Book Review.

Explaining or understanding?

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Patrick Baert

The Existentialist Moment. The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. 231 pp., £17-99, pbk., ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-8540-3

 and

Simon Susen and Patrick Baert

The Sociology of Intellectuals. After 'The Existentialist Moment'. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 194 pp., £44-99, hardback, , ISBN: 978-3-319-61209-6

Baert's book was published in 2015 and Susen presented reflections on it in June of that year at the 14th Annual Conference of the International Social Theory Consortium, held in Cambridge. An extended version of these reflections constitutes chapter 1 of the Baert & Susen publication, which also has a jointly authored Introduction and Baert's reply. I was originally invited to review Baert's book and then was subsequently asked to consider both publications. Taken together, these texts offer important contributions to thinking about the contemporary nature, status, and value of social science, both as a result of their substantive discussions and of the *forms* of their presentation. What is at issue is not just what they both say but the different procedures which they adopt to try to say it.

Baert: The Existentialist Moment.

To begin at the beginning with Baert's book. *The Existentialist Moment* has an Introduction, followed by seven chapters, the last of which is entitled 'Explaining intellectuals: a proposal'. The Introduction announces that 'the question' to be examined in the book relates to 'the astonishingly high public profile' (Baert, 2015: 1) achieved by Sartre in his 'heyday'. Baert specifies that his book 'is an attempt to *comprehend* this extraordinary case of public celebrity' (Baert, 2015: 1, my italics), but he proceeds to offer a sub-section entitled 'theoretical orientation and hypotheses' which makes it clear that he is not seeking simply to comprehend a particular instance but rather to generate an *explanatory* theory to be applied in the analysis of 'intellectuals' at all times and places. Hence the title of the final chapter. Between the Introduction and the final chapter are six chapters which can be described as 'social history' or as 'intellectual history' or, following Baert's intention, as attempts to represent a socio-intellectual history, denying the autonomy of the component elements, of the context of the rise of Sartre's reputation in the period between 1945 and 1960. The fundamental problem of the book, therefore, is inherent in its formal structure. The Introduction and the final chapter engage with general theoretical questions while the six intervening chapters are descriptive of a particular case. The problem is to

determine the extent to which the conclusions of the final chapter were already contained within the way in which the project was conceptualised. Are we witnessing a process of induction or deduction in respect of the analysis of historical phenomena? Baert is uneasy on this point. He claims that his approach in general has affinities with actor-network theory as proposed by Bruno Latour and specifically in that it 'consciously avoids imposing too rigid a theoretical framework from the outset' (Baert, 2015: 16) but 'we nevertheless adopt a theoretical orientation' (Baert, 2015: 16). He insists that his approach 'makes an effort not to exclude *a priori* any factors that might have been constitutive of the making of the existentialist movement' (Baert, 2015: 16) but his statement that his orientation 'centres round the idea that through their work writers position themselves intellectually and that this positioning affects whether their ideas are taken up by others and, if successful, how they are adopted' (Baert, 2015: 16) suggests, what is confirmed by the text, that this orientation does *a priori* exclude serious attention to the *content* of the ideas which are analysed pragmatically. Baert tries to deal with the problem of the relationship between 'theory' and analysis in his book by suggesting that it can be read in two ways or appreciated by readers with different kinds of interests: 'For those readers interested in the theory, we refer to the final chapter where we expand on this idea ['positioning theory'] and where we revisit some of the empirical material in the light of the new theory proposed' (Baert, 2015: 16). This separation is presentationally undesirable and even contravenes Baert's own contention that the problem with many previous accounts of 'intellectuals' is that they have been insufficiently sophisticated in terms of their theoretical perspectives. The separation is also unsustainable as it becomes clear that the 'hypotheses which provide a guiding framework for this study' (Baert, 2015: 16) are not, as this states, 'hypotheses' which are tested but theoretical assumptions which shape the enquiry and its conclusions. Baert next elaborates what he calls his 'starting assumptions'. These are three: that ideas are 'more likely' to spread if they are coherently labelled and packaged; that this dissemination depends as much on the relations of the individual promoters of these ideas with the intellectual establishment as on their 'charismatic qualities'; and that the success or otherwise of new ideas depends on whether they 'resonate with recent socio-political experiences' better than do 'older, established ideas'. These 'assumptions' break down into 'five concrete hypotheses' which 'guide' the research, more, however, as principles than as hypotheses. These expose at least two more fundamental assumptions which are not articulated. The first is that Baert is concerned with the *transmission* of *ideas*, with the correlation of the 'intellectual' with the 'experiential' as a process of uni-directional communication. He is not concerned with the intrinsic meanings of ideas even though he assigns them intellectualist privilege, nor is he concerned with the social conditions influencing the production of these ideas. The correlation which interests him presupposes the autonomous validity of 'ideas' and, secondly, his pragmatic analysis of these ideas supposes that their recipients in the 'public-intellectual arena' are supplicant, experiential consumers rather than equal, but different, producers. Baert operates with a fundamental dualism: 'The most sophisticated ideas will fail to penetrate the public intellectual arena if they do not manage to connect with the recent and present experiences of the people involved' (Baert, 2015: 17).

