

Susan Strange 1923–1998: a great international relations theorist¹

Three weeks before she passed away, Susan Strange said to me something she obviously found extremely amusing, because I know for a fact she repeated it to other well-wishers. ‘You know what, Ronen, I reckon we are all going to die, so there is no point in bitching about it.’ We both laughed. The logic, after all, was impeccable. Those who knew Susan would agree that this was a quintessential Susan statement, something that only Susan Strange could have said, and something that Susan Strange could not help but say. To me this anecdote captures the essence of what made Susan such a unique personality whom many came to love and admire for her work. Susan loved anecdotes. She used stories and practical jokes as literary techniques to shake her students and colleagues out of their self-absorbed academic haze, and to awaken them to life and the issue of living it to the full. But she also loved these anecdotes because they were funny. Given a choice between laughter and crying, Susan always opted for laughter.

To her last moments, Susan seemed more concerned to make people around her feel comfortable in what were potentially awkward times. In this, the lesson she continued to give was that even though death was close, it was no excuse for moaning about life. Remorselessly practical, and yet infinitely curious, Susan took the view that there is something very beautiful about life, and death, and we should take both as they come. When she said, ‘let us not bitch about it’, she wanted to signal to me and to other well-wishers that we should talk about important things: Have you read the latest World Bank report? What do you think about the impending global crisis? She would tell me that she always hated big business and what it does to people, but she just did not know how to organize against it. She would want to know if anyone was doing something about it and then ask how the students at York were.

So let us talk about important things: Susan Strange’s unacknowledged contribution to International Relations theory. The substantive argument

of this appreciation was settled in a brief conversation I had with her after the 'distinguished IPE' panel at the ISA dedicated to her work. The panellists reiterated what everyone near and far knew about Susan: her charm, her non-conventionalism, her eclecticism and her mothering of all of us. In her response, which unfortunately fell on deaf ears, Susan tried to explain that, like it or not, she had managed to generate something close to an alternative theory of international relations.

She said that she had proposed a theory that challenges the realist assumptions of the motives of state action in international affairs, an interpretation that goes now under the label of the competition state theory. Her theory explained, among other things, the decline in importance of bilateral relations between states and the rise of multilateralism. Her theory was rooted not in an anthropomorphic interpretation of state action, but in an anthropological interpretation which derives from four foundational structures: knowledge, security, production and finance, in a theory of human needs. As well, she argued for an alternative theory of power: the theory of structural power. Effectively, what she did was propose an alternative definition of IR (or IPE) scholarship. She made a cogent argument for the end of traditional interstate wars and developed a new and expanded theory of a trilateral form of diplomacy. She introduced into IPE topics like the Mafia, insurance organizations and so on. In being a staunch critic of the deregulation of global financial markets, she also alerted us to the fact that governments' non-decisions may play just as important a part in shaping the world as decisions. In her last book, completed in late 1997, *Mad Money*, she talked about the current crisis as a matter of fact, pleading desperately for a reform of the international financial system. She advocated closer relationships between IPE, political economy, geography, business studies and international law. Indeed uniquely, Susan Strange's reputation was equally high in all those fields. Any one of these innovations would make an author an important contributor to International Relations theory. When they are combined, however (and this is only a partial list), Susan should undoubtedly rank as one of the most creative international relations theorists *ever!*

Why then was Susan Strange not recognized as a theorist? The reasons are complex. The fact of the matter is that she refused to package herself as a theorist. She detested academicspeak and was committed above all to simplicity and efficiency of expression in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience. Her reluctance to engage in theoretical debates left admittedly gaping holes in her arguments, which were often inconsistent and at times contradictory. As a result Susan can easily be mistaken for a naive empiricist driven by strong moral convictions. She appears an empiricist because her conceptual schemes are presented as if they were derived directly from reality, not mediated by theory or cognitive

processes. In my view, that impression, which she did nothing to refute, does her great injustice. Susan was widely read and perfectly aware of a great diversity of theoretical traditions. She often used short-hand terms as references to well-known philosophical debates, signalling to her readers the meaning of her thought.

