

Patrick Baert. *The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*. Polity Press 2015. 240 pp. \$69.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780745685397); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780745685403).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) wore many hats during his lifetime: playwright, biographer, novelist, literary critic, political activist and, of course, existentialist philosopher. In *The Existentialist Moment*, sociologist Patrick Baert explores another of Sartre's roles: public intellectual. Sartre's stardom and existentialism's popularity grew and peaked in the post-war years, between 1944 and 1947—a period Baert describes as 'the existentialist moment'—and then went into significant decline, especially from the 1960s onwards. Besides exploring Sartre's biography as a public intellectual, Baert's broader project is to understand public intellectualism as a sociological phenomenon. Although Sartre never held an academic post, his ideas initially gained favor among the Parisian literary and educated elite, including the professoriate. So the question arises: How do philosophical notions filter their way from intramural academic discussions into the wider currents of public discourse? In Baert's words, 'under which conditions [are] ideas ... likely to spread from the intra- to the public intellectual arena' (16)?

The book is organized into seven chapters: the first on the intellectual collaboration and resistance to the German occupation of France in 1940-4; the second on the purges of French intellectuals who collaborated with the Germans during 1944-5; the third on how the intellectual landscape or *zeitgeist* changed with the purges; the fourth on the emergence of existentialism in fall 1945 and extending into 1946; the fifth on how Sartre cemented his role as a public intellectual in 1946-7; the sixth offers an explanatory framework for Sartre's rise and decline as a public intellectual; and the seventh shows how the framework helps us understand the career trajectories of other public intellectuals.

In chapter one, Baert relates the history of France's occupation by German forces during World War II, as well as the reaction by French intellectuals, who either collaborated with or resisted the occupiers. Some intellectuals became collaborationists, writing for pro-German publications and acquiescing to the SS censors. Others joined the intellectual resistance (which, Baert notes, rarely overlapped with the armed Resistance), writing for clandestine magazines and journals, adopting pseudonyms for fear of arrest and execution, and criticizing collaborationists who they saw as selling out French culture to the German propaganda machine. Sartre was part of the intellectual resistance. For him and other non-collaborationists, '[w]riting ... was widely seen as an act of defiance: France might have lost the war but fought on in other ways' (43).

Chapter two tells the story of the post-war purges of collaborationist intellectuals. After France's liberation, a decree was passed to punish all those writers and artists who supported the pro-German Vichy regime. Intellectuals who chose the wrong side during the war faced dire consequences. For publishing in collaborationist journals, the guilty were blacklisted. For supporting the German occupiers, offenders were either tried for national indignity (i.e., an unpatriotic act that dishonored the nation) or treason (i.e., collusion with a foreign power and giving aid to the enemy). Of ten French intellectuals sentenced to death for treason, only four were executed, while the remainder had their sentences commuted to life or fled. According to Baert, the purges made a tragic point about the relationship between authorship and moral responsibility: '[W]ritings are consequential Writing is public, and the audience can be persuaded by it. [... So, ultimately the author] was responsible for his writings' (59). The trials of these collaborationist intellectuals contributed to France's recovery from the trauma of the war. As a resistance intellectual during the occupation, Sartre would afford the concept of responsibility a central place in his existentialist philosophy.

In chapter three, Baert explains how Sartre capitalized on the public mood generated by the purge, as well as the need for post-occupation healing, to launch his own rise to prominence as a public intellectual. ‘Sartre during this period [mid-1944 to the end of 1945] reformulated his philosophical position, making it less abstract, attributing centrality to the notion of responsibility and speaking directly to the experience of the war’ (75). In three popular essays, Sartre reinforced the myth of *résistantialisme*, i.e., the comforting narrative that most of the French people resisted German occupation, acting in solidarity with the French Communist Party, even though collaboration was far too common. Besides responsibility, the notions of freedom and silence also factor strongly in Sartre’s essays; freedom lost under German occupation; and silence brought on by censorship and coercion at the hands of the Nazis. In Baert’s estimation, ‘all three articles end with expressing hope for a future that would build on the heroics of the recent past but also learn from its grave failings’ (89).

