The Existentialist Moment Defended:
A Reply to Simon Susen

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Abstract In this chapter, Patrick Baert offers a detailed reply to Simon Susen's review of *The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*. 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.

Keywords Existentialism · History · Positioning theory · Public intellectuals · Sartre · Social theory

INTRODUCTION

I would like to express my appreciation for Simon Susen's comprehensive and intelligent engagement with the central theoretical arguments developed in my book *The Existentialist Moment*[1]. It is a pleasure to be able to read a thorough and fair critique of one's work, and

delivering such a critique is precisely what Susen has done. I hope to be able to do as much justice to his critical assessment as he has done to my book.

Let me first start with a word of caution. Whilst Susen's critique of *The Existentialist Moment* is extremely well developed, it focuses almost entirely on two chapters of the book—the introductory chapter and especially the final chapter. In this concluding chapter, I develop the theoretical perspective—called positioning theory—that underlies the preceding chapters. The main objective of my book was not to propose this theory but, rather, to answer a specific historical question: how can one explain the sudden rise of Jean-Paul Sartre as a public intellectual in the 1940s? In order to make the book accessible to a broad audience, I decided not to elaborate on my theory as such until the final chapter. In other words, the large bulk of the book is an attempt to show how the intellectual field and political and cultural sensitivities changed throughout the early to mid-1940s and how Sartre was able to operate within that context and tap into new insecurities and hopes.

For instance, I discuss the prosecution of collaborationist intellectuals, especially in 1944 and 1945, in which the notion of responsibility loomed large. Some writers were put on trial, mainly for writing in support of Nazi Germany, some received lengthy sentences and a few were even executed. In the trials, the arguments used against collaborationist writers tended to focus on their ability to influence their readers. It was argued that the more talent you have as an author, the more you carry responsibility for what you write, because you will then have an audience that might be susceptible to your ideas, and people who have been influenced can influence others. The notion of the responsibility of the intellectual then quickly moved from the legal to the cultural sphere, occupying a central theme in the literary pages of newspapers and journals.[2]

During this period, Sartre redefined his philosophy, made it simpler, more digestible and palatable, and crucially he redefined his philosophy around the notion of the responsibility of the intellectual. The responsibility about which he was talking, however, bore little resemblance to the responsibility of the courtroom. Sartre's genius, if that is the appropriate word, was to define responsibility and strip it of its negative connotations. Responsibility, then, was no longer about holding someone accountable for the pernicious actions of their past. Responsibility had become a positive category, directed towards both the present and

the future: it was about your moral duty as a writer to engage politically with the present. Hence, a key notion that emerged was that of the engaged intellectual, which, from then onwards, became Sartre's central self-positioning.[3]

In sum, the book showed, among other things, how Sartre tapped into this renewed cultural interest in the notion of responsibility, redefining his philosophy around this category. My positioning theory was central to the arguments developed—Sartre managed to reposition himself in tune with the changing climate. This theory remained, however, implicit until the final chapter.

Now, Susen's critique mainly focuses on the theory—not the historical case study. Given Susen's research interests, this is perfectly fine and understandable. After all, in *The Existentialist Moment*, I argued that the positioning theory that I developed here has much broader applicability well beyond the Sartre case. I gave many other examples along the way—all to make this point. In short, Susen is more than justified in zooming in on the theory chapter, and I am very happy he did so, especially as some other reviews of the book failed to engage with this aspect of the book.[4]

Nevertheless, in this book I tried to present a rich, historical account of the context in which Sartre rose to prominence; the theory was an aid to this empirical enterprise—not an end in itself. The positioning theory that I propose draws our attention to the significance of thick interpretative research. It focuses on how some intellectual interventions resonate with various publics; uncovering this process requires in-depth empirical investigation of the kind that I sought to undertake in *The Existentialist Moment*. For instance, I explored how, during the Second World War, in French Resistance circles the notion of silence acquired heroic connotations, whereas at the end of the war the very same people celebrated and promoted the act of speaking out. This cultural shift was crucial in the making of Sartre, whilst, as I point out, he also contributed to it. Investigating these cultural changes requires a thorough socio-historical analysis, one that goes well beyond the rigid structure of a theoretical framework. This is not to belittle the significance of the theory, nor to dismiss Susen's critique of it. Rather, what I want to argue is that for those, such as Susen, who are interested in the broader implications, what is at stake here is not just a theory, but it is something different. Call it an approach or, to use a grand term, a research programme—a way of conducting research. The metaphorical proof of the pudding

is in the eating and a significant part of *The Existentialist Moment* does precisely that: putting the research programme into practice. In this case, we should be careful when analysing the theory separately from the actual research.

Whilst Susen pays attention to the more theoretical chapters, I would like to take the opportunity here to correct some misunderstandings about the bulk of the book, which deals with Sartre's rise and fall as a public intellectual. I will focus in particular on two reviews that grossly misread what I wrote: a review by Steve Fuller in the *British Journal of Sociology* and a review by William McBride in *Contemporary Political Theory*.[5] Fuller, who generally likes to court controversy, suggests that my account of Sartre is 'neither so surprising nor so different from more conventional accounts'[6], but then he fails to say anything about which conventional accounts he is talking about and why they are supposedly so similar. I suspect the reason for this lacuna is obvious: he has little knowledge of the literature to which he is alluding. Indeed, a self-styled polyglot, Fuller's writings touch upon the philosophy of science, social epistemology, and some social theory, but certainly not French intellectual history. Even so, if he had read my introductory chapter, he would have learned that I provide a clear description about how different my explanation is from the existing accounts that are available, including those by Anna Boschetti and Randall Collins.[7] Fuller's slapdash review fails to acknowledge this altogether. Surely, a reviewer should at least read the Introduction!

