In this article, I will introduce an outline of a positioning theory, applied to the intellectual sphere. The theory presents a new perspective on intellectuals and intellectual interventions which, I will argue, differs from and improves upon past conceptualisations of the intellectual by sociologists, as well as intellectuals’ self-presentations. The aim of the article is to develop the basic framework of the theory, and to provide examples that involve academics as well as intellectuals operating outside the academy. For the sake of brevity, the examples provided are limited to those from the social sciences and humanities, though the theory can also be applied within the framework of the natural sciences.

It is worth setting out from the outset the two basic intuitions which underlie the theory that will be proposed here. The positioning theory outlined in this paper relies firstly on the view that the reception, survival and diffusion of intellectual products—whether as research programmes, theories, concepts or propositions—depends not just on the intrinsic quality of the arguments proposed or the strength of the evidence provided, but also on the range of rhetorical devices which the authors employ to locate themselves (and position others) within the intellectual and political field. In this sense, the theoretical framework that is introduced here shows affinities with sociological works that operate broadly speaking within a dramaturgical approach or cultural pragmatics or centre round the notion of performativity (e.g., Alexander, 2011; Pickering, 1995). However, as will become apparent in what follows, the specific theory proposed here is quite unique and certainly differs from other exponents of the so-called “performative turn”. Secondly, the positioning theory that will be developed in this article rests on a context-cum-relational view of intellectual products. According to this relational perspective, an intellectual intervention—whether as a book, article, blog or speech—does not have an intrinsic meaning as such; it acquires its meaning in a particular setting; it is dependent on the status, position and trajectory of the author(s) and on the other intellectual products available at the time. As such, the theory developed below draws parallels with the relational sociology proposed by other sociologists and sociological theorists (e.g., Collins, 1998; Fuchs, 2001), although it is worth mentioning that my positioning theory distances itself from the functionalism or system thinking associated with some proponents of relational sociology.
In what follows I will sketch an outline of a theory of intellectual life that centres on these two presuppositions. This article does not set out to elaborate on the broader philosophical issues underlying those basic intuitions; there is already a considerable amount of literature that does this very well (e.g., Pickering, 1995; Fuchs, 2001). Instead this article attempts to show how the specific theoretical outline suggested here provides novel concepts and insights into the workings of intellectual life. This explains why, in the first section, I elaborate on the deficiencies of the current state of the sociology of intellectuals and the need for the type of theoretical framework which I propose. This critique of the contemporary sociology of intellectuals enables me to drive home the significance of positioning theory. In the second section, I briefly discuss the history of positioning theory before expanding on my version of it. By introducing new notions and conceptual distinctions as well as examples, I hope to demonstrate the historic and contemporary relevance of the theory and give some sense of its scope and overall explanatory power. In the final section, I discuss some of the methodological and philosophical issues that research centred round this version of the theory might entail. In the process, I will demonstrate that positioning theory, if used effectively, can avoid some of the philosophical pitfalls or methodological drawbacks of other contributions to the sociology of intellectuals.

LIMITS OF THE NEW SOCIOLOGY OF IDEAS

The strength of the theory of positioning becomes clear in relation to, and in contrast with, some assumptions in the sociology of intellectuals, notably in Camic and Gross’ “new sociology of ideas” (Camic & Gross, 2001). Camic and Gross coin the term to encapsulate what they see as an emerging research programme under which a variety of scholars are united, ranging from Bourdieu-inspired work such as Michele Lamont’s to the strong programme for science studies. Given the incompatibility of some of the authors and approaches under this heading (Bloor and Bourdieu are unlikely bedfellows) I will use the term “new sociology of ideas” as solely indicative of Camic and Gross’ own project. The specific critique that follows applies to Camic and Gross and not necessarily to other recent research in the sociology of intellectuals (Misztal, 2007; Lamont, 2009; Sapiro, 2009; Sapiro, 2011; see also Camic, Gross & Lamont, 2011; Eyal & Bucholz, 2010). In my critique, however, I will also occasionally refer to other sociologists when relevant. Indeed, some of the criticisms identified in this article are also applicable to other approaches in the sociology of intellectuals.