There were, however, deeper reasons for her refusal to engage in theoretical debates. Susan simply cannot be subsumed within a conventional dichotomy of theory and practice. She was neither a theorist, nor was she an empiricist. She was not interested in theory for its own sake, but equally she found empirical research utterly boring: she was interested in theoretically informed empirical research. A theory for her was not something one subscribes or adheres to, certainly not a totemic myth to be waved around like a patriotic flag. A theory is the name we give to the individual act of interpretation and reflection, it is a sensibility, a mode of expression in which one brings one's own life experience to bear upon the question at hand. A theory therefore is not a code but a voice. The pursuit of theoretical codification is dangerous, she felt, because it may stultify the dynamic relationship between knowledge and practice. The practice of not discussing theory was therefore intentional, it was a theoretical statement. But as Susan learned that her message got lost somewhere in the process, she began very reluctantly in later writings to address more explicitly the problem of theory and theorizing.

Susan's writing from *States and Markets*² onward expresses her awkward dilemma – and it shows. But a proper critique of Susan's work can begin only if we understand that her mode of presentation, her approach to theory and to theorizing and her views of the limited purchase of an international relations theory are the product of many years of reflection.

Susan was tenaciously eclectic. Her commitment to eclecticism appears to be the central axis upon which her philosophical outlook on theory stands. But her eclecticism, curiously, embraced only certain approaches and not others. Why is that? I view her eclecticism in the context of one of the central debates in the social sciences, the debate concerning the relationship between specific fields of study and the central institution of modern life. Such a question presupposes another one: what are the central institutions of modern life? Broadly speaking, there are three competing traditions of thought, each coalescing around what Nicholas Onuf calls an 'operating paradigm': capitalism, industrialization and rationality. According to the first group, the key attribute of modernity is the rise of capitalism and the ever increasing commodification of social relationships and labour, and the predominance of the profit motive in human interaction. Many social institutions, such as calculative rationality, nationality and citizenship, all of which pose individuals as 'free' and equal before the law, are derived from the theory of capital. The

same theory then generates a theory of the capitalist state, capitalist law and modern ideologies.

For the second, industrialization, theorists point to technological advances and successive stages of industrialization as the principal force of change in modern life. Each stage of industrialization lays the foundation for the next one, which then incorporates all that went before it. The latest stage of industrialization is producing the 'information society'. Marxism and liberalism are viewed by industrialization theorists as two complementary approaches that emerged in response to the first and second industrial revolutions. Thus successive stages of industrialization have enlarged the scope of social struggles from the class struggle to other social movements such as women and minority rights, gay and animal rights and the rainbow coalition.

The third group of theories is huddled around the notion of rationality and the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. Modernity is defined by pervasive calculative rationality and the concept of progress. Modern rationality is underpinned by the scientific method which produced the tremendous technological advances experienced in the past 200 years. The same rationality organizes society and the state, and generates the quintessential modern economic unit, the multinational enterprise. According to many theorists, modernity is currently turning on itself, questioning the very convictions and advances that it has produced. Thus modernity is giving way to 'postmodernity', a period of transition the outcome of which we cannot predict.

Each of these three approaches is able to account to some extent for what the others take to be fundamentals. Marxism accounts for the rise of modern calculative rationality and industrialization, but treats them as epiphenomena. Rationality theories treat capitalism as a by-product of modern rationalism and the same, of course, goes for industrialization which it sees as the application of scientific method to production, manufacturing and services. Industrialization theories incorporate theories of both rationality and capitalism.

But which of these three is truly foundational? Well, that is a matter for debate. There can be three views on the subject. One view is that we need to have a coherent and consistent world view, and hence the debate should be resolved. It is then up to each of these approaches to resolve the logical incoherencies pointed out by the two others. Another position, espoused by those like Susan Strange, is eclecticism. With regard to this debate, which she addressed only in a roundabout way, she argued: (a) it cannot be resolved because there is no one or ultimate source of social power; and (b) it should not be resolved because it does not really matter who is ultimately right. She signalled that she was more than happy to take the best from whoever provides us with good insights. She was certainly not prepared to ignore, in the name of some

theoretical rigour, any important insight provided by any of the three.