If Fuller does not seem to have much in-depth knowledge about the topics covered in *The Existentialist Moment*, McBride has made a career stretching over half a century from editing and writing about Sartre. He is undoubtedly knowledgeable about Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. Yet, his review includes a string of bizarre misinterpretations mixed with the occasional non sequitur.

First, McBride writes that, in his view, I exaggerate the importance of Sartre's famous lecture 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme', which he gave at the end of October 1945 in Paris. Nothing could be further from the truth: I explicitly criticize any attempt to account for Sartre's rise by focusing exclusively on the autumn of 1945 and the public lecture in particular.[8] My whole point was that focusing exclusively on the autumn of 1945 ignores the significance of the preceding five years. In this context, McBride also contends that there was by the summer of 1945 'already wider awareness, at least in intellectual milieux and possibly

beyond'[9]. Again, this is not really in contradiction to what I argued in the book, as I made it very clear in the text that Sartre's rise to prominence already got under way in the course of 1944—not in the autumn of 1945.[10]

Second, for McBride, the initial absence of reviews of *L'Être et le néant* is not necessarily indicative of a lack of interest in this book, because reviews of philosophical works always take time and there was a paper shortage under Vichy. Still, we cannot ignore that, initially, no major outlets showed any interest in *L'Être et le néant*, and McBride fails to provide any evidence for his *idée fixe* that the publication of *L'Être et le néant* somehow made his broader reputation. McBride's reasoning becomes particularly confusing when he cites a positive review of *L'Être et le néant*, published in an Argentinian journal in August 1945, as proof of the wider interest in *L'Être et le néant*. Now, all commentators agree that by *then*—the summer of 1945—Sartre's rise was already underway, although we can all concur that there are better indicators for his fresh status as a public intellectual in France than a positive appreciation in a specialized national journal in Argentina. If there is any veracity in McBride's review essay, it is the suggestion that Sartre's writings prior to 1944 already gave him some credibility among a specialist circle. I totally agree, and I never argued otherwise (although I refuse to limit the significance of Sartre's corpus to *L'Être et le néant*). Indeed, I acknowledge in *The Existentialist Moment* that by early 1944 Sartre had already acquired a reputation among his peers, partly because of his philosophical writings (which included not just *L'Être et le néant* but also various other publications in the 1930s that engage with German phenomenology) and his literary output (which included novels, plays, and short stories).[11] He was at that point, however, not a public intellectual by any stretch of the imagination. He became one over the course of the next couple of years.

Third, McBride misunderstands my typology of public intellectuals (authoritative, expert and dialogical) and erroneously assumes that I celebrate the expert public intellectual and the role of the social sciences in it. For instance, he writes about 'Baert's […] frequent insistence that social scientists, including in particular sociologists like himself, are in possession of certain keys to the intellectual kingdom that mere humanists like Sartre (for whom, after all, existentialism *was* a humanism) lack'[12]. This is a misreading of the arguments developed in *The Existentialist Moment*. My statements in this regard were descriptive as

well as, to a certain extent, explanatory; they were never meant to be normative. I did not mean to promote the expert public intellectual and the social sciences, nor did I mean to applaud the gradual demise of the authoritative public intellectual and the humanities. Rather, I was simply arguing that various sociological shifts (including higher educational levels for more people, plus the rise and institutionalization of the social sciences) have made it more difficult to operate like an authoritative public intellectual.[13]

Simon Susen's Critique

I will now move on to Susen's critique, and I will take each of his points in turn.

Susen's first point concerns intersectionality—the intersection between different sources of inequality. He argues that I ignore this. Well, it is true that this has not been the focus of my attention in the book. It is also true that the protagonists in *The Existentialist Moment*—collaborationist authors and Resistance writers—tended to be male and came mostly from relatively privileged backgrounds. This might not be entirely surprising, given the historical context. There were quite a few exceptions, however, and they appear in *The Existentialist Moment*. In relation to gender, Colette and Simone de Beauvoir were key figures in the 1940s whilst, of course, operating in a predominantly male context. Further, some of the well known authors during this period had little educational or social advantage. We all know about Albert Camus's working class credentials; his mother was an illiterate cleaner. Susen also mentions sexual orientation: I explain in the book how the alleged homosexuality of the collaborationist writer Robert Brasillach played a crucial role in his trial and how, contentiously from today's perspective, Sartre linked collaboration with homosexuality.[14]

In relation to Sartre himself, class, obviously, comes into the picture. As I explain in the book, Sartre came from a relatively privileged background and his maternal grandfather, who was a significant intellectual in his own right, took it upon himself to educate the young Jean-Paul. So Sartre had a head start, the cultural capital that he 'inherited' certainly helped him to gain access to the École normale, and this institution in turn would provide Sartre with important social connections. I acknowledge all this, but I emphasize that this is not sufficient to explain the Sartre phenomenon—his remarkable success. Against Anna Boschetti

(who makes this narrative of a privileged trajectory the cornerstone of her explanation for Sartre's rise)[15], I point out that many of Sartre's contemporaries in the intellectual and literary field had a similarly privileged *parcours*. Nor does Boschetti explain why Sartre came to prominence around 1945—not before, not after. So my point is that we need to go beyond the traditional Bourdieu perspective (which Boschetti follows very closely) and investigate how, around 1945, Sartre's writings managed to connect with sections of French society.

