

ANTHONY LIVERSIDGE

**Serge Lang Interview (April 26, 1993)<sup>#</sup>**

Exploring ideas with Yale mathematician Serge Lang is anything but dull. Lang's ruling passion is accuracy, in words as much as in mathematics, and woe betide the clumsy interviewer. "That's not what I said!" he will scold, his sharp nose quivering and his brown eyes shining with righteous indignation. "Don't use your words, use mine!"

Then he will laugh to relieve the tension and make sure his purism is not taken personally. For Lang's overriding aim in public debate is to improve standards of accuracy, not to provoke personal reaction.

His establishment colleagues are indeed often disconcerted by Lang's outrage at inexact and self-serving formulations of issues in academic debate and journalism. For his targets are mighty names that have grown unused to challenge: powerful scientists, heavyweight academics, editors of scientific journals, university deans, and other high ranking members (or prospective members) of prominent institutions, in particular the National Academy of Sciences. A one-man strike force in the cause of honesty and accuracy, Lang is ready to take on any of them, if he feels the issue being distorted is sufficiently important.

These modern mandarins must be shocked at what happens when Lang feels they are abusing their trust. Instead of the cosy exchanges behind the scenes that intra-establishment politics is normally confined to, they are, as Lang terms it gleefully, "put through the meat grinder!"

A top mathematician and a member of the exclusive National Academy of Sciences since 1985, Lang himself is praised by Yale colleagues for what they call his "enormously energetic teaching devoted far beyond the call of duty", as well as the thirty four books he has written expounding mathematics up to the frontiers of research in a variety of fields, and his talent for grand synthesis.

What they call Lang's "pedagogical genius" has led him, unlike most other leading mathematicians, to write math books for high school students to help improve the state of elementary math education in the US.

Born in Paris in 1927, Lang came to live in the States at the age of 13. Graduating from Caltech, he spent a year and a half in the army, and then a year as a philosophy graduate student at Princeton before switching to mathematics and receiving his Ph.D. He taught mathematics at Columbia for fifteen years and then briefly at Princeton and Harvard before settling in at Yale in 1972.

He has published more than 70 research articles. His latest paper is on "explicit formulae" in analytical number theory. What one colleague calls his sometimes "stupendous" results have won the Cole Prize, America's top algebra medal, and the French Academy's Prix Carriere. He won the Humboldt Award in 1984.

What makes Lang unique, however, and what has put him in the limelight is his fierce determination to keep facts straight and intellectual behavior proper in academic circles and the media when disputes arise. Unlike most Ivy League academics, he is an activist willing to survive being perceived as a troublemaker.

His best known intervention came in the mid-eighties, when Harvard professor of government Samuel Huntington was nominated for the National Academy of Science. Lang, himself elected only the previous year, objected there were serious flaws in the political scientist's works, including a textbook then used at Yale and elsewhere. He sparked a battle royal over the

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<sup>#</sup> For OMNI Magazine in New York. Copyright Anthony Liversidge. (Version edited with agreement with Lang Saturday, March 31, 2001).

nomination which lasted two years, and in the end Huntington never made it into the most exclusive science club in US academia.

Notable interventions for Lang also include spiking a Federal government attempt to get professors to fill in "effort reports" to detail the "per cent of time and effort" a professor spent on various activities, a demand which Lang found quite absurd. His stand as a national leader against this encroachment of bureaucracy cost him his National Science Foundation grant. Yale turned it down, even though Lang had the support in writing of the director of the NSF and Yale's own Deputy Provost. But he won. The government gave up on the idea.

In another victory, he derailed a national survey on the attitudes of thousands of American professors, written by prominent sociologists Everett Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset, and backed by major foundations. When Lang received his questionnaire in the mail, he was infuriated by what he characterized as its misleading formulations and he fought to discredit the project.

Much of Lang's influence has been won by a novel and fearsome weapon he has developed: the notorious Lang "File".

In this unique strategy Lang moves against an alleged information polluter by engaging him or her in correspondence, and building up a large File of letters, press clips, congressional testimony, and similar documentation on the issue. He may then mail this substantial "File", which can reach a hundred pages or more, to several hundred academics, members of the National Academy of Science, government officials, influential journalists and the like.

The recipients get an inside look at the complete details of an affair, the correspondence that has been written as well as published material, a rounded view not normally available even to participants. They can see for themselves the truth of Lang's strictures, and the level of cooperation or resistance he met with.

His 700 page File on the Lipset questionnaire was published by Springer Verlag as *The File* in 1981.

Another huge File of Lang's offers exceptionally extensive coverage of the recent David Baltimore affair, a now famous case in science politics. In this extended scandal, biology postgraduate Margot O'Toole's challenge to a paper that Nobel laureate Baltimore had coauthored resulted, after Baltimore stonewalled university, NIH and congressional investigations, in the prominent scientist resigning as president of Rockefeller University. Few if any outsiders had access to the full details of the case until Lang compiled his comprehensive File, which included his own involvement, published articles, and any and all other correspondence.

The editorial board of the journal *Ethics and Behaviour* were so impressed with Lang's "highly novel and fascinating means to approach a complex case" that editor Gerald Koocher published Lang's article on the Baltimore File in his January 1993 issue, even though it was 70 pages long.

Kindred spirits praise Lang's efforts as an invaluable counterweight to the power politics distorting modern science. Walter Stewart and Ned Feder, the science fraudbusters who were recently closed down by NIH bureaucrats, say Lang's File on their predicament has been "extremely helpful". Lang's File on Baltimore was a "spectacularly good job", says a Berkeley historian.

