The Spirit of Susan Strange (1923–1998)

Louis W. Pauly

Friends, colleagues and students of Susan Strange gather every year at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association. It has long seemed to me that she haunts the meeting, where to this day an award in her name is regularly given to ‘a person whose singular intellect, assertiveness, and insight most challenge conventional wisdom and intellectual and organizational complacency in the international studies community’. In 2015, the meeting was held in New Orleans, just after the Mardi Gras celebrations. Although I may have enjoyed a bit too much bourbon the night before the meeting began, I swear she returned for a long chat.¹

Lou: I knew you wouldn’t miss this ISA meeting! You always enjoyed a good party.
Susan: It’s true, but there has been no shortage in my new digs.
Lou: So you ended up in the good place.
Susan: A double surprise. I really did think that a final good-bye meant lights-out, and I was hardly an angel during my terrestrial time. After I got my bearings and cast off my natural scepticism, which was not easy to do, the key was to charm St. Peter. Piece of cake.
Lou: How did you do it?
Susan: I asked him questions about himself, about what he had learned, about what he thought about all manner of things. But I especially asked him to educate me about who got what in this new life and how we might make things a bit better. Men are so easy to steer. St. Peter remains an incurable romantic who enjoys being taken seriously.
Lou: Even after all of these years, even after all the trouble you once caused at an ISA meeting by calling on women to stop
complaining and get on with their work, you still dabble in gender stereotypes?

Susan: I remain convinced that women are more realistic and better able to adapt to changing situations. I also remain fascinated by the life of the mind men idealize, by the ‘theories’ you dream up and consider so important and exclusive, by your dreams of utopia. Women, especially ex-journalists and mothers – I had six children, know what really matters.

Lou: What really matters?

Susan: Making hay while the sun shines.

Lou: Come on, you were a serious scholar of international relations, a pioneer in the field of international political economy, and a great critic of established orthodoxies.

Susan: That doesn’t mean one shouldn’t have fun. I enjoyed disturbing the peace, and I especially enjoyed irritating people who thought they wielded power, especially so-called intellectual power.

Lou: Why did your targets continue talking with you? And why did so many become your friends?

Susan: Long ago I discovered that it was better to tame dragons than to slay them. Make the gatekeepers friends. Better to have them open the gate willingly than to have to break it down. Acknowledging one’s own imperfections, of course, is a helpful complementary strategy.

Lou: Sounds like you are beginning to recall your principal method of research in your chosen fields.

Susan: You are right about that. Ask big questions, identify a real problem, find the people who can help you figure it out, and go talk to them. Most importantly, however, pay more attention to what decision-makers do than to what they say. Read what others have written. Doubt conventional answers. Question authority. Avoid grand theory. Use your intuition to seek your own counter-intuitive answers. Look beneath the surface of things, but don’t ever pretend that you have found the Truth – at least until you get past St. Peter’s gate.

Lou: I think you anticipated the ‘practice turn’ in social theory that has only recently penetrated IR and IPE.

Susan: My practice was to avoid the kind of abstraction that many of my friends over the Channel enjoyed.

Lou: Your own analytical approach led you to anticipate the monetary and financial mess the world finds itself in. In *Casino*