In sum, *The Existentialist Moment* does mention issues relevant to what Susen talks about (e.g. class, gender, sexuality), but it does not flag it up as such because the focus is different.

Susen's second point concerns my claim that Sartre's status as a public intellectual and his political influence have been unrivalled in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this context, Susen lists other intellectuals who have been prominent in the public sphere and have exercised a considerable political impact. I never intended to deny the existence of other prominent public intellectuals, but I remain unconvinced by Susen's list: it includes thinkers who have contributed significantly to their respective fields but whose position in the public realm is nowhere near comparable to that of Sartre. For instance, there is no doubt that Nancy Fraser's contributions to political theory are very important, but that does not make her a major public intellectual, and it is not a surprise that she does not feature in the latest list by *Prospect* of the top 50 current 'world thinkers', as voted by people around the world. Of all the people on Susen's list Noam Chomsky has probably been the most prominent (he was listed as number one in the 2005 *Prospect* list of public intellectuals, but interestingly he does not feature in the latest list); and, like Sartre, he is undoubtedly an iconic figure. Sartre's political influence was remarkable, however; he enjoyed private audiences with various heads of state (including Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro) and played a central role in several political developments, ranging from the anticolonial movement to the 1960s student movement. Chomsky's political influence does not begin to compare.

Susen's third point concerns my use of field theory, and I think he makes some pertinent observations, though none that conflict with or undermine my arguments in the book. Susen is right that, in the context of Sartre, I ignore the scientific field, but there is an obvious reason for this: Sartre operated in a variety of fields (journalism, philosophy, literature, etc.), but the scientific field was not one of them. Relatedly, there

is truth in Susen's observation that the literary and the academic fields started to intersect much earlier than in the twentieth century, although some of the philosophers he mentions—such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche—hardly operated in the academic realm. Regardless, I was not trying to deny that this intersection had a long history; rather, I sought to argue that it was only in the course of the twentieth century that this intersection intensified. I also agree with Susen's comment that the philosophical field should not be equated with the academic field (indeed, Sartre for one never worked as an academic, and he did not really mean to engage with academic philosophy in a straightforward fashion), although I remain unconvinced that I confuse the two in the book. Finally, I entirely agree with Susen that, besides Sartre, many other intellectuals, including contemporaries of his, were able to operate in both the literary and the philosophical fields, but again I never argued otherwise. Actually, I made precisely the same point in my critique of Boschetti. She was misguided in explaining Sartre's success by the fact that he was successful in many domains: not only is her argument circular, but, in addition, it ignores that many of Sartre's contemporaries also worked in different fields.[16]

I find Susen's fourth point about diversity perplexing. Susen contends that my positioning theory does not account for why certain intellectuals from nontraditional backgrounds manage to be successful in the intellectual realm. I disagree: the theory that I suggested in *The Existentialist Moment* does precisely what Susen says it does not. It is true that a Bourdieu-inspired perspective would find it difficult to explain why some people from a less advantaged background would rise to prominence (after all, they have less social and cultural capital, etc.), but the positioning theory that I suggest is much better placed. Positioning theory pays particular attention to what the intellectual interventions *do*—what they accomplish, how they manage (or fail) to resonate with the public(s). Of course, intellectuals rely on various performative tools to bring about these effects; for instance, they might (or might not) have the right connections, and they might (or might not) have the rhetorical skills to bring their message across. Here, class and background undoubtedly play a role, and it would be foolish to ignore these factors, but positioning theory draws our attention to how positioning affects levels of diffusion and symbolic or institutional recognition.

Susen's fifth point is an attempt to defend Bourdieu against my criticisms of Boschetti. Now, it was not my intention to criticize Bourdieu as such; rather, I wanted to show the deficiencies of the Bourdieu-inspired analysis by Boschetti. My argument against her was that she tended to focus on Sartre's background and the advantages that it bestowed on him—his social and cultural capital, to use Bourdieusian parlance. I show that this explanation only goes so far because the same reasoning would apply to quite a few other French intellectuals at the time (*supra*). Furthermore, her explanation is not so different from the pedestrian explanation that Sartre was successful simply because he excelled at what he did, although of course this excellence, Boschetti would argue, had social causes. I was trying to show that what appears to be a sociological explanation is anything but.[17]