Yale colleagues call him 'heroic' for his defeat of 'effort reporting'. But even some admirers say Lang may be too strongminded for his own good. His 'inflexible polemics' are often 'counterproductive', says one.

I drove to Yale to talk to Lang in his Yale office and over lunch. At first I found him rigid to the extent of seeming uncooperative in rejecting misleading formulations of his activities. After all, that journalistic trick is standard for eliciting an interviewee's vision in his own words. But I also saw that exactness was not an unreasonable request. For Lang's core issue may be that in the politics of being collegial, maintaining face and avoiding conflict, standards do unravel. In professional discussion, Lang insists on precision before agreement, not vice-versa.

And when Lang stepped out of his public role as the fire breathing watchdog of intellectual standards, he was cheerful and friendly. I left his office with my arms full of unique and fascinating insider documentation of scientific politics. - Anthony Liversidge (April 26 1993).

**AL:** This interview is not the kind of exchange you usually do, is it?

**Lang:** No, I usually provide documentation. I have accepted because I want to draw some readers' attention to the existence of my documentation. but I don't want to shift the emphasis from the documentation to talking about it. The danger of such a shift in emphasis is ever present, and I warn readers strongly against it. Talking about my Files and Filemaking is not a substitute for the documentation itself.

**AL:** Can you tell us about your math career?

**Lang:** I never had one! As a mathematician you prove big time theorems, or pretty good theorems, at a relatively early age, and you become a full professor, and that's it! That's how we think. We just keep on doing mathematics. You get to be a professor by the time you are 30 or 32, and there's no higher position. Some people want to make it on committees and academies and all that sort of stuff. but the math community is set up so we mostly admire those that go on producing theorems. I think that's pretty healthy.

**AL:** So what do you want to teach people outside mathematics?

**Lang:** One thing I want to teach people is that if they are asked a question, the first thing they have to decide is whether to accept the terms of the question, or whether to challenge them. I also want to explain how I regard certain works as defective, and that I reject three items - excessive generality, attribution of motivation and speculation - in trying to correct the defects.

**AL:** What is the general problem you are addressing?

**Lang:** One basic problem that is common to practically all the issues that I have got involved in is the problem of processing information, and disseminating information accurately. What I have found is an overall failure in the establishment media and also within the universities.

I emphasize this point explicitly at the end of my book on the Huntington case, where I list sources of misinformation, ways misinformation is spread, through the academic world, through the media and through the government, ways misinformation is accepted, ways critical thinking is inhibited, and then the decisions we have to make on how we can make corrections, and how the corrections are obstructed.

**AL:** How are your corrections received?

**Lang:** What is remarkable is the way people react in the face of this operation. In each case in which I have been involved, there has been some question raised in some fashion about the legitimacy of my questioning and of the corrective action I was trying to induce.

But I was not interested merely in a theoretical discussion, as some people like to phrase it. I was interested in corrective action. To get corrective action one needs correct information to be passed on to people.

**AL:** What led you to intervene in the case of Robert Gallo, for example?

**Lang:** The (National) Academy (of Sciences) last year nominated a panel to oversee the NIH review of Gallo's research practices, following the allegations by John Crewdson in the Chicago Tribune. The higher-ups at NIH, especially NIH director Bernadine Healy, were covering up for Gallo. I had a big mailing documenting that cover up.

I wrote to the council of the National Academy of Sciences that they should investigate the merits of Gallo's election to membership, since some people take this seriously as certifying scientific achievement and credibility. They refused to take action.

I also objected to the way in which the scientists on the panel were treated by the NIH.

On the other hand, they themselves used certain techniques of obfuscation instead of clarification when asked about their activities. They refused to give precise information publicly, they signed a "confidentiality agreement", they made ambiguous statements to the press, they left out certain points documented by Crewdson, they defined the responsibilities ambiguously, and so on.

**AL:** Can you suggest a model of how scientists should behave politically?

**Lang:** I would pick (the physicist) Richard Feynman. When he was asked to be a member of the commission investigating the Challenger disaster, he gave us a model of scientific responsibility.

He resisted attempts by (commission chairman William) Rogers to inhibit his investigation. He interviewed engineers and others at Morton Thiokol. He explained the scientific facts to the public. He bought pliers and screwdrivers and a clamp in a hardware store and showed publicly in front of the video cameras how rubber O rings lose their elasticity at low temperatures. He resisted being railroaded into modifying his report. He insisted it was published intact and he took full responsibility for it. He wrote about all this in his book, *What Do You Care What Other People Think?*

Unfortunately over the last few years I haven't found many instances of the Feynman model in the politics and policing of science. But I have found plenty of instances of another model, which consists of evasion, fudging, and obstruction of information, if not outright disinformation.

My question is how long the scientific community is going to tolerate such deterioration of scientific standards.

**AL:** What do you hope to do with your interventions?

**Lang:** To give accurate information to people, and teach them how to process information and teach them the different ways of formulating issues, some of which I regard as defective. Some of these are illustrated in my critique of the Lipset Survey of the American Professorate.

For instance, in one question in the survey they ask: 'Do you strongly agree, agree with reservations, disagree with reservations, or strongly disagree, with this statement: "Economic growth, not redistribution, should be the primary objective of American economic policy?'

I reject the way the question is formulated.

**AL:** Why is that?

**Lang:** First, the question is formulated with an alternative which smacks of left wing-right wing rhetoric. I don't see the alternative as being between growth and redistribution. Second, I don't see either as being a primary objective of American economic policy. I don't see any single objective as being the primary one. There are many simultaneous ones.