Chapters four and five chronicle Sartre-the-public-intellectual’s phenomenal rise to fame during the autumn of 1945, continuing into 1946. Simone de Beauvoir called these months of hyper-productivity for Sartre and his fellow French artists, writers and philosophers ‘the existentialist offensive’ (91). In *L’Existentialism est un humanism*, Sartre introduced the general public to the key concepts of existentialist philosophy: bad faith, freedom, responsibility, authenticity and choice. In *Qu’ est-ce que la littérature?*, he passionately defended the engaged intellectual, claiming that members of the creative class have an obligation to push back against injustice, ignorance and oppression. At the heart of Sartre’s writings, according to Baert, is the notion of *applied existentialism*, or the idea that ‘philosophy should not just be an abstract, timeless construction, but intertwined with and relevant to the social and political issues of today’ (127). The French philosopher’s record as a beloved public intellectual was imperfect though. Of all the works Sartre wrote during this period, the one that would prove most damaging to his reputation was his book on anti-semitism, *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Its stereotyped portrayals of Jews would anger many in the Jewish community and even lead to a qualified retraction by Sartre himself.

In chapters six and seven, Baert identifies four factors that influenced Sartre’s rise to prominence and proposes a novel, though somewhat derivative, sociological theory of public intellectualism. The first factor, ‘intellectual vacancies,’ describes how a cultural vacuum (e.g., post-war France after the collaborationist purges) generates immense opportunities for underappreciated thinkers (e.g., Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir) to write, publish and spread their ideas (136). The second factor, ‘publishing,’ indicates the ability to have work widely disseminated as a result of forming close relationships with publishers (e.g., Sartre’s strong ties with several French publishing houses that survived the purges) (139). The third factor, ‘public performances,’ refers to media events (e.g., Sartre’s many radio appearances and public lectures) which buoy the public intellectual’s credibility and popularity (141). Finally, the fourth factor, ‘cultural trauma and the role of the public intellectual,’ signifies collective shock (e.g., the French people’s feelings of despair and anomie after the occupation) and the function of the public intellectual (e.g., Sartre) to help the victims break with the past and heal (144). How does the intellectual successfully cross over from participation in intramural academic discussions to engagement in the wider currents of social and political debate? Baert’s theory of public intellectualism borrows concepts from business marketing—specifically, networking, positioning, teamwork and branding—to explain how the public intellectual popularizes her ideas. He also identifies the public intellectual’s most effective rhetorical tropes, such as narrative (i.e., stories that employ simple memes and speak to the concerns of wider audiences) and meta-argument (i.e., critical evaluation of the key assumptions guiding dominant positions and ideologies). Finally, Baert offers a typology of public intellectuals (‘authoritative,’ ‘expert’ and ‘dialogical’), insisting that new social media (e.g., blogging) and the rise of the social sciences (e.g., economics)

have spelled the demise of authoritative public intellectuals, such as Sartre, but given life to new breeds of public intellectuals with specialized knowledge and populist credentials (185-187).

For those curious about the changing role of the public intellectual—or in philosophical circles, what some have decided to call the ‘public philosopher’—*The Existentialist Moment* is a truly insightful work. The novelty of Baert’s sociological theory resides in its treatment of public intellectualism’s performative space as highly inclusive, so that it ‘to a certain extent blur[s] the distinction between public intellectuals and their publics’ (188). Sociological theories before Baert’s represented the academic sphere as operating independently of the public sphere, as if they were two hermetically sealed chambers. Sartre’s career as an *intellectual engagé* demonstrates that the boundary between the two is porous, if not illusory. This might be the theory’s only weakness: It is perhaps too derivative of those features that made Sartre’s career as a public intellectual successful, though still untested in its ability to explain other public intellectuals’ experiences. Maybe Baert’s motive is to invite scholars to conduct similar studies of the careers of other prominent public intellectuals past and present—for instance, John Dewey, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Noam Chomsky and Henry Giroux. Overall, the book is an enormous contribution to the literature on public intellectualism and might even offer some guidance to those philosophers seeking to share their ideas outside of the Ivory Tower.

Shane Ralston, Pennsylvania State University-Hazleton