Baert's Introduction next offers a sub-section, entitled 'Dreyfus and the notion of the intellectual', which acknowledges that there was a pre-history in France in respect of the engagement of intellectuals with public events. He briefly discusses the way in which the Dreyfus affair helped to constitute a notion in France of the 'public intellectual', one which was not exclusively either 'left' or 'right' wing politically. He mentions this legacy from the 1890s such that 'by the mid-1940s the idea of political engagement had become the new

orthodoxy' (Baert, 2015: 20), but he insists that his book will focus on the particularity of Sartre's position. He argues that he does not neglect the continuity with previously socially constituted notions of the role of the intellectual, but that his focus will be 'on those conditions at the end of the war which account for why [Sartre's] particular take on these notions resonated with a wider public and broke through to the public intellectual domain' (Baert, 2015: 18). Acknowledging this already established tradition of intellectual engagement within French society, Baert rather ambiguously emphasizes that this is important for our understanding of 'the rise of existentialism' at the same time as admitting that 'existentialists revisited historically rooted views about intellectuals and their political engagement' (Baert, 2015: 18). This is ambiguous because Baert is not clear what he is designating by 'existentialism' or 'existentialists' in that he does not specify whether the 'existentialist moment' is one in which a system of philosophical thinking or a mode of social action prevailed or whether it was a moment when a logical connection between the two was posited. In short, Baert proposes a sociology of the conditions of transmission of ideas of one person as a case-study for a general analysis of intellectuals without either problematising the general status of 'intellectualism' or attempting to understand the logic of Sartre's specific philosophy.

The final sub-section of the Introduction summarises the structure of the book, outlining the content of the six substantive chapters between the Introduction and the conclusion. The first of these – 'Occupation, intellectual collaboration and the Resistance' – 'explains how the occupation and collaboration altered the cultural arena substantially, accentuating already existing divisions within the intellectual community' (Baert, 2015, 21). This is an excellent account of the implications of the German occupation and the Vichy government for the situation of writers between 1940 and 1945, emphasizing the dilemmas confronting authors in choosing between clandestine or collaborationist publication. Baert accentuates well the tension between 'speaking out' or remaining silent. The chapter offers 'context' rather than detailed analysis of Sartre's activity in the period. Significantly, however, Baert makes comments which ambivalently imply that the Sartre phenomenon was constituted by the context but that he strategically manipulated the situation in which he found himself. Baert emphasizes the importance of the dilemmas which, as a social intellectual historian, he identifies because 'they would affect the distinctive cultural sensitivities of the immediate aftermath of the war into which Sartre was able to tap' (Baert, 2015: 23). In anticipating the discussion of the next chapter – 'The purge of collaborationist intellectuals' – Baert repeats the same expression when he says that the notion of the responsibility of authors acquired during the purge 'an unprecedented centrality in the cultural sphere, a shift into which Sartre tapped' (Baert, 2015: 48). The language betrays Baert's methodological uncertainty. Is he seeking to analyse objectively the socio-political context within which Sartre's texts were phenomena or is he seeking to represent Sartre as a strategist who managed his self-presentation in the light of *his* understanding of his situation? Equally, the account suffers because Baert makes no distinction between types of intellectuals. He focuses on 'intellectuals' as tacitly synonymous with 'writers' without confronting the epistemological problem of whether contextual sensitivity is of the same order in respect to the 'fields' of philosophy and literature or, specifically for Sartre, in respect to the performance of a play like *Les Mouches* [The Flies] (staged in Paris in 1943) and the publication of *L'Etre et le Néant* [Being and Nothingness], also in 1943.

Again, the chapter on the épuration (the post-war purge trials) is excellent, providing invaluable information about the criteria adopted by lawyers in seeking retrospectively to judge whether texts published during the Nazi

occupation had been treasonable. Interestingly, Baert highlights the debate revolving around the political accountability of works of art or their a-political validity as art for art's sake without explicitly posing the question in relation to Sartre's own production during the war. We are confronted with the same difficulty as before. Baert argues that the consequence of the trials was that 'the notion of art for art's sake … was now moribund' (Baert, 2015: 71), generating a situation in which new intellectuals were 'able to tap into the new sensibilities'. The arguments of the trials prompted 'intellectuals like Sartre to revisit the war and reformulate their own philosophy' (Baert, 2015: 59). This interpretation is not supported by any consideration of the extent to which Sartre's 'existentialism' of 1946 was or was not latently present within *L'Etre et le Néant*, whether, or in what ways, it is the case that he did 'reformulate' his own philosophy. A social causality is posited, either of detached observation or of immanent agency, without attention to textual detail.

Baert's summary of the next chapter (3) says that it 'explores the intellectual shifts that took place in conjunction with the purge; it also shows how Sartre's journalistic pieces of 1944 and 1945 tapped into those changes and resonated with the spirit of the time' (Baert, 2015, 22). More 'tapping' is indicated and now the force of resonance with the Zeitgeist is posited. The chapter makes a very brief gesture towards analysing the changing emphasis of Sartre's philosophy, but the concentration is on three 'essays' which he published between September, 1944 and August, 1945. Without taking seriously the influence of genre, Baert chooses to analyse Sartre's 'journalism' of the period. Baert's language again exposes his dualistic orientation. 'If in these articles Sartre drew partly on *L'Etre et le Néant*, …', and, again, 'Drawing on some of the existentialist themes of *L'Etre et le Néant* …' (Baert, 2015: 77) are both expressions which seem almost unconsciously to assume that *L'Etre et le Néant* had, or has, an autonomous meaning within an arcane field of philosophical discourse which Sartre plundered strategically to manufacture a popular or vulgarised meaning. Baert does not attempt to investigate how far the shifting meanings of Sartre's work are conditioned by the differently socially constituted discourses within which they are communicated more than in direct, pragmatic response to perceived audience expectations, an issue which needs to be addressed in respect of the meanings of his novels and plays as much as in respect of his 'philosophy' and his journalism. More importantly, Baert characterises Sartre's philosophy somewhat anachronistically precisely when he should be chronologically scrupulous. Sartre offered *L'Etre et le Néant* as an 'essai d'ontologie phénoménologique'. The Hazel Barnes translation as *Being and Nothingness* renders this sub-title as 'An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology' whereas it might more accurately be given as 'an essay *in* phenomenological ontology'. The question, in other words, is whether Sartre's major philosophical text was intended primarily as an essay *about* phenomenological ontology or, rather, as an illustrative performance of it, whether, if the former, it was a contribution to discrete philosophical discourse or, if the latter, an exercise in indicative social engagement. To suggest that Sartre was 'drawing upon' the 'existentialism' of *L'Etre et le Néant* in his journalistic articles is to use the term avant la lettre. On the second translation of the sub-title, Sartre's *method* of philosophising was existential, as evidenced by his illustrative, fictional narratives within the text. On this reading, the essence of *L'Etre et le Néant* was that Sartre was reconciling what he had absorbed philosophically from his reading of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and others with fictional representations of 'real life' social encounters. It follows that Sartre's achievement in 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme' (1946) was not that he adapted a pre-existent 'existentialist' philosophy but that he consolidated the style of *L'Etre et le Néant* by engaging his phenomenological ontology with real life rather than with his fictional representations of it. The form of Sartre's work was constitutive of its content. I