Susan Strange's eclecticism, then, is central to an understanding of her work. It combines the intellectual goal of open-minded criticism and commitment to exploratory research with a genuine belief in pluralism. That Susan Strange's eclecticism was not all that embracing can be seen from her attitude towards the discipline of International Relations. The problem with this discipline was that 'with certain rare exceptions, [International Relations] has been predominantly directed at far too narrow a set of questions' (p. 12). International Relations offers in fact a third, and least plausible, answer to the quandary. That is, that all three approaches are unimportant. Incredible as it may sound, International Relations evolved as a field of study that says: neither capital nor rationality nor industrialization is important for the study of international affairs. All three categories are *external* to international relations because international relations consists of a separate realm defined as an anarchic or particularistic state system. Now, this is quite a big statement which one would imagine requires some explanation. And yet that collective decision remains implicit, always there but never stated and debated.

Susan Strange's eclecticism did not allow for such an attitude. I was told that she commenced a public lecture at the LSE a few years ago by saying: 'I always felt that International Relations as a discipline was a bit fishy, but now I am sure!' Susan was a latecomer to International Relations and, not unlike other latecomers, she was desperately looking for some kernel of serious debate. When she concluded finally that there was none, to the consternation of her colleagues she declared: 'I am not a professor of International Relations because I do not profess International Relations.' To my mind she did not refute international relations as such; she meant that she does not profess the intellectual sophistry that allowed this discipline not to address the central questions of our time. For her, a proper international relations theory can emerge only among those who do not subscribe to the artificial separation of the 'international' from the 'domestic', state and society – those who do not profess international relations as currently conceived.

What then is a veritable international relations theory, or as she called it International Political Economy, about? Her eclecticism with regard to the three central debates produced in *States and Markets* apparently the most unusual definition of International Political Economy, indeed so unusual it is ignored by admirers and critics alike. Susan Strange said about International Political Economy: 'What we need is different. It is a framework of analysis, a method of diagnosis of the human condition as it is, or as it was, affected by economic, political and social circumstances' (p. 16). Let us dwell upon this very unconventional definition of IPE. Susan Strange argues that International Political Economy is not

a discipline or a sub-discipline, nor is it an approach or a theory. IPE is none of the above but a particular way of looking at the world, a framework of analysis and a method of diagnosis. Her studies are indeed diagnostic. Susan discovered many ill patients 'out there'. And when one discovers illness, one begins by examining the symptoms, then one identifies the disease and then suggests, if possible, a remedy.

The object of study of IPE is more remarkable. The object of study of IPE is far removed from interstate rivalry or cooperation or some aggregation of politics and economics on the international sphere. The object of study of IPE, according to Susan Strange, is nothing less than the 'human condition as it is, or as it was'. We cannot avoid noticing the strong hermeneutical undertones of that statement. How she came to this definition I do not know and regrettably I never asked her. So I can only speculate.

Contrast her definition with Anthony Downs's celebrated view of political sociology as the study of order and change. Susan Strange could have adopted an imperialistic view of IPE as the study of societal order and change. But even such a view was somehow too narrow for Strange. For the study of order and change suggests that there is something stable – let us call it 'human nature' – that is in a social setting and reconfigured by different systems of order and change. For Susan there was no such ultimate fixed or stable basis; only a hermeneutical approach to human conditions.

The oblique reference to hermeneutics offers, in my opinion, an insight into Strange's view of the relations between IPE and philosophy. The study of the human condition is conducted on two levels: at a foundational philosophical level, the hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, genealogy, tell us about the historicity of the subject, rationality and system of truth; and at a second level, the level IPE inhabits, is the study of how the human condition is affected by political, economic and social circumstances. But in accepting the fundamental tenets of historicism, Strange felt, perhaps wrongly, that philosophical, epistemological and ontological debates were not part of IPE. Since she understood that these debates were part of the baggage that IPE relied upon, while refusing to get entangled in philosophical debates, she should have realized that her own work demands closer contact with philosophy and history. After all, it was Strange who placed the study of 'human condition' at the heart of our discipline.