One has to do with dwindling resources - minerals, forests, oil - and how we adjust to that by changing the tax laws, by changing how we consume, by taxing gasoline or energy, or by directing the production of automobiles through tax laws, whether we build highways which enhance the automobile at the expense of trains and public transportation, and so on.

That issue, how to deal with diminishing resources, is not a question of economic growth or redistribution. But I certainly view it as a major objective of American economic policy.

**AL:** You mean the question is poorly worded?

**Lang:** The question is defective in the precise way I describe. I'll give you another example. Do you strongly approve, approve with reservations, disapprove with reservations, strongly disapprove a) the use of marijuana b) swinging (the swapping of sexual partners among married couples). (There you have a bit of cheesecake for your magazine!) c) pornographic motionpictures and magazine. d) premarital sex e) the use of such drugs as heroin and cocaine f) extramarital

sexual relations in the absence of the spouse's consent. g) the level of violence prevailing in current tv programming.

Whether someone has extra marital relations is none of my business. It's between spouses and whoever else is concerned. Who am I to interfere with their lives? What of it if a lot of people want to watch pornographic pictures? My choice of answer for such items is that it's none of your business! But that alternative was not proposed.

**AL:** Why was it important to point out the defects of the questionnaire?

**Lang:** Lipset is an influential member of the National Academy of Sciences. He is a famous professor who was at Stanford and who now has a name professorship at George Mason university. The survey was financed by the National Science Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. It went to 9000 professors, and it was being published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and discussed in *Time* and *Newsweek* and the *Manchester Guardian* and the campus report of Stanford university.

The authors of the survey stated that 'The primary reason for this faculty survey is to collect information useful to the formation of sound education policy.' I didn't see what my attitudes toward pornographic motion pictures and extramarital sex have to do with sound education policy.

What I have noticed in the production of Lipset and others, not only in these works but previous works, is major incompetence in formulating social issues and political issues, and giving information about them - professional incompetence as a person involved with teaching and dealing with social matters.

It's not my professional responsibility to make up a survey. He's the one who calls himself a political scientist. I see my responsibility as educational towards students, and towards the public at large, in perhaps teaching them different standards which they then may choose to adopt or not adopt. And in that I see myself as quite effective. I think I taught a lot of people something about how to recognize a defective way of presenting issues. That is an educational function.

**AL:** This was a success for you, then?

**Lang:** In a limited sense, because the whole problem has also to do with what is done and will be done in the classroom by the academics who "pretested" that questionnaire and didn't perceive its flaws. The whole establishment around Lipset.

So it was successful only in a very limited sense. I am never exclusively after the immediate objective. The fact that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* stopped publishing articles by Lipset on the survey is a sign of success but a limited sign. Because what I want to affect at the least, in addition, is how things occur in the classroom, what books are used and how they are used, how questions are formulated in the media, in the classroom, and in the government.

**AL:** How do you aim to intervene in issues?

**Lang:** When I intervene I ask opponents to put certain things on the record. Then I can document contradictions. At one point they have created one type of reality, and at another they have created another type. These contradict each other. I show them the contradiction and at that point they begin stonewalling or accusing me of McCarthyism.

**AL:** They are never motivated to cooperate?

**Lang:** I can't say. I won't use that word "motivation". I register a fact that once I point out and try to establish a written record, and make them come out in the written record, which points to certain contradictions, then I meet with either stonewalling, or insults, like calling it 'McCarthyism'. Or people talking behind my back saying I am 'crazy.' That is the type of response.

**AL:** So what reason do you imagine they have to stonewall?

**Lang:** I don't want to go into the pop psychology of reasons. My mind does not run that way. I register a fact. It is for them to give the reasons.

If you forced them to give reasons, on the basis of my past experience my prediction is that you will pick up contradictions quickly enough. When they realise what is being done to them they will start stonewalling. That is part of the dynamics of the exchange in Filemaking.

**AL:** Is there a philosophical basis for your method?

**Lang:** I thought of this way of operating and thinking when I was a graduate student of philosophy in 1947.

I was technically trained in French schools until the age of thirteen in writing and in organizing thought, and I read a lot of philosophy and literature. As a graduate student in philosophy I studied the development of Western thought at a professional level, and arrived at a mode of operation for myself to use in journalistic, political, and academic intellectual discourse.

I first tried it in public confrontation and political engagement in the sixties, and I have used it since against whoever comes up. It is a very powerful tool - philosophy put into practice in daily life.

So I claim I belong in philosophy's history books. There is a certain thread in the history of philosophy from Socrates to Hume, to Bertrand Russell, to the physicists of relativity and quantum mechanics, to the Vienna circle, to Lang, that says that before you can agree or disagree with a statement, you have to determine what the statement means.

In Huntington's and Lipset's work they claim meaning in the scientific sense, in the verifiable sense. They claim factuality. But they give no evidence they can tell the difference between a fact, a perception of a fact, an opinion, and a hole in the ground. That's where I catch them.

Obviously this philosophical claim will sound rather pretentious before people see the filing cabinets of documentation about how it is put in practice.

And I don't want to shift the focus from the defects of the works I criticize to something else, where no one is correct or incorrect. That is, to states of mind. I have had it with states of mind. I am trying to avoid discussion which deals only with states of minds.

