

Susan Strange—a critical appreciation

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For a quarter of a century, Susan Strange—who died in October 1998—was the most influential figure in British international studies. While she held a number of key academic posts in Britain, Italy and Japan (including a ten-year stint as Montague Burton Professor of International Relations at LSE from 1978–88) and although she was a major figure in the professional associations of both Britain and the US (founder member and first Treasurer of BISA, President of ISA in 1995), it was predominantly as a creative scholar and a forceful personality that she exercised this influence. She was almost single-handedly responsible for creating ‘international political economy’ and turning it into one of the two or three central fields within international studies in Britain, and she defended her creation with such robustness, and made such strong claims on its behalf, that her influence was felt—albeit not always welcomed—in most other areas of the discipline.

After taking a first in Economics at LSE in 1943, she spent most of the next twenty years raising six children and pursuing a career as a journalist, initially with the *Economist* and then with the *Observer* at first in Washington and at the UN, then in London as economics correspondent, meanwhile teaching off and on at University College London. Her years as a journalist were undoubtedly important, and the fact that she came to an academic life at a comparatively late age almost certainly contributed to her notorious unwillingness to be seduced by the joys of learning for learning’s sake and her ambivalent attitude to academic institutions, but it was during the years from 1965–76 when she was a full-time researcher at Chatham House that her project took shape. In those years she produced two remarkable pieces of scholarship—*Sterling and British Policy* and *International Monetary Relations*, the latter being the second half of a two volume post-mortem of the Bretton Woods System, edited by Andrew Shonfield.¹ These two volumes are, nowadays, probably the least widely read of her books—largely because, superficially, they take the form of detailed histories of problems believed long past their sell-by dates—and yet they put forward, implicitly, or explicitly, most of the positions made famous by her later text-books, polemics, and scholarly papers.

The first of these positions was that, taken as a breed and with one or two notable exceptions, economists simply do not understand how the global political economy works. There are two inter-related reasons for this; first, they do not understand the role of power in international, or any other, relations, second, they are too reliant on abstract and formal models which inevitably take them away from ‘real-world’

¹ *Sterling and British Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/RIIA, 1971); *International Monetary Relations*, vol. II of *International Economic Relations of the Western World 1959–71*, ed. Andrew Shonfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press/RIIA 1976).

problems. This hostility to abstract theorising was later extended to apply to a great deal of academic international relations theory, whether oriented towards rational-choice theory, as in the US, or inclined in a more post-positivist direction as in the UK. While economists do not understand how the world works, her second position was that neither do the majority of political scientists, who are over-impressed by military force and liable to credit institutions with more power than they actually possess. This position was later elaborated into an account of four key structures of power—security, production, finance and knowledge; power consists of the ability to provide protection, make things, obtain access to credit, and develop and control authoritative modes of interpreting the world.² Strange was always careful to insist that it was a mistake to think of any of these structures as necessarily dominating the others, but the third position developed in these two early books was that the most neglected structure—and therefore the one that it is most important to study—is the *financial* structure. Access to credit—‘other people’s money’ as she put it—was to Strange the key to the development of states in the early years of what she later termed the ‘Westfailure’ System, just as the operation of global capital markets, described in *Casino Capitalism* and its recent successor, *Mad Money*, is the key to our contemporary global system.³ Although much of her later work (for example, *Rival States: Rival Firms* and *The Retreat of the State*⁴) concerned predominantly the international business enterprise and the struggle for global markets, she never abandoned the belief, shaped by *Sterling and British Policy* and *International Monetary Relations*, that to understand the global economy it is, first and foremost, necessary to understand the world’s financial markets.

