

Review of:

Baert, Patrick (2015) *The Existentialist Moment. The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 240 pp. ISBN: 0745685404

This book provides a comprehensive and historically rich account of the sudden rise of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) as a public intellectual in the mid-1940s. Written by Patrick Baert, Professor of Social Theory at Cambridge, the case of Sartre is in fact but an application of a new sociological theory of intellectuals that revolves around notions of positioning, networks, and conflict. This theory is the subject of the last two chapters and can be read separately from the others. By “positioning,” Baert means: “the process by which certain features are attributed to an individual or a group or some other entity.” The starting point of this novel sociological approach is that intellectual interventions, whether through writing or speaking, always involve positioning. Positioning, in turn, is effective insofar as human agents are involved in certain contexts. It is not a one-off event but an ongoing process that involves more or less complex intellectual and political networks. Team membership is crucial, Baert notes, because positioning rarely goes uncontested. An intellectual might be able to position themselves positively and effectively for a certain period of time, but eventually rival intellectuals will challenge them, portraying them as outdated, insignificant, or outright erroneous. Sartre’s case is a good illustration of this as, from early on, he was the subject of criticism from various quarters and struggled to shed accusations of being either a bourgeois thinker or a nihilist.

The main focus of the book, however, is not on Sartre’s demise but on his ascent to stardom. In five detailed chapters, Baert discusses Sartre’s intellectual interventions, the network of friends and colleagues in which he operated, and the broader context of France in the mid-1940s to explain the origins of “the existentialist moment”.

The first chapter presents a useful overview of the period of the German occupation of France, between 1940 and mid-1944. Baert focuses upon how the Occupation and collaboration affected the French cultural scene, deepening existing cleavages within the intellectual community.

The second chapter proceeds with this historical analysis and discusses how, with the fall of Paris in the summer of 1944, censorship was lifted and anti-collaborationist authors made use of this opportunity to discredit their collaborationist counterparts. This chapter looks mainly at the debates around the trials of collaborators, following the decree of 30 May 1944 that stipulated that writers and artists who had collaborated with the enemy would be purged. The trials of collaborators triggered immense media interest, with all major newspapers reporting on the major court cases. The most controversial trial was that of Robert Brasillach, the Editor of the fascist *Je suis partout* and a major cultural figure who co-wrote a ground-breaking history of the cinema. The trial took only one afternoon – 19 January 1945 – and resulted in Brasillach’s guilty verdict. Despite a petition to commute the death penalty into a life sentence, Brasillach was eventually executed. Baert interprets this purge as an attempt by some sections of French society to come to terms with the cultural trauma of the Occupation, and suggests that writers were the object of exemplary punishment owing to the mythological status that writing and literature had for the French intellectual and cultural establishment.

The third chapter discusses the intellectual debates around the purge, in which the notion of responsibility became central to the vocabulary used by former Resistance intellectuals to express the trauma of the war. This is also the period when, between the autumn of 1944 and the summer of 1945, Sartre began to position himself through his writings as an authoritative public intellectual. A case in point is “La République du silence”, first published in September 1944. In this piece Sartre elaborates on the theme of silence in the context of the German Occupation. In particular, he makes two related points. The first is that silence can be something imposed on people. Being silenced, however, makes one conscious of the power of words. The second point Sartre makes is that silence can also be a form of assertion – as a heroic act of resistance against the oppressor.

The fourth chapter addresses the events that took place in the autumn of 1945, the period in which existentialism became a highly publicized philosophical movement and Sartre its most celebrated spokesperson. Whilst only a year had passed since the publication of “La République du silence”, the

meaning of silence had changed dramatically. Now silence was increasingly seen as a cowardly act, a failure to speak out and take the responsibility that is bestowed upon us. Ironically, as Baert emphasizes, intellectuals like Sartre seem to have decided that they had the responsibility to speak out precisely at the moment when it had become safe to do so. Furthermore, as Baert suggests, the collective silence of France under the occupation may explain why so many people were receptive to Sartre's message of political commitment and responsibility: "as if the cult of the engaged intellectual would exorcise the ghost of a shameful past".

The fifth and last substantive chapter of the book deals with Sartre's attempt to consolidate and strengthen his position as a public intellectual between 1946 and 1947. It focuses upon two books: *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Whereas in the first Sartre articulates a theory of literature, structured around the questions of what is writing, why write, and for whom does one write, in the second book he analyses anti-Semitism as an exercise in applied existentialism, as it were. Indeed, existentialist concepts such as choice, authenticity, inauthenticity, and bad faith provide the conceptual framework for Sartre's argument. One of Sartre's most controversial writings was translated into English in 1948 under the title *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Each of its four chapters presents a psychological ideal-type: the anti-Semite, widely regarded as the most perceptive of Sartre's types; the democrat; the inauthentic Jew (i.e. Jews who, in an act of "bad faith", seek to integrate at the cost of losing their original identity), and the authentic Jew, inspired by the figure of Raymond Aron, which consists in "choosing" oneself as a Jew.

Written in an accessible and jargon-free style, this book is much more than a mere historical reconstruction of the early days of existentialism in France. It offers a historically sensitive application of a new sociological approach to intellectual life. In this sense, *The Existentialist Moment* is an important and timely contribution to the burgeoning field of the sociology of intellectuals. It has relatively less to say, however, about Sartre's ideas themselves, both regarding their internal philosophical consistency and possible uses for them today. A second, related point is that future applications of positioning theory might benefit from extending the analysis to longer time periods with the aim of examining how intellectual interventions by the likes of Sartre often stand for remarkably different political and disciplinary projects in different contexts. Such a variation, I suspect, has as much to do with intellectuals' positioning in their lifetimes as it does with debates over the meaning of their work by subsequent generations for different political and disciplinary projects.

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