suggest that it was not the case that Sartre pragmatically re-branded his 'philosophy' for popular purposes. (As an aside, this discussion exposes the unanswered question which is implicit in Baert's book: whether it is the historical 'existentialist moment' which has paradigmatic value for us in the present or whether it is 'existentialist *philosophy*' which has trans-historical validity, or, even, neither).

Chapter 4 ('The Autumn of 1945') goes some way towards considering questions of form in Sartre's work. The chapter proceeds sequentially to examine the period that Simone de Beauvoir retrospectively called that of the 'existentialist offensive' (September and October, 1945). These were the months in which Sartre published the first two volumes of his novel trilogy, *Les Chemins de la liberté* (*L'Age de raison* and *Le Sursis*); in which he launched the journal *Les Temps modernes*; and gave the public lecture which was to be published as 'L'Existentialisme est un humanisme' the following year. Baert tries to consider the relations between Sartre's forms of expression in a sentence such as: '…*Les Chemins de la liberté* was like a practical companion to *L'Etre et le Néant*, elucidating its main concepts but also giving them flesh' (Baert, 2015: 92), but, in his historical analysis, he does not really come to terms with the implications for the correlations between the forms of Sartre's writings of the fact that the two novels were written, respectively, between 1939 and 1941 and between 1942 and the end of 1944. Rather lamely, he comments that 'The two volumes brought home the fact that Sartre's existentialism was not merely an abstract philosophy but relevant to contemporary experiences' (Baert, 2015: 93) and proceeds to analyse the behaviour of the main character in the two novels, Mathieu, as if this is an indication of Sartre's position (when?) on the grounds that Mathieu 'is very much an alter ego of the author' (Baert, 2015: 93), on the grounds, in other words, that he does not recognize the formal autonomy of literary imagination. Baert rightly turns to *Les Temps modernes* and 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme' as secure phenomena of engagement with the contemporary. With regard to the journal, Baert comments that 'Sartre's rise owed considerably ' (Baert, 2015: 96) to it, but he adds the statement that '… politico-literary journals in general are significant because of their serial nature and because of their relatively wide and loyal readership' (Baert, 2015: 96). This generalisation is not helpful in relation to Sartre's specific situation because the essence of *Les Temps modernes* was that it was Sartre's *creation* (assisted, of course, by other significant players). In this instance, if ever, Sartre was not, to use Baert's common phrase, 'tapping in' to a journal with pre-existing identity and readership but was inventing a public identity in a journal which was as much cultural-philosophical as 'politico-literary'. Baert analyses meticulously Sartre's extensive introduction to the first issue of *Les Temps modernes*. He presents this as Sartre's appropriation of a collective identity, pointing out that the 'Présentation' does not mention the other editors and contributors by name. Although this is the case, it surely does not amount to appropriation in that, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the first volume – 'La guerre a eu lieu' [the war has taken place] – would also have been influential. This is a point worth making because the seeds of disagreement between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were present from the start and I shall want to argue eventually that the sequence of Merleau-Ponty's reconciliation of philosophy and politics in his transition from *Phenoménologie de perception* (1945) to participation with *Les Temps modernes* is more conducive to an analysis of the social function of intellectuals than is the sequence of Sartre's reconciliation. I shall want to argue that Merleau-Ponty's deployment of phenomenology was pluralist whereas Sartre's was dualist and that Baert's analysis of Sartre tends towards a vindication of Sartre whereas a better analysis would recognize that Bourdieu's sociology of intellectuals follows the thinking developed by Merleau-Ponty and makes possible an appreciation of plural intellectualisms. For the moment, I suggest that Baert is significantly

imprecise in his representation of the position adopted by Sartre in his 'Présentation'. Baert states that 'Sartre used this essay to elaborate on some key notions of his existentialist philosophy, rejecting attempts to define the individual in universalistic terms and promoting instead the view that individuals are always "situated"' (Baert, 2015: 99). He continues by clarifying that this means that, for Sartre, 'the individual is always faced with a situation in which he or she is compelled to make choices' (Baert, 2015: 99) and that, further, this means that Sartre was elaborating on his view of people's freedom 'even if it is the case, as he admitted, that their choices are constrained' (Baert, 2015: 99). Arguably, Sartre was accommodating in his 'Présentation' the critique of his position which Merleau-Ponty had offered in the last chapter, entitled 'La liberté' [freedom], of his recently published *Phénoménologie de la perception* where, explicitly against Sartre, he had stated that freedom is 'both to be born of the world and to be born into the world' ['Naître, c'est à la fois naître du monde et naître au monde'] (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 453; 1945: 517). Baert is right that Sartre resisted attempts to define individuals in universalistic terms or, better, in terms of any metaphysic of 'human nature', but he does not highlight the extent to which Sartre assumed that individuals retain an autonomous identity within the contexts where they are situated and are constrained. Sartre's existentialism was dependent on a notion of autonomous personhood whereas Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology recognized that there is a continuous interaction between the constitution of society by selves and the social constitution of those selves. I relegate detailed argument about this point to a footnote[1], but I believe that the necessary differentiation between the positions of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is crucial in reflecting on the fundamental issue raised in these two books – the nature and function of the 'public intellectual'.

