Review Essay

Intellectuals: Who they are and how they work

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Birth of the intellectuals 1880–1900
Christophe Charle, translated by David Fernbach and G.M. Goshgarian
Polity, Cambridge UK and Malden MA, 2015, 266pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-7456-9036-0

The existentialist moment: The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual
Patrick Baert
Polity, Cambridge UK and Malden MA, 2015, vi+231pp.,
ISBN: 9-780745-685403

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At least three key words are common to these two books: Dreyfus, France, and "intellectual." Of the three that I have named, Dreyfus is something of an outlier. True, Baert's book identifies Sartre as a latter-day Dreyfusard as early as page 3, but it returns in earnest to this theme only in a much later discussion of Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*; while Charle's work, although it deals from start to finish with the signatories mainly of pro- and anti-Dreyfus petitions during the two decades identified in its title, is almost obsessive in refraining from dealing with anything substantive about the Dreyfus affair itself. As far as France and its intellectuals are concerned, the two books taken together span precisely a century between the early evolution of the term "intellectual" and the demise of its most famous mid-twentieth century instance, along with the putative demise of the influence of such *exotici*.

The covers of the paperback editions of both books (why not begin with the covers?) are, each in its own way, alluring. The front cover of *Birth of the Intellectuals* is graced by a reproduction of a famous caricature, housed in the historical archives of the City of Paris, of an angry Émile Zola writing "J'accuse" on a large blank paper with an enormous quasi-pen. The front cover of *The*

Existentialist Moment displays a photograph of Sartre that is unusually becoming to him, but it is the insistence on the back cover that this book is "compelling," just as Sartre himself was, that presents at once an appeal and a challenge. I shall take up each work in turn before drawing a few conclusions about France, French intellectuals, and intellectuals on the whole, concerning which there are interesting ongoing questions – while recognizing, presumably along with these two authors, that Dreyfus now belongs to the ages.

Charle, whose publications include a broader study of nineteenth century French social history, and, with collaborators, a comparison of French and English intellectuals since the eighteenth century, tends to see the process that was played out through the pro- and anti-Dreyfus petitions above all in the dichotomous terms of "intellectuals" and "elites." As he explains in an endnote (p. 194), both this book and another, *Les Élites de la République (1880–1900)*, are based on his two-volume (mimeographed) *thèse d'État* of 1986 that was entitled, not altogether surprisingly, *Intellectuels et élites en France (1880–1900)*. He shows that, to put it in broad terms, the notion of "*intellectuel*" in its peculiarly French meaning developed over the course of the Dreyfus controversy and was originally associated more closely with elements of the pro-Dreyfus side. By the end of the period in question, however, it became possible to speak, as the title of the book's original final chapter would have it, of "'Intellectuals' of the Left and 'Intellectuals' of the Right" (p. 149). And, as Charle indicates in his very brief concluding chapter appended to this English edition, the dissemination of such new complexities of meaning and application of the term "intellectuals" soon extended beyond France to other countries, notably Germany and Italy.

Charle's scholarship, devoted above all here toward ascertaining in as much detail as possible the identities of the various signatories beyond the few who are best known, such as Zola on the one side and Maurice Barrès (whose 1898 essay, "La Protestation des Intellectuels," is said by the author (p. 126) to have "enshrined the term '*intellectuel*'") on the other. Those who were employed by universities were of course the easiest to track, along with the most established writers and artists, while further information concerning some other names remained resistant to even the most extensive archival research. The impression with which the reader is left is that the period in question was a time during which the old elites were losing ground both in the academy and in French life as a whole, while some of those labeled "intellectuals" were, despite certain populist leanings, moving in the direction of forming a new elite – the very charge made by Barrès in his article. Another impression, though one not strongly reinforced in the text itself, is that the number of players actively involved in the events was relatively small. To take an extreme example, presented as such by the author, some provincial universities were so marginal that few, if any, of their faculty members signed any petition; the University of Poitiers had a total of 39 faculty members, and only one, a retiree, signed (p. 155).

On the whole, then, *Birth of the Intellectuals 1880–1900* is rich in certain details but short on both background and theoretical framework. Its author is fastidious in avoiding *grands récits*, and he seems at times to assume that the readers of this book will be familiar with the relevant historical facts, about which, after all, so many other books have been written by himself and others. For example, there are just a few references, in the middle pages, to the populist Boulangist movement, which is mentioned as having attracted considerable opposition from students in Paris, especially at the École Normale Supérieure, in the late ’80s. But it would be very difficult to extract from this handful of references any coherent idea of exactly who Boulanger was and exactly what his movement stood for, absent any prior background information. Still and all, the reader will come away with a much more nuanced understanding of the pedigree of French intellectuals, if not of intellectuals more generally.

