

Book Review: The Sociology of Intellectuals: After 'The Existentialist Moment' by Simon Susen and Patrick Baert

*With **The Sociology of Intellectuals: After 'The Existentialist Moment'**, Simon Susen and Patrick Baert make a collaborative effort to build upon Baert's preceding book, [The Existentialist Moment](#), in order to offer a new set of theoretical and methodological tools for considering the emergence of intellectuals and the constructive social and political role that they can play. While largely a book review-and-reply exercise, the book contains flashes of excellence, finds **Sarah Burton**, and will hopefully act as a spur for wider conversations aimed at developing a sensitive and fine-grained programme for the sociology of intellectuals.*

***The Sociology of Intellectuals: After 'The Existentialist Moment'*. Simon Susen and Patrick Baert. Palgrave Pivot. 2017.**

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During the third year of my undergraduate degree, I read Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. I finished it feeling I had been exposed to something intriguing – possibly even important – but with a hard-to-shift nagging doubt as to what the purpose of the novel actually was. It's probably rather a parochial stance to question the 'point' of a book, but *The Sociology of Intellectuals: After 'The Existentialist Moment'* left me with similar intellectual and affective responses. The book delivers real flashes of excellence, but concealed within what is arguably a book review-and-reply exercise. However, given the [radical distrust of experts](#) in contemporary political and social arenas, and the populist rhetoric and reform which [results from this](#), a sensitive, thorough and fine-grained programme for the sociology of intellectuals is more than overdue – and my Pynchon comparison belies my shared enthusiasm for the intentions and commitment of the authors, [Simon Susen](#) and Patrick Baert.

The Sociology of Intellectuals pivots on Baert's (excellent) 2015 book, [The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual](#), in which he lays out his original contribution of 'positioning theory' and the ways this helps sociologists account for how and why intellectuals emerge. Susen and Baert's collaborative effort builds on this to 'explore a new set of theoretical and methodological tools for the sociology of intellectuals' (vii), and make a considered analysis of 'the extent to which intellectuals can play a constructive role in influencing social and political developments in the modern era' (vii). The book gives us a brief introduction, which sets forth a number of persuasive challenges in providing a cohesive theoretical framework for the study of intellectuals. This is followed by a substantial chapter from Susen assessing Baert's 2015 work and engaging with its 'limitations and shortcomings' (viii), and then a shorter chapter from Baert which replies to Susen's examination as well as clarifying his theoretical position in relation to other reviews of *The Existentialist Moment*.



The central connection between this new work and Baert's 2015 book is where my question as to the aim and success of this collective intervention arises. It is perfectly feasible to read *The Sociology of Intellectuals* as an elaborate review-reply piece, in which case it seems reasonable to question why it needed to be a book at all. That said, it is enormously refreshing to see academic authors continue elsewhere conversations begun in one piece of scholarship, and with an interlocutor who provides some extremely productive frictions. In *Punk Sociology*, David Beer discusses how sociology's obsession with rigour, seriousness and precision creates too-neat, boring and hesitant research. What might be more fruitful, Beer suggests, is to do research and writing which has some 'roughness around the edges [which] gives others purchase to respond' (2014: 51). It is more encouraging of collaborative creative scholarship, Beer argues, to present 'raw and emergent ideas' (51) that leave room for others to engage with and build upon them. Both Susen and Baert's work in *The Sociology of Intellectuals* fulfils that criteria – developing the ideas introduced in *The Existentialist Moment* and shifting them to a broader space of inquiry, whilst beginning a (hopefully) ongoing conversation regarding the parameters and means of theorising 'intellectuals' in the public sphere and the academy.



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Susen's comprehensive review of 'positioning theory' – through a focus on 25 separate areas he considers unsatisfactorily treated in Baert's original 2015 account – provides succinct critical reflections, most of which stimulate further investigation and critique. Whilst all the topics are apt, some could usefully be combined into more compelling and sensitively-attuned categories, which would allow Susen (and others) to helpfully consider the *complexity* of the figure of the intellectual as deeply contextual, as well as socially and historically embedded in spaces and narratives.