The new sociology of ideas, as conceived by Camic and Gross, contrasts with previous attempts by sociologists to study intellectuals and their intellectual production, in particular the sociology of knowledge associated with Karl Mannheim and Marxist scholars. For Camic and Gross, the latter tends to make broad generalisations that are not always substantiated by empirical research. In con-
trast, the new sociology of ideas studies empirically the specific context in which intellectuals operate and which enables, shapes and constrains intellectual production. Whereas the old-style sociology of ideas tends to explain intellectual products reductively in terms of, for instance, social class or generation, the new sociology of ideas explores more modestly the role of institutional factors and professional trajectory. This new breed of sociologists explores the power struggles over symbolic and institutional recognition within local settings and academic disciplines.

Two examples give some indication of the type of work conducted under the banner of the new sociology of ideas. Firstly, Camic’s research exemplifies the spirit of the new sociology of ideas, analysing, amongst other things the work of an important academic, the sociologist Talcott Parsons, within the Harvard context in which he operated. In a couple of key articles (Camic, 1987; 1992), Camic argued that aspects of Parsons’ early work can be explained by the institutional context in which he worked. Whereas Parsons’ theoretical orientation was perfectly compatible with institutionalism in economics, he carefully avoided aligning himself with this perspective because of the hostility to it by his senior colleagues in the Harvard Economics Department who were wedded to orthodox neoclassical thinking. Also, the ambitions of institutionalism to develop a science of society as a whole would have undermined any attempt by sociology to carve a niche for itself. Hence, Parsons referred to Marshall, Pareto, Weber and Durkheim (all either unknown or well respected in Harvard) rather than Veblen, Hamilton or Ayres. In sum, Camic (1992) substitutes the “reputational model of predecessor selection” for the “content-fit model”: whereas the former states that intellectuals select their predecessors based on how well those predecessors’ work fits their own project, the latter postulates that they select predecessors based on those predecessors’ reputational standing within the local intellectual context in which they are working.

Secondly, Gross (2002; 2008) also analyses in detail the intellectual trajectory of a specific intellectual within the modern American academy. In particular, Gross explores the life and work of the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty from his early formative years to his dramatic and public break with analytical philosophy. Gross’ biographical account of Rorty has a distinctly social-psychological flavour in so far as it centres round the notion of self-concept. Intellectuals are seen as guided by an intellectual self-concept, “... the totality of a thinker’s thoughts and feelings having reference to herself or himself as an intellectual.” (Gross, 2008, p. 267) This set of beliefs by intellectuals about themselves guides their actions and work and they try to produce writings that are consistent with the beliefs (Gross, 2008, pp. 264–276). Gross shows that because of Rorty’s upbringing—in particular because of the influence his parents had on him—he saw himself from early on as a progressive, pragmatist-orientated intellectual. Some of Rorty’s letters over the years testify to this. This self-concept, Gross argues, remained with him and had a profound effect on the type of work
that he produced, leading to tension with analytical philosophy and eventually culminating in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Before this book, most of Rorty’s research had been in analytical philosophy. Fully aware that it was the reigning orthodoxy of the day, he worked in this area in the knowledge that it might be essential to secure a position at one of the top departments in the country and eventually to obtain tenure (Gross 2008, pp. 277–314). Once established, his work became more congruent with his self-concept.

Whilst the new sociology of ideas has undoubtedly provided careful empirical research that has proven to be an important corrective to the old-style of sociology of knowledge, there are a number of problematic issues which need addressing. Five issues stand out: an empiricist bias, a motivational bias, a sociological fallacy, an authenticity bias and a stability bias.

