world or a “new world . . . [more] inhabitable and beneficial to the human community” . . . in its widest and most inclusive definition and form.