Susen's sixth point is the assertion that I set up straw men when I list four dominant narratives often invoked to explain the rise of Sartre. Susen might be right that I could have provided more examples of authors who exhibit those views. So let me give one example: Cohen-Solal's excellent biography of Sartre.[18] It is an extraordinarily thorough analysis and a remarkable achievement. For the sake of the argument here, however, I am interested in the sections in her book devoted to the mid-1940s, when Sartre rose to prominence. Now, in those passages, Cohen-Solal very much focuses on the autumn of 1945 and ignores the earlier period. More precisely, she writes about the earlier period (1940–1944), but only in relation to Sartre's own trajectory (his brief stint in the army, the ill-fated attempt to start a small resistance group, his joining the Resistance, etc.). In contrast, I show that, during the war and the period leading up to the liberation, numerous significant things happened, both politically and culturally. Moreover, I posit that it is important to see the connection between Sartre's performances in the autumn of 1945 (including his famous lecture on 29th October) and the broader cultural and political shifts that preceded.[19] In other words, to focus exclusively on the autumn of 1945 is to ignore the significance of the broader historical context that preceded it and affected it profoundly. Without appreciating the cultural and political complexities of what happened during the period 1940–1944, it is difficult to understand how, around 1945, Sartre managed to resonate with sections of the French public.

Moving on to Susen's seventh point, he disagrees with how I portray the Humboldtian notion of the university. This is a minor criticism

because it does not really affect the rest of my argument. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Susen misunderstands what I was trying to say. As can be inferred from Susen's quotation, I explicitly used the Humboldtian notion as referring to self-governance. Of course, the Humboldtian University serves a larger function for society, and Susen puts it succinctly when he writes about the *Bildung der Gesellschaft*; this societal role, however, does not contradict the principle of self-governance. On the contrary, in Humboldt's view, the two are connected.

Point eight deals with the labelling of intellectual interventions. Remember that I was trying to argue that labels help the diffusion of ideas, especially from the specialized to the public domain. Now, Susen seems to make two distinct observations here. His first observation is that many significant intellectual currents are internally fragmented, whereas his second comment is that, paradoxically, some intellectual interventions gain currency precisely because of their lack of clarity and coherence. With regard to the first observation, it is certainly true that one label can cover very different intellectual strands, including ones that are incompatible with each other. Yet, this does not necessarily undermine my argument that a label *can* help processes of diffusion. On the contrary, labels are like shortcuts, enabling the broader public to make sense of intellectual currents. They give a sense of unity where there might not be one. The second observation is more interesting: there are indeed cases where ambiguity creates a sense of enigma, possibly contributing to the aura around the intellectuals involved. Some of Jacques Derrida's appeal at some point, especially among younger academics, might have had something to do with the difficulties of pinning him down. In those cases, ambiguity might of course be a form of positioning itself.

Point nine goes to the core of what I was trying to say in *The Existentialist Moment*. Susen takes issue with my hypothesis that for intellectual interventions to enter the public realm they need to resonate with recent socio-political experiences. He asserts that intellectual currents may well distort, rather than resonate with, the recent past. Now, I think Susen posits a false opposition here between resonating and distorting; and he seems to attribute a different meaning to the process of resonating from the one I attach to it. For me, to resonate with something does not presume that one provides what Susen calls 'objective accounts of reality'. To resonate with people is, as far as I am concerned, to connect emotionally with them. *The Existentialist Moment* shows how Sartre did precisely that: his writings and lectures resonated with

sections of the French public in the way in which he presented a narra-tive that enabled them to come to terms with the traumatic experience of the war, whilst assisting them in moving forward. I was not trying to imply that Sartre managed to present things as they really were (or had been), let alone that his appeal at that time had anything to do with his purported ability to reveal the truth. If anything, I indicate in the book that Sartre's reconstruction of the recent past was dubious at best: for instance, subsequent historical evidence sheds doubt over Sartre's *résistantialisme*.[20] The issue of veracity, however, is not really the point here. What is important is that Sartre's reconstruction of the recent past was a convenient narrative (an untruth, as it turned out) that resonated with the French at the time. Aristotle had something similar in mind when he pointed out that, besides *ēthos* (confirming one's own charac-ter) and *logos* (developing a coherent argument), the art of rhetoric is also about *pathos* (evoking emotion in the audience).[21] That is what Sartre did.

Susen's tenth point concerns the contention that I failed to specify about what kind of ideas I was talking. Well, the introductory chapter to which Susen is referring deals with intellectuals (and the whole book does), so obviously the ideas I had in mind were ideas that, tradition-ally, would have been associated with the intellectual realm. However, I do not want to hold on to a strict distinction between intellectual and nonintellectual ideas in the way in which Susen seems to suggest. Susen appears to contrast intellectual ideas with epistemic forms such as com-mon sense, dogma, traditions, and religion—a distinction that is dif-ficult to uphold and that is, surely, at closer scrutiny bound to break down. His implicit assumption that intellectual life somehow resides in a realm devoid of these other factors seems very curious. At vari-ous points, the religious and intellectual worlds have intersected, and Hans-Georg Gadamer rightly pointed out that any form of knowledge acquisition always necessarily draws on some form of tradition.[22] Of course, nowadays intellectuals often position themselves in opposition to dogma and tradition (and in some respects, this is a lasting legacy of the Enlightenment), but this does not mean that their interventions are devoid of it.

Point eleven: Susen argues that there is hardly any scope for right-wing intellectuals in my study. This is not true. It is true that I show how the historical origins of the French notion of the intellectual were inter-twined with a progressive, Republican tradition. This phenomenon is,

however, historically contingent, and several chapters of *The Existentialist Moment* discuss, at length, the views and actions of fascist and conservative intellectuals in France in the late 1930s and the first part of the 1940s.[23] I discuss, for instance, Béraud Céline, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, and Charles Maurras—hardly progressives in any meaning of the term!