This affords us some preparation, then, for Baert’s book about Sartre, the quintessential public intellectual of the mid-twentieth century. In fact, a short section of Baert’s introductory chapter (pp. 18–20) alludes to the Dreyfus Affair, to Barrès’ article about intellectual protest, and to those who view Sartre as falling within the Dreyfusard tradition. The following three chapters, which are quite informative, concern the German Occupation of France and the Resistance, the purge of prominent Frenchmen who had collaborated with the Nazis that followed the Liberation, and debates about responsibility and the question of how to deal with former collaborators that elicited widely cited essays by Sartre, notably “La République du silence,” “Paris sous l’occupation,” and “Qu’est-ce qu’un collaborateur?” There follows a pivotal middle chapter 4, entitled “The autumn of 1945,” the time at which existentialism, notably Sartrean existentialism, is said “really” to have taken off as a phenomenon in France and then elsewhere. It is usually agreed that the single most important event in this “existentialist offensive,” as Simone de Beauvoir notoriously called it (p. 91), was Sartre’s lecture on October 29, “L’Existentialisme est un humanisme.”

But it is easy to exaggerate the importance of that single event, and it is particularly easy to underestimate the extent to which not just Sartre, but above all Sartre’s philosophy (as distinguished from his more purely literary works), as Baert asserts concerning its *locus classicus*, *L’Être et le néant*, was “virtually unnoticed when it was published initially” (p. 2). As corroboration of his assertion, he cites Annie Cohen-Solal’s claim, in her important Sartre biography, that this work was mentioned in only one published article in the year in which it appeared, 1943. But book reviews, at least at that time and to a large extent even today, seldom appear very soon after a book’s publication, and there were additional problems in France under the Occupation, including a paper shortage. Add to this the fact that book reviews in philosophy tend to be slower to appear than in many other fields and that some readers find books in philosophy to be difficult slogging. Nevertheless, as I documented in a report on some early reviews of *L’Être et le néant* in an anthology

(Galster, 2001) cited by Baert, such reviews began to appear in 1944 and were fairly numerous by mid-1945 – and not only in France. In one of them, published in an important Argentine journal, *Sur*, in August 1945, the reviewer, Georges Izard, referred to Sartre as having been the first phenomenologist to attract a "numerous public" and wrote of the *many* young students for whom the difficulty of the text was seen as a valuable challenge (McBride, 2001, p. 189). So it seems to me entirely reasonable to conclude that the appearance of a very large crowd at Sartre's lecture in mid-fall 1945, about the immediate facts concerning which everyone agrees, was testimony to an already much wider awareness, at least in intellectual milieux and probably beyond, of the importance of Sartre as a thinker and writer than Baert implies.

Baert's goals in writing his book are not purely historical. Above all, he is attempting to find an *explanation* for the rise of Sartrean existentialism to a position of prominence in the mid-1940s (or, as Ingrid Galster put it in the sub-title of her anthology to which I have just alluded, "*raisons d'un succès 1938–1945*"), and, while doing so, to critique the approaches of other scholars. The single key term in Baert's own approach is "positioning": Sartre made the name that he did for himself by shrewdly identifying some aspects of French society in the immediate post-War era and taking positions that resonated with this atmosphere. There is undoubted truth in this claim, but I am not convinced that it is either as unusual (after all, Sartre himself repeatedly stressed the notion of *situations*), or as comprehensively satisfactory for explanatory purposes, as the author seems to think.

Perhaps more problematic in Baert's treatment of his subject-matter is his 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. One detects a great deal of sniffing upon occasion, as here:

> The social sciences have emerged as a significant force and have professionalized, making it more difficult for philosophers or others without appropriate training and expertise in the social sciences to make authoritative claims about the nature of the social and political world without being challenged…. There are now lifelong specialists in the areas that public intellectuals used to comment on, who are better placed to contest such "generalized" interventions as uninformed and superficial (p. 186).

Actually, it should not come as a surprise to Professor Baert to learn that even "authoritative claims" made by social scientists, even by some lifelong specialists, and sometimes even with regard to their most cherished methodological approaches, can be and in fact often are "challenged."