In chapter 5, Baert continues to give close attention to specific texts. The discussion of *Existentialisme est un humanisme* of chapter 4 is followed by consideration of *Qu'est-ce que la literature?* and *Réflexions sur la question juive*, published respectively at the end of 1945 and early 1946. Sartre was now becoming a 'major public figure' (Baert, 2015: 112) and this prompts Baert to try to typify the nature of his intellectual status by differentiating in general between 'authoritative public intellectuals' and '*professional* public intellectuals' (Baert, 2015: 112-3). The former 'not only possess high cultural capital but also exhibit charisma and character' (Baert, 2015: 112-3) while the latter 'draw on their expertise and on the authority derived from this expertise' (Baert, 2015: 113). Baert references his earlier text on intellectuals (Baert and Shipman, 2011) in support of this characterisation of the first category of intellectuals but the formulation does not adequately clarify whether the authority possessed in it is intrinsic (charismatic) or socially assigned or, equally, whether the 'cultural capital' is, to use Bourdieu's distinction, 'incorporated' or 'instituted', nor does it indicate whether or in what ways the 'expertise' in the second category is immune from the influence of charisma and character. The intention of the chapter is to demonstrate that Sartre 'positioned' himself as an 'authoritative public intellectual', by which Baert means that he 'drew on high cultural capital and spoke with great moral authority about a wide range of issues without necessarily possessing expertise in any of them' (Baert, 2015: 121). Indicative of this non-expert generalism, according to Baert, was Sartre's disinclination to deploy the social sciences in offering opinions about social and political phenomena, and it becomes apparent that Baert is wanting to recommend that professional social scientists should become 'media-savvy', more disposed to imitate the communicative strategies of authoritative intellectuals. In doing so, he operates with just two alternative intellectual 'types' without supposing that degrees of engagement might descriptively be placed on a continuum which is dependent on contingent social conditions[2].

In chapter 6, Baert offers to pull together the threads of the argument presented in the previous chapters with a view to providing 'a multifaceted *explanation* for the rise of Sartre and existentialism in the mid-1940s' (Baert, 2015: 135, italics added). He offers an account of the rise and fall of Sartre's reputation and influence, both in terms of the changing social conditions. Baert's summary of his case-study becomes a re-statement of the underlying assumptions guiding the enquiry, presented as general propositions, such as, for instance, 'Intellectual ideas spread mainly through publications' (Baert, 2015:138); 'The spread of a philosophy or a doctrine within the broader public not only depends on publishing opportunities but also on the other media' (Baert, 2015: 141). Baert purports to derive these propositions from his social historical analyses but we have the paradoxical situation in which this move involves a denial of the historical contingency of dominant modes of communication, such as publishing and 'other media'. In a section entitled 'Further comments', Baert argues that his work takes 'a different stance from those of Boschetti and Collins' (Baert, 2015: 148) in that they 'assume the relative autonomy of the intellectual sphere' (Baert, 2015: 148) whereas his assessment 'shows the extent to which the specific socio-political context at the time at least partly accounts for the sudden rise in popularity of French existentialism' (Baert, 2015: 148). The use of 'at least partly' is nervous. The whole point of the attempt to relativise intellectual autonomy is to measure the degrees of 'at least partly' in different social contexts. The orientation of Baert's book is to deny absolutely the autonomy of the intellectual sphere and to assert the primacy of context in determining intellectual influence but, in taking this position, Baert nevertheless tacitly subscribes to a dualist vision of the world in which 'ideas' do have separate existence in pragmatic relation to contexts, and not to a monist view in which ideas and contexts are in mutually constitutive correlation. Baert's analyses are self-fulfilling because he chooses to ignore the logic of Sartre's thought by seeking to demonstrate that its success was socio-logically conditioned and by 'deducing' from these analyses the general pragmatist propositions from which he started. A pragmatic approach here, perhaps like all pragmatisms, presupposes an intellectualism which it seeks to disown.

Susen and Baert: The Sociology of Intellectuals.

This jointly authored text, subtitled 'After "The Existentialist Moment"', consists of a brief, co-authored introduction on 'Key Issues in the Sociology of Intellectuals', followed by Susen's reflections on Baert's book and, lastly, Baert's rejoinder to Susen's criticisms. The joint introduction outlines the proposed process of analysis and response and, very importantly, highlights the way in which the book builds on *The Existentialist Moment* in two inter-related respects. Susen and Baert together recognize that 'The challenge of providing a theoretical framework for the sociological study of intellectuals has become particularly pressing in light of contemporary social developments …' (Susen & Baert, 2017: ix) and they elaborate two of these. The first is that '*There are signs of an increasing polarization between "intellectuals" and "non-intellectuals"*' (Susen & Baert, 2017: ix), and the second is that, following on from the first, 'the new communication technologies available in the "digital" age have made it possible for many individuals to intervene in intellectual debates without having to go through, let alone to rely upon, traditional gatekeepers' (Susen & Baert, 2017: ix). The intention of the book is that it should advance a theoretical framework for the sociological study of intellectuals so as to enable the analysis offered by Baert in respect of the case of Sartre to be transposed to the present to provide resolutions of the current problems of 'post-truth' phenomena and social media influences. Articulated in this way, the book seems to recommend a revival of the expertise of the professional public intellectual, in

this case the professional sociologist, in opposition to the prevalent influence of authoritative intellectuals who derive their authority charismatically and without reference to any knowledge base. The paradox is that Baert's emphasis of 'positionality' or 'position-taking' as the constitutive elements in determining intellectual success fails to acknowledge that this pragmatic orientation has been the precursor of 'post-truth'. In suggesting the relevance of the transfer of the arguments of *The Existential Moment* to the present, Baert and Susen suggest that there are 'several noteworthy similarities between these two historical settings' (Susen & Baert, 2017: x). In one paragraph, they give some indications of the similarities they have in mind, concluding that the 1940s in which Sartre's rise took place was a period which was 'marked by a high degree of discontinuity and rapid social transformation' (Susen & Baert, 2017: x), just as, understood, is our own.