While working on these seminal studies, she produced a manifesto for a new approach to international relations—‘International Economics and International Relations: A Case of Mutual Neglect’, a paper that still reads well, nearly thirty years on.⁵ Following from this mission statement, in 1972 her ambition to promote the study of ‘international political economy’ led to a ten day conference at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park, under the auspices of Chatham House, attended by a group of some thirty senior and junior scholars, economists and political scientists, from Britain and the US.⁶ This conference—and a successor two years later—led directly to the formation of IPEG, the International Political Economy Group which was set up by Strange within the British International Studies Association, itself formed in 1974 partly on her initiative. IPEG remains one of the most active of BISA groupings and, over the years, has sponsored many conferences and books; indeed, so well established is the group, and IPE is so much a standard item of fare on University syllabi, that it is difficult to grasp the extent to which it was, at the time of its foundation, a path-breaking initiative, flying in the face of the dominant approaches to international relations.

² See *States and Markets* (London: Pinter Publications, 1988)

³ *Casino Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), *Mad Money* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998).

⁴ In collaboration with John Stopford, *Rival States, Rival Firms: Competition for World Market Shares* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ *International Affairs*, 46, 1970, pp. 304–17.

⁶ See *International Political Economy*, Conference Report, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London 1972, and, a spin-off article by the *rappporteur* (and author of this appreciation), Christopher (sic) Brown ‘International Political Economy’, *International Affairs*, 49, 1973, pp. 51–60.

In 1978 Susan Strange succeeded Geoffrey Goodwin in the Montague Burton Chair at LSE, which gave her a firm base for promoting her ideas—it should be noted, incidentally, that Goodwin, along with his colleagues Michael Donelan and James Mayall, had been present at Cumberland Lodge in 1972, and the Politics of International Economic Relations had been an undergraduate option at LSE since the early 1960s, so the ground in Houghton St. had been prepared for her coming well in advance. She was also able to build on her own work on the politics of international economic relations at UCL in the 1950s and 1960s. At LSE, in collaboration with her new colleagues, she developed these beginnings into fully fledged programmes particularly at the graduate level, and for ten years was a major creative force in the midst of what was then, and still is now, the biggest centre of international relations in Britain.

Although herself a professor of IR, Strange always insisted—both at LSE and in BISA—that it was international *studies* and not international *relations* that ought to be promoted; she frequently expressed her disappointment that BISA in particular had been taken over by scholars of international relations—worse still, international relations theorists—rather than being the broad church she had wanted. However, her own attempts to engage with economists at LSE always ended in failure because, as she would no doubt have put it (albeit in stronger language), of their unwillingness to abandon the abstract models that are the tools of their trade, and it was probably unrealistic of her to expect BISA to do any better in the wider world of British international studies. Economists and lawyers have their own priorities, which rarely include spending much time talking to international relations specialists; international historians, on the other hand, have always been part of the BISA family, but they have been, for the most part, diplomatic historians, who were, in her mind, almost as bad as IR theorists.

These occasional, largely good-natured, skirmishes with her colleagues in British international studies served as dress rehearsals for the full-scale campaigns Strange fought against the dominant trends in North American international relations in the 1980s and through the 1990s. She felt very much at home in the United States, having worked there in the 1940s, and believed that, on the whole, what she was quite willing to call the American Empire was a force for good in the world—but she was deeply critical of many aspects of US economic and financial policy, and in particular of the policy-advisers and scholars who, in her opinion, provided the intellectual basis for this policy. On her account, the world needed American leadership—based, of course, not on altruism but on enlightened self-interest—but the Americans were unwilling to lead, approaching issues instead from a narrowly selfish point of view, and, what was worse, American scholars underwrote this irresponsibility by stressing the lost ‘hegemony’ of the US—its alleged comparative weakness *vis-à-vis* other states—and promoting co-operation via international ‘regimes’. From Strange’s point of view, expressed in a series of papers through the 1980s, this was all wrong.⁷ The idea of a regime dramatically overstated the extent of order in the modern world; American power was only superficially in decline—in terms of the structural factors referred to above, the US remains predominant and

⁷ See, for example, ‘*Cave hic Dragones!*’ in Steven Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) and ‘The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony’, *International Organisation*, 41, 1987, pp. 551–74.

should be prepared to use its power in the common (and its own) interest. The failure of American scholars to grasp these (to Strange) obvious points, could only be attributed to their predilection for abstract theorising, their desire to reduce the messy world of politics to the neat formulae of rational-choice theory. Clearly they had to be shown the error of their ways and, if they were not already aware of them, the political implications of their positions.