Susan Strange's apparent empiricism is grounded, then, in a certain philosophy, a point of view that can be debated and I hope will be debated. But we should acknowledge that it was a consistent point of view. Following in the same vein, Susan Strange never tried to develop a theory of IPE, she tried to develop a *framework* for thinking about the nature of the human condition. In *States and Markets* she says:

Students are often given books to read which tell them what they are supposed to know, or else what they are supposed to think. This [book] is not like that. It is going to suggest to you a way to think about the politics of the world economy, leaving it to you to choose what to think.

(p. 9)

Such a framework should be grounded, she thought, in the fundamentals of the human condition. In her words, 'We have to start by thinking about the basic values which human beings seek to provide through social organisation, i.e. wealth, security, freedom and justice' (p. 17). There was, in other words, a strong normative strand to her work. Her critique of modern society, particularly of the financial structure and multinational enterprises, was a critique of systems that failed to provide such basic values.

The typology of the four structures is reminiscent of the one developed by her colleague from the LSE Michael Mann's four sources of power. The extent to which Mann influenced Susan's ideas is unclear to me. Mann's terminology is slightly different: for Mann the security structure is the military source of power, production and finance is economic; knowledge for Mann, a sociologist, is divided into two separate sources of power, ideological and religious, whereas for Susan the economy is divided into production and finance. It is obvious that Strange paid little attention to ideational structures, her concept of the 'knowledge structure' probably owes much more to the work of the New Trade theorists than to a sociological conception of knowledge.

The significance of the resemblance between Strange's and Mann's approaches is that under cover of deceptively simple and readily observable phenomena, Strange smuggles in sociological and anthropological sensibilities and, more important, the concept of society into International Relations. Her IPE is therefore society-based and not state-based. The net effect is that in her work the state ceases to be a mere political agent. Thus at the very moment when the concept 'state' is relocated at the heart of the analysis, it is stripped of much of its traditional connotations.

Strange in fact approached the issue of power from a holistic standpoint. I am doubtful whether her concept of structural power can be utilized independently of her framework of the four structures. Structural power, she argues, does not emanate from the structures themselves (security, production, finance and knowledge), it is the *articulation* of elements which contains the essence of the state's power. In reaffirming her 'eclectic' beliefs, Strange emphasizes that there is no ultimate source of power, be it either in security or in production: 'no one facet (of power) is always or necessarily more important than the other three. Each is supported, joined to and held up by the other three' (p. 26). In

other words, the process of articulation of the various systems, which is always historically specific, is the key to the power games of International Political Economy. Consequently, IPE must be rooted in history. For, 'there is no way that contemporary international political economy can be understood without making some effort to dig back to its roots' (p. 18).

Now, if there is no one ultimate source of power, and if 'states' are seen as political processes, i.e. interactions of a variety of systems and congeries, then it is the very diversity represented by the different societies that defines the uniqueness of international political economy. Society-based theory cannot hope to generate a reductionist theory like realism because societies are different and they change over time. There is no one overriding principle or hook upon which a theory can be hung. Here again we see how she came to the same conclusion: there cannot be a theory of IPE – a new version of the realist mode of theorizing the international – there can only be a framework for thinking about IPE.

It is clear from the above that not untypically for Strange, the concept of 'structural power' is not truly a theory as much as a heuristic tool. Strange did not engage properly with the various power theorists. The Weberian conception of power is mentioned in passing as a realist theory. Outrageously, Bacharach and Baratz's theory of agenda setting is not even attributed to the authors but referred to as an 'American academic language' (p. 25) – i.e. another of those myths Americans believe in. The authors of 'structural power' (in Luke's sense) such as Poulantzas and Foucault or even Mann are not even alluded to. Seen in one way, her rather off-hand treatment of the concept of structural power represents a wasted opportunity to challenge international relations theory at its very core. Seen in another way, Strange could not bring herself to believe in something as abstract as a theory of power. The concept of structural power is introduced, therefore, as a supportive grid within her framework approach. She claims no more for her concept than that it is 'a much more useful distinction for the understanding and analysis of power in political economy' (p. 25). For her, structural power is the ability 'to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises' (p. 25). Such powers are not unique to the state, but can be identified with other institutions such as Lloyds of London.