The empiricist bias arises out of Camic’s work. Whilst Camic is certainly right to draw attention to the significance of the intellectual prejudices and power relations at Harvard for understanding Parsons’ earlier writings, there is a lack of clarity as to the precise nature of Camic’s intellectual enterprise. Throughout the articles Camic seems to oscillate between two types of reasoning. The dominant mode is a causal explanation, accounting for what caused Parsons to make the type of intellectual interventions that he made. Occasionally, though, Camic shifts gear and spells out the effects of Parsons’ interventions for his career and tenure at Harvard. Indeed, the young Parsons managed to acquire a competitive advantage at Harvard because of the extent to which both the content and sources of his intellectual production were compatible with the views of senior academics in a position of power. The reason for the lack of clarity in Camic’s project lies in its under-theorisation: whilst Camic’s analysis has proven particularly useful in accounting for some of Parsons’ idiosyncratic moves, notably his choices of intellectual allies, Camic’s empirical research is in need of some theoretical scaffolding if it is to prove robust and above all clearer as to its precise remit. Camic’s new sociology of ideas presents a fruitful research programme with clear methodological guidelines but it lacks a broader theoretical agenda that would enable it to guide and make sense of the research conducted. The theory of positioning, I will argue, will provide this theoretical framework.

The motivational bias arises out of both Camic and Gross’ work. Leaving aside their occasional focus on the effects of intellectual products in terms of symbolic or institutional recognition (for example, Camic’s references to how Parsons’ writings were received by Harvard economists), their writings mostly account for the motivations behind the work of individual intellectuals. However, it proves extremely difficult to provide empirical evidence on this score, often leading to confused discussions as to the motivational basis for intellectual interventions. Take, for instance, the ways in which Camic accounts for Parsons’ idiosyncratic intellectual moves. Trying to provide clarity as to the motivations behind them, Camic warns the reader that “. . . Parsons’s concern with the solid reputational standing of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber, against a backdrop where
the institutionalists were in ill-repute (...)

Further elaborating on this point, Camic’s argument shifts slightly: he asserts that Parsons did not make a one-off decision to opt for the European theorists over institutionalists after weighing their reputations. The decision process was more subtle; it “... crystallized gradually in the course of the 1930s... while he was part of a well-signposted intellectual network that warned him of the defectiveness and uselessness of some lines of relevant work while announcing the greatness, brilliance, and fruitfulness of other lines.” (Camic, 1992, pp. 437) The latter seems to suggest that Parsons unconsciously picked up on various signs, and in response to Alexander and Sciortino’s critique (Alexander and Sciortino, 1996), Camic and Gross’ subsequent comments reiterate this theory of unconscious adaptation (Camic, 1996, pp. 82–83; Gross, 2008, pp. 258–263). However, the evidence for this theory is non-existent. Whilst Camic is right that it is unlikely that Parsons made a one-off decision at some point and then stuck to this throughout, it does not follow that Parsons did not operate instrumentally. For all we know, he might well have made repeated calculations throughout his career. With this example, I am not trying to argue in favour of an instrumentalist perspective, but want to give some indication of how difficult it is to speculate about the motivations behind intellectual choices.

The sociological fallacy applies to Gross’ work, referring to his attempt to explain individual decisions by sociological determinants. It is worth recalling that when Durkheim (1982), in his Rules of Sociological Method, advocated the position that social facts ought to be explained and predicted by other social facts, he was fully aware that this sociological explanation did not extend to individual facts. For example, whilst levels of societal integration and regulations explain and predict suicide patterns, they do not account effectively for an individual suicide (Durkheim, 1992). Gross, however, does not seem to make this distinction. He goes a step further (and indeed a step too far), bringing in sociological variables to account for Rorty’s individual choices. So the reader is told that “... Rorty’s social background predisposed him to be antagonistic to logical positivism and sympathetic to the project of metaphysics.” (Gross, 2008, p. 303) Arguments of this kind confute sociological and individual explanations. It might well be correct that the “first generation of intellectual aspirants”, like Rorty’s parents, were more likely to be disdainful towards the anti-intellectualism of the “new rigour”, but this is not an effective explanation for an individual’s intellectual choice given the richness of an individual’s biography. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) made a similar mistake in his sociological account on Heidegger, arguing that Heidegger’s petty bourgeois background explains the anti-cosmopolitan and anti-modernism of his outlook and his predilection for a “völkisch language”. Just like Gross who he inspired, Bourdieu erroneously takes a sociological explanation of social facts for a sociological account of individual action.
The authenticity bias refers to Gross’ work, in particular to his notion of the intellectual self-concept. According to this notion, intellectuals tell stories about themselves to themselves and to others, and those stories, which tend to be typological, shape their creative output (Gross, 2008, pp. 263–264). In what follows I wish to dissent from the view expressed by sociologists such as Gross that it is fruitful to conceive of intellectuals as pursuing authentic projects that correspond to their views about their identity and values. Whether within the academy or outside it, intellectuals operate within competitive arenas, struggling over symbolic and institutional recognition and scarce financial resources. It makes a lot of sense, therefore, to recognise the extent to which their interventions—whether through books, articles or speeches—are an integral part of this power struggle rather than an expression of some deeper self. By emphasising how intellectual production and the struggles over scarce resources are intertwined, I take it as essential to establish a critical distance vis-à-vis the way in which most intellectuals portray themselves to their audience. Indeed, as Bourdieu pointed out in the context of the “scholastic fallacy” (Bourdieu, 2000), intellectuals have a tendency to depict their own intellectual trajectory as untainted by these material, symbolic and institutional constraints. For instance, there are remarkably few intellectual autobiographies that acknowledge the full extent to which considerations of this kind interfered with the intellectual choices that were made. This is because autobiographies too—just like other intellectual products—position their authors, their allies and opponents.

