

# Susan Haack: On Pineapples, Puzzles and Real-Life Philosophy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Finding and solving pineapples

I have been reading Susan Haack's work since 2009, but it wasn't until 2012 that I got to meet her personally. When I think of ways to describe her, two scenes strike my mind almost immediately, both of which involve joyful moments that I had with her in Porto Alegre. The first was when she was amused by a parked truck full of pineapples, and I explained to her that "*abacaxi*" (the Portuguese word for pineapple) has a figurative meaning here in Brazil: when we Brazilians have a problem, we say "I have a pineapple to solve." Susan found that very funny and later even published a paper<sup>1</sup> in which she mentions this scene. The other occasion was when she asked me what was written on the sign we see posted on all elevator doors in Brazil. "Before entering the elevator, make sure it is on the same floor as you are." I answered. Again, she found it hilarious, and together we laughed at the incongruity.

Those scenes speak volumes about Susan—about how curious, amused, and interested she is in culture, real life and how everything works. Susan aims to truly understand the world; empty exercises of intelligence are definitely not for her. As Susan herself puts it, "epistemologists (...) have to get past their self-absorption and focus on the real world."<sup>2</sup> This is a serious matter for her: if you don't have an actual problem (as is the case with the "problem" the incongruous sign on the elevator door intends to "solve"), then you have nothing to worry about (nor to inquire or develop philosophy about). When you have a question, a problem to be solved—a pineapple, as it were—then and only then is inquiry indeed worth it.

## 2. THE BEST INQUIRER FOR THE JOB MIGHT BE... SOMEONE WHO IS PREPARED, SOMEONE WHO RUNS SUCCESSFUL INQUIRIES

This leads us to the same, only different. A crucial point about Susan and her work, then, is that the way she sees epistemology/philosophy/science does not put epistemologists/philosophers/scientists in any kind of hierarchy. Everybody has problems to solve every day, and, therefore, anyone *can* theoretically become an inquirer: yes, a scientist, a detective, an investigative journalist, an historian,<sup>3</sup> but also someone who simply wants to find out why his/her

second bromeliad died, so as to prevent the others from dying as well. The desire to solve the questions that reality poses is the same for tribesmen and for scientists.<sup>4</sup>

However, Susan never meant that everyone *should* go into philosophy/science/epistemology.<sup>5</sup> In fact, she reckons that creative philosophical thought is a “quite rare and unusual talent,”<sup>6</sup> and thus, actual merit is the best way to have the most prepared person doing the job. Susan acknowledges, for example, that there have been many situations in which, as a woman, she has experienced awkward and unfair situations.<sup>7</sup> Understandably, she took offense in those moments. And yet it was not because she believed there is a “female way of knowing”;<sup>8</sup> but rather because she thinks that “no one should be excluded from a scientific career (or from any other, I am sure she would say) on the basis of irrelevant considerations such as race, sex, or eye color”.<sup>9</sup> After all, first and foremost, inquiry involves being prepared and having talent (like hers, I would add).

True inquiry, however, is not only about being prepared; it also involves extensive work.<sup>10</sup> This, again, is what she herself has always done with her own ideas by creating, testing, retesting etc. It is what she did when she understood that she would have to learn a lot about a specific field of science to test her theoretical approaches,<sup>11</sup> for instance. Or when she developed a general idea of inquiry and presented it in *Evidence and Inquiry*, and in *Manifesto*, and, later when she further developed and applied it to science, in *Defending Science*, and to law, in *Evidence Matters*; always developing “rules, or, better, guidelines, for the conduct of inquiry” and figuring out “what environments are supportive of, and what hostile of, successful inquiry.”<sup>12</sup>