Since the framework of the four structures is founded on basic human values, it is prior to the state system, which is a secondary product historically inserting itself within these systems. The state system's predominance in a field such as IPE is therefore only transitory. The relationship between one state and another, and states and other forms of human organizations, is historical and hence empirical. What was true yesterday may not be true today. State primacy is constantly challenged

and needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed. As a corollary, Strange's theories were essentially descriptive. She argued, for example, that from the mid-1980s a marked shift occurred in the way states behave. Strange postulates that rather than compete for power and prestige, states are now increasingly 'competing for world market shares as the surest means to greater wealth and greater economic security'.³ The immediate implication of the argument was that the competition among states over market share is leading to a concomitant decline in significance of bilateral relationships between states. 'Structural power' has as its aim primarily to change and affect or indeed to maintain the 'rules of the game' of the global world economy. The big players in the structural power game are the economically powerful regions where high value-added products and services are produced. These players join together in various groupings such as the G7 where the rules of the game are decided.

Within this new 'global' game, states aim to improve their position in the international division of labour. Many tactics and strategies may be cited, but this position ultimately hinges upon the ability of states to attract capital, trade and production facilities into their national space, or alternatively, to curb the flight of capital, trade and production facilities from this same national space. In a situation of increasing globalization (i.e. increased freedom in the flow of capital, goods and labour), combined with increasing sophistication on behalf of the main vehicles of globalization (the multinational enterprises and international banks, states' 'structural power' to 'persuade' capital to remain within their national space), what is implied is a fundamental shift in power from the state to the firm: a dangerous shift which undermines our democratic institutions.

The causes of these changes are not well developed in Strange's work. Nor is it entirely clear whether she approved or disapproved of these changes. The point was that changes have occurred, and they require new ways of thinking about IPE. Not having a theory as conventionally understood, Strange did not feel compelled to make sense of events in terms of some previously existing theoretical constructs. Her framework allowed her to engage with events as they happen. But there was a sting in the tail. It is often argued that states employ their structural power in order to improve their position in the world-economy (by monopolizing financial circuits, by dominating hi-tech industries, by creating favourable international frameworks such as the Bretton Woods system, the EU, etc.). As countries improve their position in the world-economy, they also extend as a by-product their structural power. Thus the notion of structural power has an ambiguity built into it: Is power the goal of the state's action or is it an instrument of state? Are 'states' aiming to capture the position of the top dog, or are they forced into such

competitive struggles in order to maintain their power? The concept of structural power lacks precision because it seeks to define the parameters of state power in this new game, as well as the ability and constraints felt by states which are playing this game. The concept of structural power, in other words, is too condensed and seeks to encompass too many things.

But this ambiguity pales in comparison with the following paradox: with the exception of the 'security system' which is currently largely territorially based, all the other systems – the production, financial and knowledge systems – are, spatially speaking, 'shared' with other states. Thus, even the components of one's structural, i.e. real, power are shared with others! Fraternizing in larger 'systems' generates political interests in support of these systems on a global scale (for instance, support for GATT, for the Bretton Woods system, etc.). The conflictive tone inherent in the concept of 'relational power' must therefore be balanced by the distinctly 'cooperative' counter-forces in international affairs. However, concepts such as conflict or cooperation do not take us far, in particular since these seemingly contrasting behaviours stem from the same source – domestic political interests. One may wish to speak of states as human beings: avaricious, greedy, power seeking, and yet 'sensitive' or 'vulnerable' – but these terms must be regarded as metaphorical 'short-cut' descriptions of complex processes. And whereas the sharing in wider systems, as Keohane and Nye note, undoubtedly increases the level of 'interdependence' among states, it becomes increasingly difficult to specify what precisely these states amount to. Can we still think of them as unitary beings separated from each other?

It is therefore the very idea of separateness and discreteness inherent in the concept of 'international relations' that is questioned. Realism makes no provision for the rather likely event that interests that happen to arise from the territorial boundaries of one country are, in effect, reflections of the interest of groups and classes of another transmitted, as it were, in realms international relations is blind to. Thus when carried to its logical conclusion the concept of structural power presents us with a paradox: just as we have finally understood the nature of state power, we are led to question the very relevance and poignancy of state power. For whereas the power of the state clearly manifests itself in various ways in world politics, it is not always clear in whose name power is exercised and who ultimately gains. In other words, the presumed, but all-important, link between power and outcome is severed.

