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Introduction:

Key Issues

in the Sociology of Intellectuals

Simon Susen and Patrick Baert

Abstract This chapter offers some preliminary reflections on Simon Susen and Patrick Baert's *The Sociology of Intellectuals: After 'The Existentialist Moment'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). The chapter emphasizes three principal objectives of this book: first, to explore a new set of conceptual and methodological tools for the sociology of intellectuals (*theoretical level*); second, to assess how the phenomenon of the public intellectual has altered since the beginning of the twentieth century (*historical level*); and, third, to examine the extent to which intellectuals can play a constructive role in influencing social and political developments in the modern era (*normative level*). The chapter goes on to give a brief overview of both the structure and the contents of the book. Finally, the chapter explains why, in light of recent social and political transformations, the challenge of providing a theoretical framework for the sociological study of intellectuals has become particularly pressing.

This book seeks to provide a cutting-edge account of key issues in the sociology of intellectuals. To this end, it centres on Patrick Baert's latest contribution to this field of inquiry: *The Existentialist Moment:*

The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015). As shall be illustrated in the following critical exchange between two contemporary social theorists, *The Existentialist Moment* has broken new ground and yielded hitherto barely explored avenues for the sociological study of intellectuals.

Broadly speaking, this book has three principal objectives:

- at the *theoretical* level, to explore a new set of conceptual and methodological tools for the sociology of intellectuals;
- at the *historical* level, to assess how the phenomenon of the public intellectual has altered since the beginning of the twentieth century;
- at the *normative* level, to examine the extent to which intellectuals can play a constructive role in influencing social and political developments in the modern era.

With the aim of shedding light on these three levels of investigation, the book is divided into two chapters:

In Chap. 1, Simon Susen provides an in-depth review of *The Existentialist Moment*, focusing on the theoretical dimensions underpinning the analysis developed in this book. In the first part, Susen gives a detailed, and largely sympathetic, overview of Baert's approach, drawing attention to its main conceptual and methodological contributions to the sociological study of intellectuals. In the second part, Susen grapples with the limitations and shortcomings of Baert's approach, especially with respect to its plea for a paradigm shift from a 'vocabulary of intentions' to a 'vocabulary of effects' in the sociology of intellectuals. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the role that intellectuals may play in shaping the development of society.

In Chap. 2, Baert offers a detailed reply to Susen's review of *The Existentialist Moment.* More specifically, Baert defends his proposal for a positioning theory, arguing that it equips us with a powerful explanatory framework for the sociological study of intellectuals. Even if the label 'positioning theory' may suggest otherwise, Baert's version of this approach constitutes a comprehensive research programme, rather than a merely theoretical endeavour. As such, it can be regarded as a way of conducting research that pays close attention to the relationship between intellectual interventions and the meanings that these interventions acquire within socio-political contexts. This type of inquiry, then, requires an in-depth understanding not only of intellectuals but also of the broader milieu in which intellectuals operate.

The challenge of providing a theoretical framework for the sociological study of intellectuals has become particularly pressing in light of contemporary social developments, two of which are crucial:

1. *There are signs of an increasing polarization between 'intellectuals' and 'non-intellectuals'.* Here, 'intellectuals' are conceived of as persons who, on a day-to-day basis, engage in different forms of critical thinking, reflection, and analysis—and who do so in a sustained, systematic, and habitualized fashion. Of course, the category 'intellectual' is far from uncontroversial. It is commonly assumed, however, that it includes academics and experts (notably, those working in the humanities and social sciences) as well as writers, journalists, columnists, critics, and literati. Recent voting patterns and reactions to voting results in Europe and North America (epitomized in two major political events, namely the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership and the 2016 US presidential election) indicate the presence of a widening gulf—not only between those who have benefited from higher education and those who have not, but also between those who possess high-level forms of epistemic expertise and those who do not. Differential voting patterns seem to reveal a growing gap in aspirations, opinions, and values, which are embedded in profound social divisions. Among large parts of the population in 'Western' societies, there has been mounting dissatisfaction with, and suspicion towards, experts in general and expert-based knowledge claims in particular. In the current socio-political climate, these are often discredited as 'partisan', 'biased', 'ideologically motivated', and/or 'disconnected from reality'.

2. Taking into account the polarization process between those who operate in the intellectual realm and those who do not, the book stresses the significance of a further trend: *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.* This phenomenon—which manifests itself in numerous ways, from self-publishing to blogging—has substantially eroded the boundaries between 'intellectual' and 'non-intellectual' spheres. At first glance, it appears that this trend—owing to its democratic,

or at least democratizing, potential—contradicts the previous point concerning the intensifying polarization between 'intellectuals' and 'non-intellectuals'. As posited in this book, however, the two aforementioned developments, while they are tension-laden, are intimately interconnected: the new media generate discursive echo chambers in which likeminded people reinforce, rather than undermine, each other's views. These echo chambers, together with the widespread animosity and distrust towards experts, have contributed to the rapid diffusion of dubious—or, in many cases, blatantly false—assertions, which are now commonly captured under the heading 'post-truth' and expressed in the provocative contention that, in the early twenty-first century, we have entered a 'post-truth era'.

In addition to developing a sociological theory for studying intellectuals, Baert's *The Existentialist Moment* explores 'the Sartre phenomenon'—that is, the sudden rise to prominence of Jean-Paul Sartre, arguably the twentieth-century public intellectual *par excellence*. Sartre emerged as a public intellectual in the mid-1940s. The set of social, cultural, and political constellations in which Sartre rose to fame might appear alien to the current situation, as depicted above. It is possible, however, to identify several noteworthy similarities between these two historical settings.

At the end of the Second World War, there was a similar gulf between 'intellectuals' and 'non-intellectuals': the differences in educational opportunities and resources were considerable. Comparable to the current context, with this juxtaposition came opposing aspirations, opinions, and values. It was only in the course of the 1950s and 1960s that the French higher education sector expanded and became socially more inclusive (although, to be clear, it continued to be based on powerful exclusionary mechanisms, reflecting the stratified constitution of the society in which it was embedded). Moreover, in the mid-1940s, the French intellectual establishment had lost its position of incontestable symbolic authority, and new writers managed to gain power *vis-à-vis* their publishers. (Both phenomena are explained in *The Existentialist Moment*.) In sum, Sartre's rise took place during a period that was marked by a high degree of discontinuity and rapid social transformation.

The following critical exchange between Baert and Susen focuses on the development of positioning theory in relation to the sociological study of intellectuals. The starting point of this conversation (and, for that matter, of *The Existentialist Moment*) is the assumption that large parts of the already existing literature on intellectuals suffer from an *under-theorization* syndrome—that is, from the failure to contribute to a sociological understanding of intellectuals that is not only methodologically rigorous and empirically substantiated, but also conceptually sophisticated. Indeed, as elucidated in subsequent chapters as well as in Baert's book on Sartre, some intellectual historians and intellectual biographers are openly hostile to the idea of employing theoretical frameworks for the study of intellectuals, let alone for the explanation of their status and role in society. Baert and Susen share the conviction that, in the area of investigation concerned with intellectuals, this relative lack of engagement with theoretical analysis needs to be rectified. More specifically, both of them believe (albeit, admittedly, with varying degrees of enthusiasm) that positioning theory may offer a way forward on this front. If, as maintained by Baert and Susen, both the status and the role of intellectuals have changed considerably in recent decades, it is the task of critical sociologists to provide explanatory frameworks capable of accounting for the chief causes underlying this shift. This book is an attempt to take on this challenging task.