This passion for the truth (and consequently for true inquiry) is also what made her choose a difficult and harsh path for herself, aiming precisely at the independence she suggested all true inquirers should pursue. In her own words: “I am beholden to no clique or citation cartel; I put no stock in the ranking of philosophy graduate programs over which my colleagues obsess; I accept no research or travel funds from my university; I avoid publishing in journals that insist on taking all the rights to my work; etc., etc. Naturally, this independence comes at a price; but it also earns me the freedom to do the best work I can.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3. COMPLETING THE ENTRIES OF A NEVER-ENDING CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Susan recognizes that the *real-life crossword puzzles* (using her own analogy) can be non-ending: an enormous puzzle with some entries “in almost-indelible ink, (...) some in pencil (...). Some are in English, some in Swahili (...) Some entries were completed hundreds of years ago (...), some only last week”.<sup>14</sup> What is interesting about knowledge, as Susan highlights, is the way “each new step in understanding potentially enables others”<sup>15</sup> (something discovered in genetics can later be used in new technologies for boats, for instance). Curiously enough, this is precisely how Susan’s work became so important to many different areas beyond general Philosophy and general Epistemology, such as physics, history, epidemiology, law and so on. Given that she’s interested in how to make inquiry successful, her ideas are useful in several fields. She is, therefore, not only completing her own puzzle, but also enabling other people to interlock their entries with hers.

That is where scholars like me come in. In the field of evidential reasoning in law, which is my area of expertise, her contributions are vast. Michele Taruffo,<sup>16</sup> one of the fathers of the new School of Evidential Reasoning in civil law countries, explicitly based many of his thoughts and theories on the clues that Susan had completed: foundherentism, the idea that warrant comes in degrees; the importance of previously obtained knowledge; the importance of combined evidence; the importance of comprehensiveness etc. Jordi Ferrer, the *caposcuola* of Girona, developed his thesis about the rational evaluation of evidence by interlocking his ideas with Susan’s: about relevance, about the ways in which mathematical probabilities *cannot* be used in Law, and about the null role that subjective beliefs play on the degree of warrant. Carmen Vázquez, writing about expert testimony,<sup>17</sup> also elaborated on many of Susan’s ideas, such as the importance of expert communities, the error of trying to draw a clear line between science and “non-science”, and the problems with Daubert’s trilogy. What is more, in many ways, her work actually seems intended to answer questions

that Susan had raised in both *Defending Science* and *Evidence Matters*.<sup>18</sup> I, too, follow in many of her footsteps. Writing about the burden of proof,<sup>19</sup> for example, I stood on Susan's shoulders when stating that Brazilian civil procedure didn't pay serious enough attention to comprehensiveness, and I then tried to develop ways of improving it. My most recent work on Witness Testimony<sup>20</sup> is also rooted in her ideas and attempts to add new entries to her entries in the never-ending crossword on how, while evaluating the evidence, subjective impressions of the fact-finder about the testimony shouldn't have any weight, on how we need to use knowledge from other areas to improve our legal systems etc.

Furthermore, in the invaluable contributions in *Evidence Matters*, we find yet another very interesting aspect of Haack's thought. As she once put it, fallible and imperfect as it may be, "science (and we could say, more generally, inquiry) is a manifestation of the human mind at its cognitive best."<sup>21</sup> Hence every inquiry, and every inquirer, has natural limitations. That is precisely why I reckon that some of the answers she offers about the Law, the only field where my crossword puzzle might have a few more entries completed than Susan's, indicate some of her own incomplete entries.<sup>22</sup> For instance, her answers might benefit from interlocking with further entries from comparative law and in the general theory of law. And this just makes me admire both Susan and her work more and more. After all, inquiries can only be made by humans. And, yes, she's right again when she says that we "feel threatened (...) both by the successes of science [of philosophy, of epistemology, of inquiries...] and by its failures; not surprisingly, perhaps, since it, and we, are only human."<sup>23</sup> As for Susan, yes, she is only human; but an absolutely outstanding, talented and hardworking one. She is truly one of a kind.