The stability bias also derives from Gross’ (and to a lesser extent Bourdieu’s) writings. Whilst both the notions of self-concept and habitus have some currency, they cannot, in themselves, account sufficiently for the changes that take place in intellectuals’ views and assertions over a lifetime. Both the notion of self-concept and habitus imply fixity within the project and output of an intellectual. Authors who subscribe to this view assume that once the self-concept or habitus of the intellectual has been formed (something which develops at a relatively early stage), it tends to perpetuate itself, guiding his or her intellectual work for decades to come and manifesting itself in his or her œuvre. For instance, Gross holds that the intellectual self-concept “. . . once established may exert a powerful effect on her or his future thought”. (Gross, 2008, p. 264) Again, the sociologist makes the mistake here of identifying with how the intellectual sees him or herself, and with how he or she wants to be seen and remembered. The reality is often different: it is rare for intellectuals to stick to a single self-concept or coherent project throughout their lives. Instead, they often reinvent themselves, articulating new outlooks and taking on new positions until they find one which delivers durability in terms of employment tenure, intellectual recognition and output. Gross’ own biography of Rorty underlines my case: whilst he elaborates on how from an early stage onwards Rorty saw himself as a progressive pragmatist, Gross’ own analysis shows how Rorty presented himself quite differently whilst establishing his academic career in philosophy. The theory of positioning is able to capture shifts of this kind.
Positioning theory ought to be seen in the context of speech-act theory. Speech act-theorists like Austin (1961) explored how some words, rather than representing or mirroring the world, are used to accomplish things. He introduced the term “performative utterances” to refer to utterances which are neither true nor false but do something. A promise is, for instance, a performative utterance, and so is a compliment or a threat. Applied to the intellectual realm, a performative perspective analyses what intellectual interventions do and achieve rather than what they represent. In some respects, applying this performative perspective to the intellectual realm is counterintuitive: we traditionally think of intellectual interventions as representational, reflecting on the world, rather than acting on it.

This brings us to the key notion of the theory that I am proposing: positioning, referring to the process by which certain characteristics are attributed to an individual or a group or some other entity. Initially used in military settings, the notion of positioning was subsequently used in marketing to refer to how a product or company can be presented to consumers, thereby filling a previously untapped niche in the market. More recently, social psychologists such as Rom Harré have introduced the same notion to describe how, with the help of conversations, individuals continually ascribe features to themselves, whilst also defining other participants in the interaction (e.g., Davies and Harré, 1999; Slocum-Bradley, 2010, pp. 86ff.). Contrary to explanations of social behaviour in terms of rules or roles, positioning theory acknowledges people’s ability to actively engage in and change position within ongoing conversations. Whereas the notions of rules and roles denote stability, the concept of positioning catches the continuous shifts in how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999a).