**AL:** Would you say that many of today's periodicals only project states of mind?

**Lang:** It is difficult to get anything but pieces of states of mind published in this country. Many periodicals give precious little information, if any at all. A state of mind is neither true nor false, correct nor incorrect. What I want is to teach people how to process information correctly. Of course I am not saying states of mind are unimportant. If other people want to wallow in states of mind, let them. I don't pretend my personal preferences are universal laws. I and the founding fathers prefer a certain type of society, that is all.

**AL:** How did you begin taking this kind of action?

**Lang:** I came out of the woodwork of mathematics in 1966, and until 1969 I was very active, socially and politically in the broad sense.

The sixties considered very many issues simultaneously, not only the Vietnam war. There were issues of liberation of women, of blacks, of other minorities, and of ecology. There were issues of journalism, such as to what extent you let people speak with their own voice, what goes into the regular media, and does one have to have new media to have what you want to say printed because you can't get it seen in the establishment media?

There were issues of personal relationships, and issues of to what extent the universities were subjected to political pressures, the student protest movement, and so on. All of that was brought to the fore in the sixties.

So in the sixties there were all these kinds of issues and to the extent they affected the universities I was involved in trying to get accurate information spread, rather than disinformation.

One issue arose in questioning the involvement of universities with secret agencies like the CIA. To the extent the universities have a privileged position in society for seeking the truth, then they should stay away from getting involved in secret arrangements.

**AL:** But then you withdrew for a time?

**Lang:** My involvement in a lot of questions was seriously interfering with my mathematical production and I went back into the mathematical woodwork in 1970. I stayed there till 1977 when I got the survey called the 1977 Survey of the American Professorate in the mail.

Even then nothing would have happened if they hadn't answered a letter I fired off telling them to lay off. But Lipset answered, and prodded by some friends of mine and the fact that Lipset was mixed up in certain important scientific and social organizations and agencies, my involvement escalated until I became fully involved in discrediting the survey, which was to be used for policy decisions for the country, for the universities, for education.

The high point was when I published an article in the New York Review Of Books, discrediting that survey. The manner in which the questions were asked prejudiced the issue to the point where I didn't want to deal with the issues on the terms proposed by that survey. And it went beyond the questioning of surveys.

**AL:** How so?

**Lang:** It had to do with the general reaction: if I am presented with a question, do I accept the terms of the question or do I reject the question? I applied it to Lipset since Lipset was involved with the Carnegie and other important foundations, and the National Academy of Sciences, and could get the results of his so called survey printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where he had thirteen articles. It was of considerable national importance.

So I escalated the fight to discredit that particular concrete case of disinformation. My involvement has been continuous since then, one way or the other, especially on issues which concern the universities and science.

**AL:** What provoked your File on the Baltimore affair?

**Lang:** It was a concrete instance of questions of scientific responsibility I wanted to raise. I saw the scientific establishment illegitimately attack (Congressman John) Dingell, and back up some scientists who refused to answer questions about their work. One doesn't need technical competence in a particular field, such as biology, to evaluate the ways in which questions were raised about experiments, or how they answered. There were extraordinary forces and pressures at work, including the courage, stamina and clearheadedness of Margot O'Toole. But the case provided one concrete illustration of larger problems of responsibility. In the case of challenges, sometimes those in power leave no choice but to submit to authority or escalate the challenge. Usually the process stops early because those raising the challenge lack resources to continue.

On the basis of the Baltimore case and other cases I conclude that to uphold the traditional standards of science, scientists cannot rely on authority, on panels, on big time certifications such as Nobel prizes or membership in the National Academy of Sciences. They cannot count on the press or on congressional committees to police the scientific community. They need to rely on individual responsibility.

Scientists need to create an atmosphere without fear of retaliation, where young and established scientists can exercise this responsibility without fear for their careers, or their funding, or their publications.

**AL:** Perhaps the publication of part of your Baltimore File will help this come about?

**Lang:** I can never tell what effect something will have. Maybe I have made some people change their minds on certain issues by giving them proper facts and documentation. I cannot tell. Some effects are only visible decades later. It's very long range.

Sometimes I have to sacrifice having an immediate effect for having a more profound effect in the long term. I am never sure of getting it. So rather than adapting a piece for an immediate effect I adapt it ad hoc for a possible long term effect. I have to make a judgement on every piece I write.

**AL:** Your most famous intervention is the Huntington affair. Did you win your point completely?

**Lang:** That is going too far. He is not in the Academy. I expect that he is not about to be in it, and a lot of people's consciousness has been raised.

But there is no such thing as winning completely in this game. Huntington served only as a focus for a wider attack on the deficiencies of a large part of the social sciences establishment, and of the certification system in the US via, for instance, the National Academy of Sciences.

So there is no such thing as winning completely. No such thing.

**AL:** What did you object to in Huntington's works?

**Lang:** Huntington has fantastic credentials. He was director of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard at the time. He has consulted for the National Security Council, the Defense Department and the CIA. He has been on national commissions.

But when I looked at some of his work - specifically his book, *Political Order In Changing Societies* - I found it deficient from beginning to end. The book purports to deal with changing societies throughout the world and these societies are exceedingly different. You have some Western societies like France and Belgium, places like South Africa and North African countries, and others throughout the world. and he purports to describe whether a country is satisfied or not. And one of the studies he was quoting in that book classified South Africa as a satisfied society.

Now a Yale undergraduate and I raised questions about that. Instead of answering those questions in a scholarly fashion, Huntington and the establishment around him either didn't answer, or when they finally answered, they answered through the *New Republic*. They had a graduate student at Harvard who was not identified in the *New Republic* as such, write an article claiming that I didn't know what I was talking about and claiming that I hadn't read Huntington's work and couldn't evaluate it.