This engagement with American orthodoxy made Susan Strange the best known British scholar in the US in our field. Greatly to their credit, the American scholarly establishment took the critic—if not the criticisms—to their collective heart, and honoured her with the Presidency of ISA; entirely predictably, her Presidential Address began with a gratuitous attack on *International Studies Quarterly*, although most of the rest of her talk was taken up with a moving account of how she regarded America and the American profession as a second home, often more welcoming in its lack of stuffiness than the British academic scene.⁸ Her battles with US international relations tailed off somewhat in the 1990s as her work shifted towards perspectives in which earlier policy issues took on less salience. The irresponsibility of global financial markets became her major theme, and American ‘masters of the universe’ on Wall Street (and their European counterparts) the objects of her wrath rather than American academics, although this shift also led to an entertaining exchange of fire with Steven Krasner (who she, rightly, considered a worthy opponent) on the continued significance, or otherwise, of the state.⁹

Undoubtedly one reason why the American academic community adopted her as one of their own was in tribute to the strength of her personality. After her nominal retirement in 1988—a tribute to the absurdity of the British way of measuring a person’s ability to contribute by the passage of time without reference to more salient intellectual characteristics—she held a Chair at Florence (reinforcing her commitment to the development of international studies in Europe) and visited Japan with great frequency, before finding a final, congenial, home with a part-time appointment at Warwick, all the while writing books and articles and rarely missing a conference on either side of the Atlantic. She became a ‘character’, a very distinguished, indeed charismatic, senior figure who always spoke her mind heedless of context. Although handicapped by being one of the subtlest thinkers in the international studies community in Britain, and, of course, an important theorist of international relations in her own right, she created for herself the persona of a bluff, no-nonsense empiricist who would good-humouredly puncture the pretensions of post-positivist and feminist theory, as well as, of course and as always, economists and their allies in political science. At times this could be a little wearing—especially since, in her later years, the meticulous scholarship of her early work gave way to a somewhat more cavalier attitude to the ‘facts’. Much more attractive was her consistent support for the cause of graduate students and junior scholars. It was entirely characteristic that, in the last weeks of her life, she should devote a great deal of energy to establishing the ‘BISA Founders Fund’ to support junior scholars. She also worked consistently to promote co-operation between international studies

⁸ ‘1995 Presidential Address: ISA as a Microcosm’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 39, 1995, pp. 289–95. The printed version cannot convey the full flavour of this address.

⁹ ‘Wake up, Krasner, the world *has* changed’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 1/2, 1994, in response to Steven Krasner ‘Abiding Discord in International Political Economy’ *Review of International Political Economy*, 1/1, 1994.

associations; she would regularly attend meetings of the International Studies Coordinating Committee—no-one was quite sure who she was representing, but no-one was brave enough to ask! And, it should be stressed, these extra-curricular activities, and correcting the follies of others, were always leisure interests for her—she never gave up her own research which remained creative and fruitful to the last.

Her intellectual influence will live on in the work of others, and, indeed, her literary executor declares the existence of many unpublished manuscripts, but her friends and colleagues will remember her most vividly as a luminous presence in their lives. BISA Officers will no longer have the sense of having their conduct of affairs overseen by a largely benevolent but ultimately unpredictable force, and BISA Conferences will be much less fun without her ‘rebuking colleagues in seminars, and holding forth, pint in hand, in the bar’.¹⁰ She will be sorely missed.

¹⁰ Fred Halliday, *Guardian*, 14 November 1998.