## NOTES

1. Haack, Susan. "Mind the Analytical Gap. Tracing a Fault Line in Daubert." In: *Wayne Law Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2016.
2. Vázquez, Carmen. "Entrevista a Susan Haack." In: *DOXA, Cuadernos de Filosofía del Derecho*, 36 (2013) ISSN: 0214-8676 pp. 573-586.
3. Haack, Susan. "The Long Arm of Common Sense." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, p. 98.
4. Haack, Susan. "Multiculturalism and Objectivity." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 145.
5. In her interview with Richard Carrier, when asked if she would encourage women to pursue advanced degrees in philosophy, she eloquently said that she would not encourage women or any other people, "independently of being male, female, white, black, green, or purple!". Carrier, Richard. Interview with Susan Haack. May, 2012. Available at: <https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/1207>. Accessed on March 13th, 2020.
6. Haack, Susan. "Science as Social? Yes and No." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 104.
7. The episode in which a boy at school stated that "everyone knows girls can't do chemistry" (Haack, Susan. "Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 123); another such situation happened when, after receiving the *congratulatory first* at Oxford (that she attributes to the University's policy of blind evaluation), she heard that the examiners had asked for her exams to be revised because the author "couldn't be a woman" (Vázquez, Carmen. "Entrevista a Susan Haack". In: *DOXA, Cuadernos de Filosofía del Derecho*, 36 (2013), pp. 573-586); and yet another, when she felt obliged to explain to a chairman in a job interview that she didn't hope to be a good professor just for the female students, but also for the male ones (Haack, Susan. "The best man for the job may be a woman... and other alien thoughts on affirmative action in the academy." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 168).
8. Haack, Susan. "Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 125.

9. Haack, Susan. "Science as Social? Yes and No." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 114.
10. Haack, Susan. "The Long Arm of Common Sense." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, p. 96.
11. See, for example, Carrier, Richard. Interview with Susan Haack. May, 2012. Available at: <https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/1207>.
12. Haack, Susan. "Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist." In: *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 130-131.
13. Carrier, Richard. Interview with Susan Haack. May, 2012. Available at: <https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/1207>.
14. Haack, Susan. "The Long Arm of Common Sense." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, pp. 93-94.
15. Haack, Susan. "The Long Arm of Common Sense." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, p. 98.
16. See, for example, Taruffo, Michele. *La Semplice Verità. Il Giudice e la Costruzione dei Fatti*. Roma: Laterza, 2009, and also Taruffo, Michele. "La Valutazione delle Prove." In: Id., *La Prova nel Processo Civile*. Milano: Giuffrè, 2012.
17. Vázquez, Carmen. *De la Prueba Científica a la Prueba Pericial*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2015.
18. See, for example, Haack, Susan. "The Troubled Marriage of Science and Law." In: *Evidence Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 78.
19. Paula Ramos, Vitor de. *Ônus da Prova no Processo Civil*. [2015] 2nd. Edition. São Paulo: RT, 2018.
20. Paula Ramos, Vitor de. *Prova Testemunhal*. São Paulo: RT, 2018. Also in Spanish: Paula Ramos, Vitor de. La Prueba Testifical. Trad. Laura Criado. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019.
21. Haack, Susan. "What Man Can Achieve When He Really Puts His Mind to It." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, p. 325.
22. For example, when characteristics of the American legal system are overgeneralized ("when the evidence that a drug or chemical is dangerous is overwhelming, plaintiffs' claims are likely to be settled out of court," p. 94), or when stating that "the law relies on an adversarial procedure" (p. 91), which is not the case in civil law systems. Or when making affirmations that seem to oversimplify legal interpretation (Nothing Fancy: Some Simple Truths about Truth in the Law, specially from p. 313 on). Haack, Susan. *Evidence Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
23. Haack, Susan. "What Man Can Achieve When He Really Puts His Mind to It." In: *Defending Science—Within Reason*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003, p. 325.