Instead of answering the question about South Africa as a "satisfied society" in a scholarly way, Huntington was quoted by Fareed Zakaria in the *New Republic* as follows: "The term 'satisfied' has to do with whether or not there are measurable signs that people are satisfied or not with their lot. That lot may be good, fair or awful; what this particular term is describing is the fact that the people for some reason are not protesting it. When this study... was made in the early sixties, there had been no major riots, strikes or disturbances in (South Africa)."

But that is completely false! Throughout the decades of the fifties there had been riots, protests, strikes and police firing on crowds reported systematically in the *New York Times*. Someone made a search for me, and found fifty pages worth of articles about protests throughout that decade, culminating with the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, where fifty people were killed. It was headline material in newspapers throughout the world for a week.

So Huntington is professionally incompetent in not knowing the history of South Africa, and the *New Republic* is editorially incompetent also in not knowing that history and printing what that graduate student at Harvard passed off as a fact and in misinforming their readers. That is a very concrete and very good example of misinformation.

Not only does Huntington not know the history of South Africa, but he also misrepresents on what basis South Africa was classified as a "satisfied society" in the study he mentions in the book. But it's even worse than that. In the study quoted by Huntington, the authors set up a way of evaluating countries on the other side of the world by making up a 'Frustration index', Which they said was a country's combined coded score on the six satisfaction indices: gnp, caloric intake,

telephones, physicians, newspapers and radios. This was "divided by either the country's coded literacy or coded urbanization score, whichever was higher."

This study received a prize from the America Association for the Advancement of Science. So the AAAS is also implicated in the certification of the "frustration index" as science.

So Huntington is ignorant of the "measurable signs" used in his own book (GNP, caloric intake, etc.). These signs are merely political choices, reflecting his outlook on the world, or that of the authors of the original study, but passed off as science.

Academics in Huntington's establishment use this type of approach in consulting for the government. They put it in textbooks and teach it in schools.

But the whole approach is cockeyed. It's insane! There is no way you can find out about the rest of the world if you take that approach! To try to determine in some country whether the people in that country are satisfied on the basis of GNP, caloric intake, telephones, physicians, newspapers and radios!

Because if you do that you won't find out how countries and regions as diverse as Belgium, South Africa, South America, Middle East or Vietnam react and what issues are important to them. And it will grossly misinform undergraduates who read that book as a text as to how to study people and determine what is important to them.

To find out about the different ways of thinking and reacting in South Africa, and the Middle East, in Vietnam, in the US, in France, in Belgium, one must take into account the conditions and ways of thinking specific to each society. And if you formulate your question in universal terms like caloric intake, newspapers and radios, you are not going to find out what is going on in Vietnam, or even France or Belgium.

The problems in South Africa with apartheid are completely different from the problems in the Middle East with oil and the Israelis and the Muslims. They are different from the problems of the French and the Flemish in Belgium. When these political scientists called South Africa a satisfied society, did they ask the blacks if they were satisfied?

These political scientists didn't find out the essential political feature that causes problems in South Africa, namely apartheid. That's it. Anybody who reads a newspaper can figure it out. Huntington's approach was cockeyed and promoted disinformation. It brought undergraduates to think in a certain way, people who are later going to be influential in education, journalism and politics, and who will make policy decisions about the world.

That's why I regard it as serious and important to stop the spread of that disinformation.

**AL:** So it did not hinge, as some suggested, on doubts that political science is truly a science?

**Lang:** I don't know what the word 'is' means! It depends how you wish to use the word 'science'. I don't want to get into that particular argument. The extent of the issue I wish to get into and have gotten into is this: are those who claim to be political scientists providing accurate information concerning political structures and situations or are they passing off political opinions as science?

**AL:** Have you ever won the cooperation of a victim?

**Lang:** It is relatively rare! Gerald Feldman, a professor of history at Berkeley became a friend. I got to know him because he and another professor at Yale got into a well publicized controversy with other historians, especially Jon Wiener who wrote things up in a very tendentious way for the *Nation*.

After I got acquainted with the documentation, I fully supported Feldman in this case, and got myself into a confrontation with the *Nation* and its editor Victor Navasky about their defective journalism. So there is a "*Nation*-Wiener" File which I have passed around.

Then I found out that Feldman himself in the sixties signed a public letter with a number of other professors against the Vietnam Day Committee in Berkeley. I picked that letter apart for it

misquotations and misrepresentations and for the way he handled political responsibilities. I made a File, and he agreed to be a Filee, he cooperated with his own File, and he had to issue a retraction and an apology for something he did 25 years ago. I asked for a retraction and an apology and I got it because Feldman is honest and fairly lucid.

One can make friends with a guy like that. and I did!

**AL:** Maybe he should have kept quiet and not replied to you, since you say that results in no further correspondence!

**Lang:** It was his choice. Either he issues the retraction and apology, and stays friends with me, or he doesn't, and then he is just another guy I make a File on. Well, as it turned out, he was another guy I made a File on, but he cooperated with the File, so we stayed great friends! Isn't that something?!!

**AL:** So a Filee is not necessarily an adversary or an enemy?

**Lang:** No, and Feldman is there to prove it. A very nice case. (President of Yale A. Bartlett) Giamatti is one too, from just before he became president. Sure.

I had a File on an article he wrote in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* which was totally defective - misrepresentations, misquotations, defamation, slander. I had a big confrontation with him, but he saw he had goofed, and although he never admitted it in writing, he did verbally, and we stayed fabulous friends forever after.