In this political context, Susen also poses a number of empirical questions, and they would form an interesting research programme. I would like to make a few observations, partly based on research already conducted in this area.

First, there has been some empirical research on the political orientations of academics in the United States of America.[24] The results were not earthshattering. Professors in the social sciences are on the left of the political spectrum in comparison with Professors in the natural sciences and engineering. The most interesting result concerned Law Faculties: they appeared to be the most divided, with a large proportion of people on opposite poles of the political spectrum.

Second, there has been some interesting research, again in the United States of America, showing that academics tend to be politically more liberal than people in other professions. The explanation provided by Neil Gross is that conservative-leaning individuals who may consider an academic career feel that universities are not a conducive place for them.[25] On that basis, they decide not to become academics and end up contributing to the liberal bias of universities. It is a plausible explanation, especially as he shows there is little evidence that higher education in itself brings about liberal views.

Third, I am not convinced that simple dichotomies such as 'left versus right' (used by Susen) do justice to the complexity of the political orientations that are currently available. Nowadays, a significant number of intellectuals embrace aspects of economic liberalism, but they differ, for instance, in the extent to which they think the state should intervene either to stimulate the economy or to protect the vulnerable in society. They also differ, for example, in how much they support regional or national calls for autonomy or in their views about ethnic diversity and social cohesion. Simple juxtapositions do not capture these complexities.

This brings me to a fourth point, concerning the interplay between what appear to be opposing political ideas. There are interesting cases in which intellectuals use the political writings of people with *prima facie* diametrically opposed views: take, for instance, the use of Antonio

Gramsci among the extreme right in France[26] or Carl Schmitt's influence among left-wing scholars such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe[27]. What I am trying to convey is that political ideas can be (and are occasionally) diffused in circles that are hostile to the initial projects associated with those ideas. Again, this demonstrates the level of complexity involved.

Susen's twelfth point relates to the claim that sociologists typically fail to engage properly with the content of the philosophies they are trying to explain. I could not agree more. Indeed, I never argued differently. Susen is responding to my observation that, in comparison with sociologists, intellectual historians tend to dwell less on theoretical considerations when conducting their empirical research. Susen is right when he argues that sociologists in turn sometimes fail to study the actual philosophies in-depth. Yet, this was precisely my argument in relation to Boschetti. She portrayed extremely well the social context in which Sartre operated, but she did not fully appreciate the significance of *what* Sartre wrote and how it struck a chord with sections of French society at the time. That is what I tried to accomplish in *The Existentialist Moment*. More broadly, the positioning theory that I developed implies that we need to look carefully at how the authors located themselves and how other intellectuals positioned them.[28] This means that we have to study the texts and talks by the authors involved and those by their contemporaries—something that requires thick interpretative work. In other words, Susen and I are on the same wavelength here.

Point thirteen: Susen questions why I wrote about the structural fallacy—not the structural bias. After all, I had referred to an empiricist bias, motivational bias, authenticity bias, and stability bias. So why talk about a fallacy suddenly? Well, the answer is simple: it is more than just a bias; it is, literally, a mistake. The other problems are biases—tendencies to overstate or to overdo something—but the structural fallacy is of a different order. It is a logical or methodological error by which observable patterns at the group level are used to explain individual behaviour. Susen defends this reasoning; thus, I will not elaborate here on why it is problematic—I refer to point fourteen. Suffice it to say the choice of the term 'fallacy' was deliberate.

In this contest, Susen also wonders why I do not use the suffix 'ism' (or 'ist'/'istic') when referring to the motivational bias, the structural bias, the authenticity bias and the stability bias. After all, I talked about

'empiricism', so why not use similar terminology for the other problems. The answer is straightforward: I tend to avoid 'isms' as much as possible because they can lead to various misinterpretations. I only used 'empiricism' because there is a clearly identifiable intellectual tradition that can be associated with that label. I did not want to add more 'isms'. Frankly, this is an unimportant point anyway—it is a matter of semantics. Susen makes far more interesting points than this one; hence, let us not dwell on it.

This brings me to his fourteenth point, concerning the structural fallacy. Susen seems to argue that there is no such fallacy and that, in this regard, my understanding of Durkheim is flawed. I obviously disagree. It is true that Durkheim wants to show that *prima facie* individual decisions are anything but individual, but only at the level of observable patterns. Social facts do not explain what a specific individual did, let alone why he or she did it. Durkheim's *Suicide* explains, for instance, why married people with children are less likely to commit suicide than those who are single, but this in itself can never explain the specific suicide of a sole individual. Leaving aside Durkheim, I was mentioning the structural fallacy in relation to sociological attempts to invoke the social background of an intellectual to explain the content of their interventions. Communist critics of Sartre used to invoke this type of pseudo-sociology: his bourgeois origins supposedly explained his alleged individualism. Now, it is perfectly possible to argue that certain characteristics of people's upbringing correlate with specific intellectual sensitivities; but, again, this does not explain a specific case because each individual has a unique biographical history that cannot be reduced in that way.