Positioning theory has traditionally been used for analysing face-to-face interactions, but has recently also been employed for analysing other forms of interaction (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). For instance, some interesting research has been conducted more recently in the area of international relations and politics (e.g. Moghaddam and Rom Harré, 2010). A handful of contributions have explored the usefulness of positioning theory for analysing science, in particular Luc van Langenhove and Rom Harré (1999b) and Osbeck and Nersessian (2010). The former developed a general theoretical perspective whilst the latter studied the problem solving and identity formation of engineering scientists in interdisciplinary research settings. Their approach shows affinities with the “rhetorical turn” in science studies, and it is therefore not surprising that Bruno Latour (1987), whilst not associated with positioning theory as such, actually used the term positioning to denote the set of rhetorical devices by which research results are presented.

These authors focus on the practices and rhetorical devices used by academics, in particular natural scientists. My analysis is different from theirs in two ways.
First, I do not solely analyse academics but intellectuals in general. Second, I shift the discussion by analysing intellectuals in the humanities and the social sciences rather than the natural sciences. My starting point is that intellectual interventions, whether through writing or speaking, involve positioning. By intellectual intervention, I am referring to any intellectual product, whether it is a book, a passage in a text or a speech at a conference. Such an intellectual product locates the author or speaker within the intellectual field or within a broader socio-political or artistic arena whilst also situating other intellectuals, possibly depicting them as allies in a similar venture, predecessors of a similar orientation or alternatively as intellectual opponents. According to this perspective, then, any intellectual move brings about two types of effects. The first type is the positioning itself (which is after all an effect of the intervention), but the latter also brings about a second type of effects: for instance, effective positioning might help to diffuse the ideas or it might help the agent’s career and material prospects. Conversely, positioning might have adverse effects, limiting the further dissemination of the ideas proposed or halting the author’s professional progress.

Positioning may take place subtly. For instance, intellectuals’ publisher, journal outlet, their choice of references might give subtle hints about what type of intellectual they are and where their allegiances lie. Sometimes, however, positioning is achieved overtly, and indeed intellectuals often use the introduction or concluding part of their text or speech to situate their intellectual intervention and themselves, whilst positioning others. Intellectuals may use intellectual manifestos to bring about this effect or they launch a new journal or book series. For instance, the launch of *Les Temps modernes* on 1 October 1945 enabled the editors, especially Sartre, to position themselves as engaged intellectuals, tackling issues of contemporary social and political significance. Sartre’s preface acted as a manifesto for the journal, positioning it and thereby positioning the editors and contributors as politically committed authors. Likewise, Bourdieu’s launch of his book series *Liber/Raisons d’agir* in the mid-1990s was crucial in repositioning himself as a public and politically engaged intellectual and not just a professional sociologist. Besides new journals, intellectuals may use meta-theoretical or methodological works to locate themselves and their other writings: for instance, although purportedly reconstructing Nietzsche’s conception of history, Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, genealogy, history” (*Foucault, 1984 [1971]*) was widely perceived as a methodological statement that acknowledged his indebtedness to the German philosopher and heralded a break with his archaeological period.

Equally explicit is the use of labels, which can act like brands. Intellectuals can use labels to flag their own position (e.g. Marcus and Fischer’s “reflexive turn” in anthropology) but they can also use labels to incriminate others (e.g. Said’s “orientalism”). The introduction of labels can facilitate the dissemination of ideas, but once many others adopt the same label (sometimes expressing different ideas), they may undermine the clarity of its meaning or the distinctiveness of those associated with it. This explains, for instance, why Charles Peirce abandoned the
term “pragmatism” which he had coined previously. Once William James, F.C.S. Schiller and literary figures started to adopt the term “pragmatism”, Peirce opted for “pragmaticism” on the grounds that it is “... ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (Peirce, 1931–35, 5.414). Likewise, Hayek (1978, pp.108–109) adopted the term “catallaxy” to refer to the spontaneous order produced by market interactions, after his earlier terms like “free market” and “liberal economics” had been adopted by the Chicago School, which had very different underlying philosophy and methods.