He was smart enough never to write. He didn't try it. The guy who answered and got caught in the meat grinder was the editor of the *Yale Alumni Magazine* called William Zinsser. So it is called the Zinsser File and not the Giamatti File.

If he had not written anything, there would be no File. You see, the only safe thing is just don't write, don't talk, don't send letters, just disappear - that's relatively safe! Nothing is completely safe! But it is the safest. The moment they write they get caught!

**AL:** So it seems!

**Lang:** The whole idea is that you can apply systematically in daily life in political, intellectual and journalistic confrontations a well thought out manner of discourse, rooted in the history of philosophy and literature.

**AL:** Do people's reactions vary a great deal?

**Lang:** One of the most interesting things is the psychology of these people. I can never comment explicitly on their personality but like any theatre - Shakespeare or Shaw or anybody - personality comes out in the scenario, and how they express themselves.

I can never myself comment on that aspect. It has to come out from them. It's drama. It's theatre! They are on the stage. I provide a stage and they act out themselves!

**AL:** Are you the director?

**Lang:** I am both producer and director and one of the principal actors. On the other hand I cannot write their script. I can only provide the stage for them. Their script they write themselves. But then I hold them accountable for what they have done. But it's in a professional capacity. I couldn't do it in a personal relationship. I wouldn't do it. It's off limits. But Feldman joined in a public letter, so I could hold him accountable publicly for what he did. We remained friends but I lost none of the sharpness in criticizing him publicly.

**AL:** Isn't that the way academia is meant to work?

**Lang:** Well it's certainly the way I would like academia to work. It's the official rhetoric. But I have found that in practice it does not work that way. To have an exchange as I had with Feldman is practically impossible in academia. Exceedingly rare.

What I have found is just stonewalling, coverups, evasions. Whereas with Feldman it worked to have it all out with his cooperation. It's very nice when it works out like that.

**AL:** How did you get involved with Peter Duesberg, the member of the National Academy who argues that the HIV is not the cause of AIDS?

**Lang:** Somebody showed him a mailing of a File I had on Robert Gallo, the US scientist who first made the claim that HIV is the cause of AIDS. Then he sent me half an inch of stuff, and his carelessness was sufficiently low and the defectiveness of the people opposing him was sufficiently high that I decided it was worth helping him to prepare his case in the most efficient way.

**AL:** He was careless?

**Lang:** Oh, sure. Carelessness or incompetence in the use of language where he overdoes generalities and absolute statements. Once I point it out, he says you are right and corrects it. But his opponents were so fundamentally defective in what they wrote it really got to me.

The problem of HIV and AIDS is a complicated one, too complicated for me to comment any further here, except for one brief statement. I have seen misinformation about HIV and AIDS passed out by official agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, certain scientists involved in studying HIV, and the scientific press.

Because of that misinformation, I question as a whole notions which are generally accepted concerning HIV as "the AIDS virus". As far as I am concerned, I have seen no evidence which I find convincing as to what causes AIDS. Even the definition of AIDS has been mismanaged by official organizations, some scientists, and the press, scientific and otherwise, to the point where I see a morass and a mess which is in itself very difficult to disentangle. To document how I arrived at this conclusion cannot be done here.

**AL:** Do you enjoy proving others wrong?

**Lang:** Not at all. I may enjoy doing something that enhances discourse. If it happens to prove someone wrong that is incidental. In asking me whether I enjoy proving someone wrong, you question my motivation. I object.

**AL:** Your approach seems to tackle and block many ways people avoid the point.

**Lang:** Certainly it is an essential aspect of what I do. I don't know how successful I am, because the approach causes opponents to disengage and stonewall. But with my approach, they cannot simply shift the focus of the issue from the factual defectiveness of their work to the question of motivation, which cannot be settled by simply saying someone is correct or incorrect.

On the subject of motivations you can go on and on and on with what I call big time bullshitting, and that is what I eliminate from the discourse. That is not to say motivation is not important. It is important to many people at many times. But I do not want to deal with it in discussing the merits of a piece written in the line of professional and institutional responsibility.

I try to maintain certain standards in the manner of discourse. I try to prevent shifting the focus of a discussion from the merits of a piece at hand to motivation. just as I try to avoid generalizations, and speculation.

**AL:** You avoid the diversionary traps that other people fall into?

**Lang:** I don't call them traps. I say some people fall into manners of discourse with which I don't wish to deal. I wish to deal with the actual merits of the piece at hand. If I use your word "traps" I have already gone along with something I wish to eliminate. I resist such formulations. I want to use language much more precisely.

**AL:** Your approach seems to work pretty well.

**Lang:** The approach is foolproof. After 25 years of academic, intellectual, journalistic, and political confrontations I have never seen my way fail. People have simply not been able to answer.

**AL:** You go after only certain targets?

**Lang:** My opponents are those who have chosen to take on institutional and professional responsibilities. It is Huntington who chose to advise the government and become that kind of professor, and who throws his weight around. His books are used in the classroom. Editors of influential journals have institutional and professional responsibilities and I hold them accountable.

**AL:** Is it right to say that you are fighting the flow of misinformation from the academic world into government and the media?

**Lang:** Wherever it comes from. Misinformation can come from many places such as radio stations, newspapers, television. Since I myself am in the academic world I am especially interested in the area where the academic world meets the world of journalism and world of politics in the broad sense, where it concerns the nature of social organization, our relationship to authority and how you structure social organizations and the educational system. Politics in the broad sense.