Susen's fifteenth point concerns the issue of authenticity. Susen argues that, in some cases, intellectuals are able to bypass or even undermine 'the rules of the game' and that my approach is less well equipped to analyse this phenomenon. I am not entirely sure what Susen means precisely by 'bypassing (or undermining) "the rules of the game"'; in this context, it might be useful to distinguish between different types of constraint—in particular, between judicial, economic, and socio-symbolic constraints:

- Judicial or legal constraints refer to the set of regulations that restrict publications and speeches, plus the sanctions available to implement those rules. They will obviously differ according to

the type of political system in which intellectuals are operating: *The Existentialist Moment*, for instance, discusses the restrictions imposed by Germany on the French cultural scene during the war.[29] Constraints of this kind are not limited to authoritarian regimes. As we know, in liberal democracies, there are also restrictions on writings and speeches.[30]

- Economic restrictions refer to the extent to which a specific intellectual is financially dependent on various institutions. In this context, the *Existentialist Moment* elaborates on the dilemmas faced by Resistance writers who could only publish or stage a play by going through the German censor. They either compromised or had to resort to other means for survival, such as teaching, but even there they would be subject to restrictions.[31]
- Socio-symbolic constraints are often less tangible, but they are powerful nevertheless: they refer to a set of expectations within specific circles. They could range from ideas which people consider deeply problematic or intolerable to highly desirable views. Again, *The Existentialist Moment* contains plenty of examples: before the Second World War the idea of *l'art pour l'art* had a certain following, but, after the experience of the war, people saw this view as pernicious, especially as collaborationist intellectuals used the separation between cultural production and politics in their defence during their trials. This created space for thinking of writing as a political act—something that would become central to Sartre's redefinition of himself as an engaged intellectual.[32]

Susen's point about authenticity and the undermining of 'the rules of the game' seems to refer to what I call socio-symbolic constraints. Of course, Susen is right: individuals can exercise agency and possibly go against the grain. *The Existentialist Moment* and positioning theory teach us, however, that the cultural setting will have a considerable effect on how your intervention will be perceived, whether your audience will be receptive to your ideas, and so on. As I explain in the book, around 1945 some collaborationist intellectuals held on to the idea of separation of art and politics as part of their defence[33], but this position had become untenable in the context of recent experiences. Positioning theory draws attention to these types of selection mechanisms.

Sixteenth point: Susen suggests that my interpretation of Bourdieu is deterministic. I never intended to claim that Bourdieu's *oeuvre* is

deterministic, and I agree with Susen that Bourdieu's framework provides scope for some level of agency. The point that I was trying to make, however, was not that Bourdieu presents a deterministic view but, rather, that there is a tendency among scholars within the sociology of intellectuals to account for the stability of an intellectual's outlook in terms of early formation. In this context, they often invoke notions such as habitus (Bourdieu) or self-concept (Gross). In addition, there is no doubt that Bourdieu's own book on Martin Heidegger[34] subscribes to a similar—that is, deterministic—picture, explaining, as he did, the views and sensibilities of the German philosopher in terms of his background. I do realize that other works by Bourdieu provide a more nuanced account of the relationship between social forces and creativity, but I was not trying to make a judgement on Bourdieu's overall contribution to social theory. That would be a different enterprise altogether.

Point seventeen: Susen criticizes the way in which I develop an analogy between language and intellectual interventions, because the former is foundational to everyday life, whereas the latter are not. I agree with this (arguably Habermasian) point, but I fail to see why this would be relevant to my argument. I never claimed that intellectual interventions were identical to language or indeed foundational to everyday life. Thus, it seems to me that this point is somewhat superfluous.

Point eighteen: Susen objects to the way in which I supposedly portray positioning in passive terms—that is, to use his words, 'as a process that is exclusively determined by exogenous agents'. In my definition, I consciously avoided attributing specific agency to the way in which positioning unfolds, precisely because the notion of unfolding is key here. It is an ongoing process in which various agents are involved. Authors are never entirely in control of how a particular intervention positions them because that positioning will be very much dependent on what others make of the intervention, how they interpret it, how they react to it, and how they may ignore or (re-)discover it. This does not mean that positioning is 'exclusively determined by exogenous agents' (I never asserted this), but it does imply that positioning can never be entirely controlled by the authors themselves. Related to this problem, Susen's objection that I am unclear as to the identity of the exogenous agents misses the point, but inadvertently gets to the core of the issue involved: we can never know in advance which exogenous agents will be crucial in defining the positioning of an intervention. Positioning constitutes, to some extent, an unpredictable process. What my approach does pay attention

to, however, is the fact that, within the intellectual realm, the players involved have different levels of resources at their disposal and some will be well equipped to impose their interpretations of the meaning of a particular intervention onto others.[35] Incidentally, this perspective is perfectly compatible with Susen's proposal for a 'multifaceted' proposal around relationality, reciprocity, and so on.

Susen's nineteenth point relates to my distinction between intellectual positioning and politico-ethical positioning. I drew this juxtaposition because there are different arenas (or, if you wish, in Bourdieusian parlance, fields) involved: intra-intellectual and public intellectual arenas. Now, Susen points out that there are different forms of intellectual positioning depending on the type of inquiry involved: philosophical, social-scientific, etc. He is right, and my perspective can certainly accommodate for this (as Susen shows himself), but those distinctions were not particularly significant for my arguments regarding Sartre. In fact, this explains why I did not make them. A different case study may well require further distinctions of the kind Susen makes (or, indeed, other distinctions), but this one did not. I would disagree, though, with Susen's statement that 'intellectual positioning always takes place against a particular disciplinary background'. Even in academia, this is not always the case, as people can straddle different disciplines. Outside academia, Susen's position becomes even less plausible.