In the final pages of his book, of which the above citation is a part, Baert goes on to distinguish between "authoritative public intellectuals" like Sartre and "expert public intellectuals," for whom he believes there is still a place in the world. He

also briefly distinguishes both of these types from another sort, "dialogical public intellectuals," who "do not assume a superior stance towards their publics" (p. 188). He himself is obviously intimately acquainted with the latter type of stance. He even seems to regard his concluding "brief historical excursion" (p. 189) as in some sense – dare I say it? – historically authoritative. As the late Jacques Derrida would say, "Let's be serious."

Taken together, these two books, Charle's and Baert's, do in fact contain some truly serious historical scholarship, and they may well occasion some "generalized interventions" – well, let us say "theoretical reflections" – on, as I indicated at the outset of this review essay, France, French intellectuals, and intellectuals in general. It is in some ways rather curious, in retrospect, that France exerted so much influence, especially cultural influence, over so much of the world well into the late twentieth century at least. (Even now that influence is not negligible beyond the "Hexagon," especially when one considers the Francophone countries of Africa.) And yet, as Charle's book causes us to realize or to recall, the total number of individuals together constituting both the elite and the newly born (as he would have it in his title) intellectuals in late nineteenth century France, bearers of that cultural influence, was comparatively small. (And, moreover, the percentage of inhabitants of France whose *langue maternelle* was not French remained surprisingly high well into that century.) How, some sociologists might be tempted to inquire, did France manage to *position* itself this way even after the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the humiliation of the post-Occupation period of which Baert reminds us? Despite everything, this remains somewhat mysterious, or so it seems: *Le monde a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*. But it just might have something to do with the fact that several generations of French intellectuals were exceptionally creative and intelligent in ways that went beyond and were different from a merely strategic, "positioning" intelligence. Indeed, at least one of the early reviewers of *Being and Nothingness*, Claude-Edmonde Magny, expressed (in 1945) the fervent hope that Sartre's work would be seen as of great importance for Western, and not merely French, thought – a somewhat daring hope, as she saw it, given the extreme provincialism to which France had been reduced during the previous four years (McBride, 2001, p. 187). But so it came to pass. *Tiens*!

While the development of the notion of "intellectuals" in the sense that was peculiarly French in its inception, but that came to be extended, as Charle readily acknowledges, to other countries, is a quite recent story within the scope of world history, there have of course always been some individuals, in advanced civilizations both Western and Eastern, who have played quite similar roles. At the same time, I suspect that there have always been those, both among the elites and among ordinary citizens, who have regarded "intellectuals" in general with some contempt, as Maurice Barrès did in his important 1898 essay, previously mentioned. (In the United States in the 1950s, for instance, the preferred term of contempt was "egghead.") In modern times at least, and despite Baert's brief foray

into the domain of the typology of intellectuals, the boundary between intellectuals and non-intellectuals in any given society is bound to remain porous and uncertain, and, as many psychologists would now agree, its location cannot be determined by the once-popular quantitative measure of "Intellectual Quotient." Moreover, even among those who regard the label of "intellectual" as an accolade, we will find that most if not all plausible candidates for it in contemporary societies will be revered by some but regarded as charlatans by others. This will be true of every such candidate to some extent; by way of concrete illustration from the relatively recent past, let me propose the figure of Ayn Rand.

One contemporary individual to whom this label has been very widely assigned – but of course "assigned," as usual, by only a rather small minority of adults in most parts of the world, the rest having never heard of him – is Jürgen Habermas, who is mentioned twice by Baert but only very much in passing. Habermas has given considerable thought to public space (*Ŏffentlichkeit*) and to what he regards as its decline in recent times. No doubt Sartre's name was better known in his day than is Habermas' today, but the latter's "rock star" status, which I have personally witnessed at conferences, particularly at the large World Congress of Philosophy in Athens in 2013, is testimony to the fact that public intellectuals, even when they are generalizing philosophers rather than social scientists who are "lifelong specialists," are still very much in demand. In short, the word "intellectual," about the origins and avatars of which a reading of these two books is certain to enhance one's understanding, retains a positive resonance in many quarters.

References

Galster, I. (2001) *La Naissance du « Phénomène Sartre » : raisons d'un succès 1938–1945*. Paris: Êditions du Seuil.

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