There are here the seeds of a comparative analysis of the position-taking of intellectuals between two historical periods and different social contexts which might directly examine the legitimacy of extrapolating a concept of the 'intellectual' from one period in order to recommend it in another, but the book does not pursue this line of enquiry. Instead, it 'focuses on the development of positioning theory in relation to the sociological study of intellectuals' (Susen & Baert, 2017: xi) on the grounds that this study is currently 'under-theorized'. The focus of the book is on the refinement of a theory of intellectuals and it is conducted within a framework of conceptualisation which is indifferent to the social context of its own production.

Susen chooses to focus exclusively on those components of Baert's book which seek to offer a general, sociological theory of intellectuals, and to ignore those socio-historical analyses of Sartre's rise and fall on which Baert's theory is supposedly based. Susen first summarises or paraphrases the arguments advanced by Baert in his introductory ands final chapters and, in doing so, he embellishes these arguments by suggesting, in footnotes, further discussion by reference to a rich assembly of canonical authors including Kant, Bourdieu, Durkheim, Habermas, Bergson, Rorty, Goffman, Boltanski and Luhmann as well as to numerous 'secondary' authors. This commentary provides an invaluable annotated bibliography of the literature on the sociology of intellectuals, but it also effects a shift of emphasis between the two books under review. It consolidates an extraction or abstraction of a concern with theory independent of social context. To some degree, Baert's orientation had been to apply a conceptual framework pragmatically in order to expose the pragmatism inherent in the historical phenomena which he was analysing. By contrast, Susen's orientation is foundationalist. He is intent on examining Baert's methodological statements with a view to developing valid propositions to be applied irrespective of specific ally historical conditions. Baert's book reveals a social historian yearning to be 'scientific '. Susen's response reveals a social theorist yearning to be philosophical.

Susen's response is divided into two parts. The first is a representation of Baert's 'argument', a detailed and systematic paraphrase of the content, exclusively, of the introduction and chapter 7 of Baert's book. Susen highlights that Baert's concern was with Sartre as a 'public intellectual and public celebrity' and that he sought to use this concern to develop a valid theory of intellectuals. Susen focuses on Baert's early discussion of two 'scholarly "explanations"' of the social function of intellectuals in general, those offered by Bourdieu and Collins, and then on his representation of four 'alternative "explanations"' of the 'Sartre phenomenon' available in the secondary literature. These are that Sartre's 'success' can be explained by his 'individual qualities'; by the historical context of 'the autumn of 1945'; by the post-war 'relaxing of morals'; and by 'the power of generational shifts' and Susen emphasizes that the point of Baert's analysis is to argue that no one of these

factors should be regarded as exclusively dominant but that we need a theoretical perspective which can accommodate 'multiple sociological variables' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 11). In making this point, Susen cites his own earlier critique of Boltanski's *De la critique* (Susen, 2014 [2012]). By extending Baert's presentation in this way, Susen contrives to transpose Baert's essentially pragmatic methodology to a more generalised field of theoreticist discourse. Susen proceeds to try to define Baert's 'theoretical orientation' within this discourse. He seeks to classify Baert's position, suggesting that he distinguishes between 'intellectuals' and 'critics' and also between the 'intra-intellectual world' and the 'public intellectual arena'. Susen argues that Baert makes a 'plea for a *theory of positioning*' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 14) which is based on three presuppositions. These are that the 'success' of the thought of thinkers is dependent on the way it is 'packaged' or 'labelled', on the process of mediation, and on its relation to the dominant '*Zeitgeist*' in the society within which it is disseminated. For Susen, these presuppositions generate what he calls Baert's 'five central hypotheses' which are those which Baert announced were the 'five concrete hypotheses' guiding his research (Baert, 2015, 17). There is, again, a subtle transference of 'hypotheses' from an empirical to a propositional context. Susen proceeds to summarise the overall intention of Baert's project, which he takes to be an attempt to overcome 'the deficiencies of existing accounts' of intellectuals, involving the construction of a 'multi-level explanation' of the social phenomenon, one which comprehensively accommodates accounts which are often inadequately found in isolation. As summarised by Susen, Baert tries to transcend partial interpretations which arise from the false isolation of five main explanatory biases. The represented contention is that existing accounts suffer from 'empiricist', 'motivational', 'structural', 'authenticity', and 'stability' bias. Primarily, these biases are thought to be contaminated by an interest in the *intentions* of intellectuals rather than by the *effects* of their work and, accordingly, Susen makes the point that, in contrast, Baert ' makes a case for a theoretical stance that may be characterized as – simultaneously – *pragmatist*, *performativist*, and *positionist*' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 24) and he elaborates on these emphases in four further sub-sections before then offering an account of the way in which Baert attempts to effect a 'paradigm shift' away from intentionalism.

Susen's detailed exegesis of Baert's theoretical position is a prelude to the second part of his reflections on Baert's book in which he offers 'critical reflections on Baert's account of intellectuals'. Susen lavishly praises Baert's 'proposal for "explaining intellectuals"' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 44) but insists that it is important to 'grapple with the limitations and shortcomings of Baert's analysis' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 44) by which he means the limitations of Baert's *theory* qua theory rather than the limitations of that theory in providing a framework within which the social phenomenon can be *analysed*. Susen itemises 25 characteristics of Baert's theory, assigning each a one-word title. In each case, Susen elaborates the meaning that he assigns to the title and assesses the validity of Baert's approach in relation to this meaning. Susen discusses 1) 'intersectionality', 2) '(in-)commensurability', 3) 'interpenetrability', 4) 'diversity', 5) '(socio-) historicity', 6) 'narrativity', 7) 'autonomy', 8)'heterogeneity', 9)'imaginary', 10) 'intellectuality', 11) 'ideology', 12)'theory', 13) 'fallacy', 14) 'sociality', 15) 'authenticity', 16) '(in-) determinacy', 17) 'performativity', 18) 'positionality', 19) 'multiposditionality', 20) 'teams', 21)'cooperative individuality', 22) 'credibility', 23) '(in-) security', 24) 'epistemocracy', 25) 'effectology'.