Susen's twentieth point addresses my notion of intellectual teams. In this respect, Susen makes three observations, each of which shall be addressed here:

- First, I disagree with his contention that my view does not allow for 'solitary intellectuals'. There are, of course, intellectuals who are not embedded in a team, but it would not be as straightforward for them to make an impact. It is not surprising, therefore, that Susen did not mention any examples of well known 'solitary intellectuals'. In his next point (twenty-one, to be discussed below), Susen himself acknowledges that, without reliance on teamwork, 'even the most established intellectuals […] may find it difficult not to disappear from the radar'! Indeed, a closer look at some of the well-documented *enfants terribles*, from Wittgenstein to Foucault, shows that they were clearly located within a research tradition (and, at some point, undoubtedly belonged to a team) before they 'broke away' and made their own mark.

- Secondly, Susen's comment about the plurality of teams has more validity: intellectuals can (and often do) belong to various teams at the same time, and this is an important issue. Susen's examples, though, confuse—rather than illuminate—the matter: in my view, he conflates what I call 'teams' (where people explicitly cooperate to bring about a particular positioning) with collective categorizations (whereby, for purposes of analysis, people are grouped together based on observable similarities). Nevertheless, it is correct that intellectuals can belong to different teams and that these multiple memberships bring their own opportunities and complexity. In *The Existentialist Moment* I explain, for instance, how the later Sartre attempted to merge existentialism and Marxism, which, in the intellectual and political context at the time, was perfectly understandable but also brought about its own convolutions and conflicts.[36]

- Thirdly, Susen's distinction between three forms of membership is illuminating and certainly helps to provide more analytical rigour in the analysis, although it seems to me that the distinction between the normative and the subjective needs further articulation. Also, I would disagree with Susen's rather sombre conclusions as to the usefulness of the notion of teams for analysing intellectuals. They are, in my view, unwarranted.

Point twenty-one: Susen questions my tentative hypothesis that 'the more secure and established one's position, the less one needs to rely on teamwork and the more likely one will press for intellectual individualization'. Susen is wondering whether there are any counterexamples, and he seems to suggest the opposite might well be the case: the more established intellectuals are, the more they depend on recognition and cooperation. This is obviously an empirical question, but note that I was arguing that, in comparison with other intellectuals, those who are established do not need to rely on teamwork to the same extent as non-established ones. This does not imply that they manage to maintain their profile and reputation without the ongoing assistance of a broader network of allies and critics, but, as I explained in the book, there is (at least in my terminology) a difference between teams and networks. And, of course, once individualization sets in, other intellectuals may flock to the new guru or creed, resulting in the creation of a new team (hence the 'Keynesians', 'Foucauldians', and so on).

Point twenty-two relates to the issue of credibility and repositioning. In *The Existentialist Moment*, I argued that, within the intellectual sphere, ongoing repositioning could lead to a reputational loss. Susen argues that there are cases where radical repositioning may enhance credibility. I could not agree more, and I support this view in my analysis. As a matter of fact, I explain in the book how the previously apolitical Sartre repositioned himself dramatically in the context of the Second World War. Sartre accompanied this repositioning with a convincing narrative: he argued that the war made him become aware of the centrality of the collective and of the need for political engagement. My argument was not that any dramatic repositioning decreases credibility (which would clearly be wrong) but, rather, that there are limits to the frequency of such repositioning by intellectuals—not only because their peers may start to question their integrity or coherence, but also because any act of positioning relies on years of preparatory work and building of networks.[37] The Sartre case shows another interesting component: repositioning is likely to be more successful if accompanied by a compelling narrative, which may involve elements of autobiography and socio-political history.

Point twenty-three: Susen here questions my distinction between established intellectuals and non-established intellectuals. Susen is right in that the distinction is rather broad, as I already discussed under point twenty. I am less convinced by Susen's additional suggestion that there are various other distinctions that could be made. Of course, they *can* be made (we can always add further distinctions), but the issue is whether we should do so (and, if yes, why). What would be the intellectual (or any other) pay-off? I tend to follow roughly a pragmatist perspective, which stipulates that there is no point in making further conceptual distinctions or innovations if we cannot envisage tangible effects for the research conducted. I have more sympathy towards Susen's related observation that there might be differences between established intellectuals and non-established intellectuals in terms of the nature of repositioning and the motives underlying it. These are obviously empirical questions, but they are interesting, and Susen is right that this may be a productive way forward.

I like Susen's twenty-fourth point. Susen is certainly right that I did not pay sufficient attention to the widening (epistemic) gap between experts and the wider public, and therefore my analysis did not capture fully the paradox that he described so eloquently. His other

observation—concerning the desirability or practicality of the dialogical model—seems to rely on a misunderstanding: I did not mean to promote the 'dialogical public intellectual' in *The Existentialist Moment*. I did, however, advocate a dialogical mode of knowledge acquisition in an earlier book, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism*[38], and this may explain Susen's reading of this section of *The Existentialist Moment*. I should emphasize that *Philosophy of the Social Scienc*es is more than a decade old, and I now very much agree with Susen's reservations about some of the optimistic presumptions that may underlie such a dialogical model.