**AL:** Do you see much misinformation these days?

**Lang:** All over the place, starting with the *New York Times*, but also in the *Nation*, and the *New Republic*, and the *Washington Post*, and the television stations, and courses in the universities. There is enough to go around. Most places I look I find a defective flow of information. There is suppression of information, and the tendentious organization of information.

It's got nothing to do with left wing, right wing or any wing - nothing to do with ideologies. It just happens. The *New York Times* is not particularly left or right, but it is full of misinformation. So is the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Washington Post*.

On certain scientific issues, the scientific magazines haven't done very well either, whether *Science* or *Nature*. And the *Scientist* - you can throw that in too. I obviously can't reproduce here the documentation for my low opinion of these publications, but I have drawers full.

**AL:** On what basis do you feel so strongly about fighting misinformation?

**Lang:** It is not for me to tell other people what they ought to do, but if they peddle disinformation I hold them accountable for it if they hold positions of authority or influence. Huntington is both an eminent professor at Harvard and a consultant for the government. As a person of authority in the classroom I hold him accountable for the information or disinformation he puts out there. He took on the responsibility by being a professor with tenure, and in advising the government to take certain policy decisions. I hold him accountable for the information or disinformation he gives to the government, just as I hold the government accountable for evaluating that information.

The president of the United States is accountable. If he screws up, we don't reelect him, that's all. And I don't see why we shouldn't hold professors accountable for whatever they are pushing in the classroom, protected by tenure. They are accountable for the information or disinformation they peddle in the classroom. I hold them accountable. I point out the misinformation and then I leave it open for the community to decide what they want to tolerate.

As a matter of fact at Yale they stopped putting Huntington's book on the required reading list in political science 111b within two years after I raised my objections. But it is still used elsewhere. Mind you, I am not for burning Huntington's book. It might very well be used as an example of what not to do in political science. But from what I have seen, it is used uncritically. It is for the academic world to decide what to do by open public discussion and if possible publication.

In the Huntington case I was prevented from publishing pieces I offered both to scholarly journals and to the national press. *Discover* magazine, and the journals of the American Political

Science Association, and the American Sociological Association, published articles which misrepresented my criticisms, but they did not accept for publication corrective pieces I offered in response.

At least three other people wrote letters to the editors of *Discover* supporting my point of view and their letters were not published either. I know, because the authors sent me copies directly.

**AL:** But wasn't your piece in a very different style from the *Discover* magazine style?

**Lang:** You are suggesting that as an excuse. I don't know. The editors didn't give any reason. They just rejected it out of hand. It's not for me to guess at the reasons. I would regard that as improper. I note the fact I was misrepresented in the magazine and not allowed to publish a rebuttal. That's the fact that I regard as important.

In any case, I don't regard the reason you suggest to be valid. Their "style" as you call it was tendentious and defamatory. So of course I would write differently.

**AL:** Is it true to say that your method is to stick to the facts and avoid being political or personal?

**Lang:** I am highly political in the sense that politics have to do with social organization, relationship to authority, and how information is distributed and used in making policy decisions. Mostly I am interested in the educational side of politics and how people formulate and evaluate issues having to do with society. Certainly it's political. But I don't use the word political as a rhetorical thrust.

**AL:** What about your own motives. Will you say what they are?

**Lang:** It isn't for me to explain my activity in trying to maintain standards of accuracy in the academic or journalistic world, following the standard rhetoric of universities. It is for others to explain why they do not maintain these standards. The rhetoric of the universities is dished out continuously by their presidents making speeches to alumni, to students, or at other universities. That rhetoric is standard. Get those presidents or the National Academy of Sciences to explain the discrepancy between uttering the big time rhetoric of truth and standards and then allowing around them transgressions of that rhetoric without doing anything about it. Ask them. Don't ask me.

**AL:** While you obviously feel very strongly about misinformation, it seems that many people don't.

**Lang:** Then I point out the consequences. Students are trained in misinformation which they don't recognize as such. It leads them later to make decisions in journalism and in politics and lead the country astray in dealing with its own problems and problems on the other side of the world.

I point out those consequences and that's it. If you want to live with those consequences, OK, that's the nature of a social organization. Different people have different opinions as to what is important. But the official rhetoric is that we are supposed to make policy decisions based on correct information.

**AL:** You are simply asking people to live up to their rhetoric, are you?

**Lang:** I would not formulate it that way. I hold people accountable for the rhetoric they utter because they have put themselves in a position of influence or power professionally and institutionally. I hold professors accountable for the way they condition students to think. A journalist has some influence in controlling what gets into a magazine, and I hold the journalist accountable for what information goes into the magazine. Politicians I hold responsible for the decisions they make in the professional positions they put themselves in.

**AL:** But even in high positions aren't people always limited in their power to do things as they wish?

**Lang:** I don't hold anyone accountable for what they don't have any power or influence to affect.

**AL:** If university presidents fail to live up to their own rhetoric, will you always challenge them?

**Lang:** Not always. It depends on how important the particular instance is, what else I have on hand, how many math papers I am writing. I can't predict in advance when or how much I get involved. I do not deal in hypotheticals.

I do not deal with principles. I am not a man of principles because for every principle there is a counter principle, so if you talk "principles" you have to choose which principles you want to follow at different times with different people under different circumstances. That is a definite individual choice which you make at any given moment in your life. So I don't talk "principles".