This is not the place to attempt to assess these categories of criticism in close detail. However, the second chapter of the Susen & Baert book offers Baert's defence of his book and contains his brief response to each of

the 25 headings in turn. Consequently, I shall try to comment on some indicative aspects of their exchange of views without attempting a comprehensive adjudication. In this way I shall try to give readers a flavour of the debate between the two authors and also highlight a few issues in contention between them which will enable me to introduce my critical conclusions on the two books under review.

In respect of 'intersectionality' (1), Susen argues that Baert's theory pays insufficient attention to the influence of factors such as gender and class in contributing to the establishment of an intellectual's reputation, while in (2) he questions the validity of Baert's claim that Sartre's status as an intellectual was unrivalled in the 20ᵗʰ Century. Baert responds by acknowledging, in the first instance, that the people who figured in his account of French society in the 1940s were mainly male and privileged, and, in the second instance, by challenging Susen's list of rival claimants to unrivalled reputation. The problem here is that the exchange demonstrates the incommensurability of the positions of the two authors and their uncertainty whether their comments in criticism and response should be offered in terms of logic or empirical socio-historical 'fact'. Baert simply admits that the interpretation of phenomena offered in his Sartrean case study, transposed by Susen (rightly or wrongly?) into a general law, was limited by its particular historical conditions, and he defends his assumption that Sartre was unrivalled without confronting the fact that his pragmatic analysis of the way in which Sartre acquired his reputation is predicated on his own immersion in an inherited, trans-historical value-judgement which, in his own terms, is the consequence of mediated effects. In other words, Baert is not prepared to place himself within the mediated and socially conditioned process of canonisation and de-canonisation of reputations influencing his choice of Sartre as an object of study even though these are precisely the elements of 'positioning' which he explores in his book.

The element of incommensurability in the dialogue is apparent again in Baert's response to Susen's account of 'heterogeneity' (8). Susen responds to Baert's view that ideas are more likely to spread from the intra- to the public intellectual domain if they are packaged and labelled by pointing out that there are instances when they spread precisely because they are arcane or attractively incomprehensible. Baert concedes that this may be the case but he adds that 'this does not necessarily undermine my argument that a label *can* help processes of diffusion' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 132). That being the case, what is the status and value of the general observation? Susen challenges the universal validity of Baert's contention and Baert retreats to invite empirical analysis of the conditions in which the general contention might apply. Susen exposes the limited worth of the general contention but the basis of his criticism would seem not to be that its utility should be verified in empirical practice but, rather, that a more comprehensively adequate principle should be articulated. The same issue arises explicitly in relation to 'co-operative individuality' (21). As Baert summarises , Susen questions his 'tentative hypothesis' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 140) that 'the more secure and established one's position, the less one needs to rely on teamwork …' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 140) and suggests that 'the opposite might well be the case' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 140). Susen indicates that there may be diametrically contradictory laws rather than just the one espoused by Baert but, crucially, Baert responds by saying that this 'is obviously an empirical question' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 140). Obviously.

The exchange concerning 'autonomy' (7) is also indicative of some mutual miscommunication. In differentiating between the 'intra-intellectual world' and the 'public intellectual arena' Susen claims that Baert misrepresents the Humboldtian conception of the university by supposing that it epitomised the 'self-regulatory

principle of the intra-intellectual world' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 52). Susen's argument is that Humboldt's notion of academic self-regulation was not designed to set academic autonomy against society but, rather, to perform a function within that society, that, as Susen puts it, 'in Humboldt's eyes, educational institutions – at all levels – should be conceived of as interconnected organs of the collective body called "society"' (Susen & Baert, 2017: 52). For Susen, this is a crucial point because, implicitly, he rejects Baert's dualistic opposition of intra-intellectual and public intellectual worlds. This is important because Susen wants to believe that university autonomy is socially functional rather than absolute and that, therefore, the publication, for instance, of the intellectual exchange between himself and Baert is not an element in academic self-referentiality but an integral component in social exchange. Significantly, Baert had cited both Edward Shils (1992) and Burton Clark (1995), both of whom had their own axes to grind, as his authorities for his (mis)representation of Humboldt. In response to Susen, Baert argues that he was referring simply to Humboldt's notion of university self-governance and accepts Susen's view that overall Humboldt considered self-governance and social function to have been interconnected in his conception of the university. What is perplexing, however, is that Baert prefaces his comments by stating that Susen's questioning of his representation of university autonomy 'is a minor criticism because it does not really affect the rest of my argument' (Susen & Baert, 2017:132). It may not affect the argument but it does impinge on consideration of the *status* of the text in which that argument is advanced. In presenting his analysis of the rise of Sartre as a public intellectual, Baert is insufficiently reflexive about the intra-intellectual conditions regulating his own transmission of that analysis.

Concluding remarks.

Baert's original book and the Susen and Baert sequel raise important questions about the contemporary social function of the intellectual, but there are two huge omissions which give rise to criticism which transcend their particular differences.