On this point, separating 'intersectionality' and 'diversity' struck an odd note. In his thesis on 'diversity', Susen argues that Baert's analysis doesn't provide scope for understanding how intellectuals from 'marginalized sectors of society' are able to become public intellectuals (49), and *vis-à-vis* 'intersectionality', he argues that Baert's positioning theory doesn't take into account variables such as class, language, gender, age and race, among myriad others (45). Based on this, Susen asserts that the majority of people able to rise to recognition as intellectuals hold dominant power within these categories (high social class, white, male and so on). Logically, these points would sit together – that an intersectional understanding of the politics of knowledge would provide understanding of how marginal(ized) positions are able (or not) to narrate themselves with, and in to, value on the intellectual stage. Significantly, much of this work has already been done by feminist, postcolonial and Critical Race theory scholars (as I did in [this](#) piece; see also [Ahmed 2009](#); [Bhambra 2014](#); [Meagher 2012](#); and [Taylor and Lahad 2018](#)), who are prominent by their absence in the book's citations. As it is, Susen's treatment of these categories provides pertinent points for consideration, but Susen himself does little to add to the existing scholarship.

The standout section of Susen's analysis runs across points eighteen to twenty, teasing out the complexity of 'positionality' (65), 'multipositionality' (66) and 'teams' (68). He convincingly asserts that, in addition to intellectual positioning and politico-ethical positioning (as Baert originally suggested), a sociology of intellectuals must also be attentive to 'the degree that intellectual positioning always takes place against a disciplinary background' (67). Susen is right, I think, to note that a programme of study not taking account of disciplinary value paradigms and how they shape the reception of scholars and their work 'falls short of doing justice' (68) to the complexity of the intellectual field. Baert's counter-comment, that 'people can straddle different disciplines' (139) within academia, thus negating the force of disciplinary regimes, is entirely valid – though as [I've shown in my own work](#), scholars recognise the competition and friction between disciplinary mores, expectations and rules when they work in an interdisciplinary fashion. This – as Susen notes – is something to be accounted for in a sociology which understands how intellectuals position themselves, and the milieu against which external commentators conceptualise them.

Related to this, Susen's comments on defining membership of a team (69-71) are insightful. In a world where we are encouraged to 'team up' via schools of thought – to be Bourdieusians, Foucauldians or whatever else – Susen's identification of how this and other forms of membership can be understood on normative, objective and subjective grounds supports a reading of the intellectual that allows for the complications and ambiguities that arise in the tussle between how we see ourselves, how we'd like to see ourselves, how others see us as well as the impact of time, distanciation and historical context on this.

My enduring concern with this book is that the authors too often return to a back-and-forth review of Baert's earlier work, rather than consistently expanding out the conversation to a genuinely new and reinvigorated programme of study for the sociology of intellectuals. The work pleads for a co-authored final chapter where Susen and Baert develop the introduction's promise to 'provide a cutting-edge account of the key issues in the sociology of intellectuals' (vii) and show readers how the tension across their interpretations illuminates the ambivalences and conflict in both the scholarship of intellectuals as well as the figure of the intellectual itself. Furthermore, any notion of tackling this in relation to the increasing precariousness of intellectual and creative positions, both [in](#) and [out](#) of the academy, is lacking (see also [Gill 2009](#); [Thwaites and Pressland 2017](#)). Often the authors tantalise their reader – with a fascinating but too-short analysis of the role of the intellectual in society (ix), or a few lines on the ongoing significance of Baert's project (80) – but these remain (very) rough edges requiring substantial revisiting. Nevertheless, *The Sociology of Intellectuals* contains all the elements for an enlightening and productive programme of study – it begins a conversation incumbent on the reader to continue.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.