**AL:** It seems that you choose not to include people's motivations in your operation, and this clears personal politics out of the way so you actually get something done. Most people don't manage this because they get entangled almost immediately by diversionary tactics, defending themselves against smears and so on.

Is that right? You are able to push those red herrings aside and expose the actual problem?

**Lang:** Now, don't spoil what you have just said by saying "the actual problem". Stop just before that, and I will remain silent.

**AL:** What did you say to those who charged you with 'McCarthyism'?

**Lang:** I don't know what the word means. Different people perceive me in different ways. Some have perceived me as having "McCarthyite tendencies", some have not. When (economist) Kenneth Arrow accused me of this, he specified he was writing as a member of the National Academy of Sciences, and as a sponsor of the Federation of American Scientists. So the NAS and FAS, and people at large, are entitled to know about his judgement in those capacities. It is for each person to make up their mind on the basis of the documentation I provide for them. It isn't for me to decide what I am.

**AL:** But how do you perceive yourself?

**Lang:** I pass out documentation. That documentation has not been faulted.

**AL:** You prefer not to defend yourself against such an accusation?

**Lang:** Why should I put myself in an inferior position by arguing about such a word? I present people with documentation. Let them make up their own mind if my documentation is valid and what is its relative importance. Different people react differently at different times about different issues.

**AL:** Does your anti-misinformation campaign cost you money personally?

**Lang:** A substantial amount. Sure. It takes capitalism to run the revolution!

**AL:** And no one helps you do it. It is a one man operation?

**Lang:** Yes. It is. I have control.

**AL:** Do people support you?

**Lang:** In Huntington's case I got explicit support in letters from some seventy members of the National Academy of Sciences. I have other letters, from within Yale and without. Here is one from a Yale biochemist asking the director of the Whitney Center for the Humanities to give me a

forum there to talk about the Huntington case. The director refused. I bet the scientist ten cents to a dollar that he would refuse, and I won the ten cents. I felt like an inside trader at that!

**AL:** Do you get many letters of support?

**Lang:** What does "many" mean? Anyhow, I don't want to overuse endorsements from others. The documentation I provide and what I write is valid on its own merits, and not because someone else said so. I never want to interfere with that characteristic of the documentation I provide. I don't want to pretend that someone should listen to me because someone else said they should. I don't want to rely on another authority. I am exceedingly wary of using other people's endorsements.

**AL:** Do the Yale undergraduates support you?

**Lang:** No, not really. Very few do. The undergraduates mostly became a bunch of dodos in the eighties. They don't relate to an intellectual issue.

**AL:** You mean they are no longer idealistic?

**Lang:** I am not looking for idealism. I am looking for an ability to process information, and an ability to tell the difference between a fact, an opinion and a hole in the ground, and to occasionally come into the open with a sensible factual statement.

Instead of that, they wallow in publications that reflect only states of mind. It is part of their culture. Look out there anywhere. That is practically all there ever is. And the scientific press is getting tainted with that also, because of course it is easier to let out with a state of mind. You don't have to make factual assertions, to check facts, to do legwork. The net result is a collapse of intellectual standards.

**AL:** Do any students listen to you?

**Lang:** In a decade I have found half a dozen. I made it big with the undergraduates in the sixties because we were alike in many ways. Then there was an intellectual reaction. It was tolerable in the seventies. They turned against me in the eighties. They didn't want to deal with me. I found four in the decade. Otherwise they avoided me like the plague. At least they don't fight me now! In the early eighties they were fighting me. It was very disturbing. My natural constituency!

The faculty is not going to be that constituency. Mostly they just want to be left alone to do their research. They want to be collegial with the colleagues that they have to live with for the rest of their lives. So the natural constituency for me is the undergraduates and that left me essentially with nobody in the eighties.

**AL:** Your long Files are persuasive because they show people the complete picture. But is it not hard to get people to read them? They are so big.

**Lang:** I have written short pieces to correct misrepresentations of my position in publications like *Discover* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and they have been rejected. I had to publish one of them as an advertisement in the *Chronicle*. I am not normally trying to publish the full Files. Everybody knows everyone is busy. However, the *Journal of Ethics and Behavior* did publish a long excerpt of my File on David Baltimore, which took seventy printed pages. The editor first asked me to cut it down but I wouldn't because that would involve cutting essential documentation on which readers could base their own judgement. His publishers let him publish it all.

But he would not publish another much shorter piece explaining how my article had been obstructed previously. I had been invited by the American Chemical Society to take part in a symposium on whistleblowers. I couldn't go, but the organizer of the symposium solicited and accepted my article for publication in a book containing the proceedings of that symposium. Then

the ACS refused to publish the book. The organizer tried to get it published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and they also refused.

The editor of *Ethics and Behavior* heard of the situation, and he offered to publish my article. But I also wrote up the circumstances and opinions of the AAAS editors and reviewers who rejected the volume, and my write up was not accepted for publication in *Ethics and Behavior*.

**AL:** Some say that we are too averse to frank public debate in this country. Do you agree?

**Lang:** Yes. The United States has developed its own way of coding and marginalizing criticism, where it is regarded as bad form to speak straight in criticism. For that there is plenty of documentation.

There is also a step beyond that. The provost of Yale, for example, in the Huntington case, wrote and asked me outright not to "turn upon our own." But there is substance in a well documented confrontation. I accept it. That's one way to get things cleared up! There is one basic aspect of discourse. To what extent do we speak straight with each other without implying we are personal enemies?

**AL:** In the end, what is important to you?

**Lang:** What I regard as important is what's the issue, what's the documentation and how can I affect people's thinking about it.