Theoretical constructs are systems of thought, and like any other system, they rest at minimum on two premises: the consistency and interdependence among the concepts, and the closure of the system. Systems closure is considered a good thing for it implies consistency in the interdependence among the concepts. Eclecticism is rejected because

it is suspected of superficial relations among concepts. There is therefore a point beyond which one theoretical framework becomes wholly inappropriate and must be replaced with another. I think that with the concept of structural power we have arrived at this critical juncture.

The paradox of power has had a profound impact on the development of the theories of International Relations. And it was probably the paradox of power that created a tendency in International Relations, on the one hand to reduce the scope of the concept of power in the theories, and on the other hand to encourage greater interest in something that may be called global structures. Thus modern theories of International Relations and International Political Economy are concerned to a far smaller extent with the questions of what states do to each other and how they go about doing it, and instead seek answers to questions concerning the nature of global structures, for example: How do they come about? Who maintains them? For whose benefit do they operate?

Two distinct lines of response have emerged, and they have tended to cut across traditional dichotomies. Almost an instinctive response which has dominated the discipline consisted of attempts to represent the global structure as an autonomous field of activity – eliminating, *de facto* if not *de jure*, the concept of power from the narrative. The representation of the global context as an autonomous field of activities is obtained, however, at a high price. Theories of the state and politics are compromised and International Relations are depoliticized, historical developments are attributed to forces outside the control of individuals or social classes.

At the same time, the complexity of articulation of elements within any society, coupled with the largely non-discreteness of societies, creates complexities of such magnitude that the use of ‘overt’ power can achieve very limited objectives, if it does not backfire altogether. Gross captures this very well when he castigates as ‘this new-style, faceless system no one knows his name; he does not exist. The web is spidery, but there is no single spider’.⁴ The ambiguity is in evidence in Strange’s work. She has a theory of state action in international affairs. But under close scrutiny it is clear she feels that the state is not a good ‘unit of analysis’, nor does she think state action stems from the very nature of the state. In her latest work, particularly the ‘Retreat of the State’, she battles with these ideas. But she achieved, alas, no synthesis.

These are then some of the ideas that I think are at the heart of Susan Strange’s contribution to International Relations theory. I have tried to show that in her own way, Susan Strange was not only a creative and innovative thinker, but also a rigorous and careful theorist. Why then is there not a Susan Strange school of International Political Economy? Susan’s very personality ensured that there will not be such a school. Susan was not an empire-builder. Even her name precludes it: could

people identify themselves as Strangeists? And yet, her anti-school, anti-hero-worship attitude, strangely, has turned into a powerful school of thought in IPE, a school inhabited by those she called her 'kindred spirits'. Susan gave inspiration to a host of irreverent, imaginative, empirically based contributions of the highest quality.

At her funeral the story was told that Picasso said his hope for his legacy was to leave his footprints in the sand. Nothing lasts, but perhaps someone will notice our little traces before they are swept away by the waves of time. Susan's footprints will remain deeply visible for a long time to come.

Ronen Palan

NOTES

- 1 In writing this appreciation I have relied on the assistance and advice of fellow 'kindred spirits', as Susan Strange used to call us: Christian Chavagneux, Stephen Gill, Louis Pauly, Richard Phillips and Jan Nederveen Pieterse. But as Susan suggested in the concluding chapter to *States and Markets*, 'Pick-your-Own: or Suit Yourself', I have indeed picked my own and I am sure they would each have picked their different own.
- 2 Unless stated otherwise quotations are from Susan Strange, *States and Markets: An Introduction to International Political Economy* (London: Pinter, 1988).
- 3 Susan Strange, 'The persistent myth of "lost" hegemony', *International Organization* 41: 564.
- 4 Bertrand Myron Gross, *Friendly Fascism, the New Face of Power in America* (M. Evans & Co, 1980), p. 41.