The first omission is any reference to the progression of thinking in German social philosophy most notably represented in Habermas's *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (Habermas, 1988 [1970] and in Apel's *Understanding and Explanation. A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective* (Apel, 1984 [1979] and pursued in many subsequent texts. Baert's book and the subsequent exchange between Susen and Baert are imprecise in their consideration, as Habermas would put it, of the relations between the nomological and the historical-hermeneutic sciences, or, as Apel would put it, between 'explanation' [Erklären] and 'understanding' [Verstehen] in the social sciences. Apel's book tried to advance 'transcendental pragmatics', emphasizing 'the fundamental difference between that which can be explained and that which can be understood' (Apel, 1984, 67). The books under review fail to engage with this distinction. Baert's book provides highly enlightening *understanding* of Sartre and the existentialist moment, but its understanding is constantly contaminated by a desire to consolidate an explanatory theory without recognizing that the incipient or latent theory was actually dictating the enquiry and its findings. In his detailed discussion of 'the inadequacy of the logic-semantic explication of synthetic acts of knowledge' Apel provides a graphic account when he considers what happens when 'we want to "explain" Cleopatra's suicide by snake bite' (Apel, 1984: 185). To do so 'we first make her choice of method comprehensible by referring to the Egyptians' religious tradition; then we construct a causal explanation of the event that uses both her intention to die and become immortal and her religious beliefs as a volitional-cognitive causal complex' (Apel, 1984: 185), that is to say that we first try to understand the meaning

which she assigned to her actions and then try to extrapolate a generalisable explanation. Apel argues that 'given an ex post actu understanding of the meaning of the historical action, it may be possible to construct a … causal explanation by distilling a lawlike premise from the historical background of the motives involved' (Apel, 1984: 186) but this given is unlikely or unattainable with the result that he concludes that 'in most cases, however, this construction reflects a procedure of methodologically parasitic hypostatization that, frankly, is comical' (Apel, 1984: 186). For all its many specific insights, I suggest that Baert's book runs the risk of such comedy in its imprecise oscillation between understanding and explanation.

The second omission is the inadequate reference in the two books to the relevant work of Pierre Bourdieu. Susen is very well informed about the work of Bourdieu just as, I suspect, he is well informed about the tradition of German social philosophy to which I have just referred. However, his critique of Baert's book does not seek to clarify the understanding/explanation dilemma, nor does it seek to put Baert right about Bourdieu. Baert touches on the work of Bourdieu, but in a wholly inadequate manner. Much of his reference to Bourdieu derives from his reading of Anna Boschetti's book on *Les Temps Modernes* rather than direct engagement with Bourdieu's texts. He demonstrates a crude understanding of Bourdieu's thought in his reference to Bourdieu's critique of Heidegger (Baert, 2015: 162) and repeats the same inadequacy when he tries to respond to Susen's criticism (16) that he interprets Bourdieu's theory as deterministic. Baert claims in his defence that he was not trying 'to make a judgement on Bourdieu's overall contribution to social theory' (Susen & Baert, 2017, 138), but his few comments exude a basic misreading of that theory. In making somewhat derogatory reference to Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field', he shows no awareness that Bourdieu's life work can be seen as an attempt to generate a conceptual framework which would accommodate a reciprocal correlation between immanent understanding and detached explanation. It is a significant deficiency that Baert seems to be unaware of Bourdieu's epistemology which recommended the analysis of intellectual fields both in their own terms as 'structured structures' and as social constructs, 'structuring structures'. Had Baert been aware of Bourdieu's real achievement, had he referred, for instance, to Bourdieu's "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur" [intellectual field and creative project] (Bourdieu, 1966) – first published, incidentally, in Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* in 1966 - he might have found it possible to recognize that contingent historical conditions generate a range of different structural opportunities for intellectual expression and that, in response to these objective possibilities, individuals situate themselves as producers on a spectrum of production which extends from aesthetic, art-for-art's sake, indifference to audience at one extreme to mundane supplication to quotidian issues at the opposite, journalistic extreme. The conditions of possibility of intellectualism, therefore, are always to be understood sociologically rather than by recourse to abstract propositions.

Not only does Bourdieu provide a framework for a sociology of intellectuals but his emphasis of reflexivity means that he was prepared to insert his understanding of his situation within the social model which he had constructed. Bourdieu believed that society is constituted from plural perspectives of social reality and that social scientific explanation is just one perspective in competition with others. It follows that he did not attempt to privilege the gaze of sociological public intellectuals but, instead, encouraged the 'public' to articulate diverse forms of intellectuality, to engage in socio-analytic encounter or dialogue. Although he shared the concerns of the German tradition of social philosophy about the relationship between understanding and explanation, he was committed to emphasizing the primacy of practice. He resisted any speculative philosophical response to this

problem but, instead, sought to regard 'explanation' as one instrument for generating social self-understanding, refusing to acquiesce in the explanatory domination of socially and intellectually detached academic social science.

I wholly accept the contention, which Baert and Susen seem to share, that mass democracy now entails a 'paradigm shift' in social science and in the conduct of social scientists. I am not convinced that Baert's concentration on 'positionality' at the expense of plurality effects that shift, nor am I persuaded that the *form* of Susen's critique enables us to de-privilege the academic gaze. I believe that the Bourdieu paradigm[3], properly understood and properly pursued, is the best on offer for our current historical situation.

Notes.