Point twenty-five: Susen argues that, in my framework, I lost sight of the significance of meanings as separate from intentions and effects. Meanings, however, do come into play in my analysis. The way, for instance, in which Sartre's literary products around 1945 positioned Sartre ultimately depended on the myriad of meanings attached to those interventions at that point in time. *The Existentialist Moment* attempted to reconstruct those meanings by contextualizing historically. It is only against the cultural backdrop of the Second World War and the Liberation that we can begin to grasp how, say, a particular play or a specific article would have been interpreted at the time.

Susen's final observation about intentions seems to be based on a misunderstanding, similar to one that can be found in Henrik Lundberg's recently published review of my book.[39] Of course, I do not deny that intellectuals have purposes when making interventions, especially given the extent to which they have time to reflect on what they are going to say or write and to anticipate possible meanings for their audience. My concern, however, is of a methodological kind. In many cases, there is insufficient evidence to attribute intentions, in which case doing so—as is often the case in biographies of intellectuals—becomes a speculative endeavour. Indeed, the genre of intellectual biography tends to be both atheoretical and speculative. The problem is epitomized in Ray Monk's lackadaisical comment in his review of *The Existentialist Moment*: he writes that there is no need for a theory (not just positioning theory but *any* theory) and that, therefore, it is perfectly possible simply to study (as he does) intellectuals on a case-by-case basis.[40] No longer shackled by theoretical and methodological concerns, biographers *à la* Monk are under the illusion that they are able to enter the minds of the individuals portrayed.

Of course, it is sometimes possible to reconstruct intentions: there are cases where letters, interviews, or diaries may indeed provide such insight, although even then we have to be careful because they tend to be recollections made within a new context. Josh Booth and I have researched how intellectuals behind Podemos draw on Carl Schmitt's ideas; in this context, we managed to gather some evidence to support claims regarding intentionality.[41] Yet, we have to remain vigilant and not be tempted to extrapolate motives and expectations from what is, in many cases, rather limited evidence. Searching for effects has major methodological advantages. I disagree with Sarah Richmond[42] that this research strategy necessarily has a descriptive ring to it: as we have seen in the case of Sartre, tracing effects, in the way in which I did, showed how certain writings resonated, whereas others did not, leading to differential uptake and diffusion—not to mention differences in symbolic recognition. Within the academic sphere, this perspective has the potential to help us think creatively about canon formation, about what is included and what is not. It seems to me that these are particularly salient topics in the context of current debates on ideas around 'decolonizing the curriculum'.

I would like to finish by, once again, thanking Simon Susen for making the effort to engage with my book.

Notes

1. Baert (2015).
2. Baert (2015), pp. 23–90.
3. Baert (2015), pp. 91–149.
4. The reviews by Carreira da Silva (2016), Catani (2017), Lundberg (2016), Mayer (2016), McBride (2017), Outhwaite (2017), Ralston (2017), Rapport (2016), and Richmond (2015) acknowledge the existence (and significance) of my theoretical chapter, but the reviews by Blanchard (2016), Bradatan (2016), Frère (2017), Fuller (2016), Grunner (2016), and Martin (2016) ignore the theoretical framework proposed in my book. Most extraordinary, Monk (2016) explicitly writes that we do not need theory for this kind of endeavour.
5. Fuller (2016), McBride (2017).
6. Fuller (2016), p. 562.
7. Baert (2015), pp. 2–22.
8. Baert (2015), pp. 11–12.
9. McBride (2017), p. 134.

10. Baert (2015), pp. 1–5, and 73–111.
11. See, for instance, Baert (2015), pp. 14 and 139.
12. McBride (2017), p. 134.
13. Baert (2015), pp. 184–189.
14. Baert (2015), pp. 56–57, 74–75, and 84.
15. Boschetti (1985).
16. Baert (2015), pp. 5–7.
17. Baert (2015), pp. 5–7.
18. Cohen-Solal (2005).
19. Baert (2015), pp. 23–124.
20. See, for instance, Baert (2015), pp. 143ff.
21. Baert and Morgan (2017).
22. Gadamer (2004).
23. See Baert (2015), esp. pp. 23–90.
24. E.g. Zipp and Fenwick (2006); Gross and Simmons (2014).
25. Gross (2013).
26. Mondon (2015).
27. Mouffe (1999).
28. Baert (2015), pp. 158–189.
29. Baert (2015), pp. 23–49.
30. See, for instance, Cram (2016).
31. Baert (2015), pp. 38–46.
32. See, for instance, Baert (2015), pp. 137–138.
33. Baert (2015), p. 64.
34. Bourdieu (1991 [1988]).
35. See Baert (2015), pp. 170ff.
36. Baert (2015), pp. 150ff.
37. Baert (2015), pp. 182–183.
38. Baert (2005).
39. Lundberg (2016).
40. Monk (2016).
41. Booth and Baert (2018).
42. Richmond (2015).

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The Sociology of Intellectuals
After 'The Existentialist Moment'
Susen, S.; Baert, P.
2017, XI, 194 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-61209-6