[1] Baert is clearly basing his summary on a paraphrase of the following passage in Sartre's 'Présentation': 'Nous concevons sans difficulté qu'un homme, encore que sa situation le conditionne totalement, puisse être un centre d'indétermination irréductible. Ce secteur d'imprévisibilité qui se découpe ainsi dans le champ social, c'est ce que nous nommons la liberté et la personne n'est rien d'autre que sa liberté. Cette liberté, il ne faut pas l'envisager comme un pouvoir métaphysique de la « nature » humaine …' [We can readily conceive that, although totally conditioned, a man can be the centre of an irreducible indeterminacy. This element of unpredictability, which is apparent in the social field, is what we call freedom and persons are nothing other than their freedom. We must not envisage this freedom as a metaphysical power of human "nature" …']. Although Sartre rejects the metaphysical, a passage of this sort, with its use of the word 'personne' for individual, provides support for Heidegger's subsequent criticism, in his *Brief über den Humanismus* [*Letter on Humanism*] of 1947, that various forms of humanism , including that of Sartre, 'all agree in this, that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole.' (Heidegger, ed. Krell. 1977: 202). This critique was already contained in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger had specifically criticised Dilthey, Scheler, Bergson and Husserl on the grounds that their various attempts to define being all presupposed an inherited understanding of what it means to be human. He had concluded that '… what stands in the way of the basic question of Dasein's Being (or leads it off the track) is an orientation thoroughly coloured by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world, whose inadequate ontological foundations have been overlooked both by the philosophy of life and by personalism.' (Heidegger, 1962: 74). Although Sartre had clearly been influenced by Heidegger's *Being and Time* in writing *L'Etre et le Néant*, it was Heidegger's view that Sartre's essay on 'phenomenological ontology' was undermined by his importation of these humanist prejudices about being.

The position which Sartre advanced in *L'Etre et le Néant* was an elaboration of what he had first outlined in *La transcendance de l'ego*, sub-titled 'Esquisse d'une description phénoménologique' [sketch of a phenomenological description]. The title of this early work can cause some confusion. Sartre's purpose was to criticise the notion found in 'the majority of philosophers' (Sartre, ed. Le Bon, 1996 [1936]: 13) of the ego as an 'inhabitant' of consciousness and to argue, instead, that the ego is 'in the world, is a being of the world, like the ego of others' (Sartre, ed. Le Bon, 1996 [1936]: 13). Citing simply Husserl's *Ideen I*, his *Logische Untersuchungen*, and his *La Conscience interne du temps*, Sartre is sympathetic to Husserl's intention to analyse consciousness as a phenomenon but he suggests that Husserl betrayed his own methodological intention by attempting to retrieve Kant's idea of transcendental consciousness through a process of eidetic reduction. In short, Sartre saw Husserl as a transcendental phenomenologist who retained a redundant notion of an 'I' controlling consciousness, an essential 'I'. In opposition, Sartre proposed to offer a description of

consciousnesses as objects unpredetermined by egos. Nevertheless, Sartre accepts the legacy of the thought of Kant, Descartes, and Husserl which regards it as undeniable fact that the 'cogito' is personal, that 'In the 'I think' there is an I who thinks' (Sartre, ed. Le Bon, 1996, [1936]: 27). The confusion of the title, therefore, is terminological in that Sartre rejects as 'transcendental' and a priori Husserl's conception of the 'ego' but retains commitment to a transcendental thinking process as one by which all individuals possess the capacity to construct themselves. Sartre attempts to clarify his position in his Introduction to *L'Etre et le Néant*, entitled 'The Pursuit of Being'. He devotes a section to consideration of 'the phenomenon of being and the being of the phenomenon' and concludes that 'the being of the phenomenon … can not be subject to the phenomenal condition … and that consequently it surpasses the knowledge which we have of it and provides the basis for such knowledge' (Sartre, 1991: xxvi). There is a basis for knowledge in ontology which is different from the knowledge examined by epistemology. Sartre calls this the 'pre-reflective cogito', saying that 'there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito' (Sartre, 1991: xxix). He devotes the next section to clarification of the difference between this cogito and perception. Sartre accuses Husserl of having revived Berkeley's 'Esse est percipi' [to be is to be perceived] in new words and, hence, to have been a closet idealist in treating 'the noema as *unreal*' (Sartre, 1991: xxvi), simply a function of the noetic process. In opposition, Sartre distinguishes between *percipere*, the act of perceiving, and *percipi*, the object perceived, or, in other words, insists on the necessary encounter between noesis and noema rather than the prevalence of either, but also still insists that the percipere/percipi relationship is an inadequate basis for knowledge. As he puts it: 'Thus the being of knowledge can not be measured by knowledge; it is not subject to the percipi' (Sartre, 1991: xxvi-xxvii). To this Sartre adds the footnote that his point applies equally to any other 'attitude from human reality' such as 'acting' since, in this case, 'it would still be necessary to guarantee the being of acting apart from the action'. For Sartre, 'the foundation-of-being (*l'être-fondement*) for the *percipere* and the *percipi* can not itself be subject to the *percipi* ; it must be transphenomenal (Sartre, 1991: xxvii), or, as he states the point differently, 'every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself', a consciousness, that is, which has absoluteness and is non-reducible to experience. Sartre struggles to express his thinking linguistically, insisting that his reference to a 'non-positional consciousness of self' is not implying a transcendent ego but, rather, meaning a process where self-consciousness should not be considered as a new consciousness but 'as the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something' (Sartre, 1991: xxx). It follows that 'since consciousness is not possible before being … its existence implies its essence' (Sartre, 1991: xxxi) and that 'the ontological error of Cartesian rationalism is not to have seen that if the absolute is defined by the primacy of existence over essence, it can not be conceived as a substance' (Sartre, 1991: xxxii).

In the introduction to *L'Etre et le Néant*, Sartre introduces two key elements of his philosophy. In more popular form he expressed one when, in *L'Age de raison*, he made one of his characters say of the Sartre figure that '… Mathieu's freedom is based on reason' (Sartre, 1963 [1945]: 31) and the other in *Existentialisme est un humanisme* when he announced that the defining characteristic of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre, ed. Elkaïm-Sartre 1996, [1946]: 26). Combining these two elements, we can say that Sartre argued that human beings possess intrinsically the capacity to constitute their selves. This pre-reflective cognitive capacity precedes or transcends experience rather than the other way round so that humans are able to exercise it in freedom, undetermined by empirical influence.

[2] This, of course, is the supposition offered by Bourdieu in "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur" (Bourdieu 1966).
[3] See Robbins 2019 (forthcoming).

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