Positioning, therefore, always involves on the one hand an “agent”, doing the positioning, and on the other hand a “positioned party”, being attributed certain features. The agent can be a sole individual but does not have to be; it might refer to several people or to a group. Likewise, the positioned party can be an individual or a larger social entity, but it can also be something different, like an intellectual school or an academic discipline. As can be inferred from the example earlier, most positioning involves an element of self-positioning whereby the agent and positioned party coincide, and in what follows I will focus on self-positioning. However, self-positioning tends to go hand in hand with the positioning of other intellectuals or other entities. Indeed, it is often in relation to a positioned party other than oneself—for instance, by contrasting one’s own position with those of other individual(s) or a group—that self-positioning is at its most effective. For instance, in his intellectual manifesto for *Les Temps modernes* Sartre (1948 [1945]) denounced several iconic figures in the history of French literature, including Flaubert, for not intervening politically when they could (and should) have done. Positioning these literary authors as morally compromised, politically pernicious and indefensible was a dramatic platform that enabled Sartre to locate the journal, the editors and the contributors. However, self-positioning can also be achieved by the positioning of institutions or concepts rather than individuals, as is exemplified in Carl Schmitt’s attack on liberal democracy for promoting a neutral state that resolves differences, thereby allegedly failing to do justice to what he thought to be the natural enmity between people (Schmitt, 1996 [1927]).

Positioning can take two ideal-typical forms: an intellectual intervention may involve what I call “intellectual positioning” or “politico-ethical positioning”. Firstly, intellectual positioning can again be divided into two types of claims, one about the general intellectual orientation of the agent (for instance, Habermas’ description of his project as “critical hermeneutics” or Ian Hodder’s “postprocessual” archaeology) and the other about the significance of the intervention or of the general outlook. Claims about the significance often come down to claims about the originality or intellectual power of the intervention or general orientation. Alternatively, they may locate the work within a broader tradition, linking it to important figures in the field, including possibly a mentor. Secondly, “politico-ethical positioning” refers to a broader political or ethical stance, whether expressed in more abstract terms as in Bourdieu’s argument about the need for a “collective intellectual” in pursuit of a “scholarship with commitment” (Bourdieu,
2003, pp. 17–25), or articulated more practically as in Emile Zola’s “J’accuse” and the pro-Dreyfus petition in the late 1890s (Ory & Sirinelli, 1992, pp. 13–40) or the Russell-Einstein manifesto and its call for peaceful resolutions to international conflict at the height of the Cold War (Russell, 2003 [1955], pp. 318–321).

Those examples refer to politically tense situations, but politico-ethical positioning can also take place within the safe contours of an academic context, whether in the form of a critique—as in Habermas’ (1987) depiction of French postmodern authors as “crypto-conservative”—or as a more constructive move—as in Michael Burawoy’s (2005) plea for a “public sociology”. In countries with less of a clear separation between the intellectual and political field (for instance, historically in Latin America), politico-ethical and intellectual positioning tend to be explicitly intertwined (e.g., Miller, 1999), and indeed in those countries leading intellectuals tend to advocate and celebrate this link. Even in countries with a clear differentiation between the political and intellectual sphere, a politically charged climate can lead to the blurring of the difference between politico-ethical and intellectual positioning, with the former taking a more central role in the latter. For instance, the political context of the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War led to a hardening of political positions amongst French intellectuals (Ory & Sirinelli, 1992, pp. 155–186) just as the student movement of the 1960s led to a growing scepticism in the American academy towards the political viability of mainstream social science and its attendant assumption of value neutrality. In both cases, political and ethical concerns underscore intellectual positioning and self-positioning. Some areas or topics are more likely to generate a merging of intellectual and politico-ethical positioning; this applies, for instance, to contemporary intellectual interventions in the fields of race and ethnic relations or gender where, due to the nature of the topic and the political sensitivities it raises, intellectual positioning often entails a strong politico-ethical component.

This brings me to the relational features of positioning. An intellectual intervention in itself does not involve a particular positioning; positioning only takes effect because of the agents operating within a particular context. Firstly, the effects of an intervention in terms of positioning depend on the individuals who bring it about, on their already established status and positioning within the intellectual field. A similar intellectual intervention by a different agent might bring about a very different positioning, or not succeed as an act of positioning. The efficacy of an intervention also depends on the length and nature of an agent’s past pattern of interventions, with different trajectories or statuses likely to generate different effects. Take, for instance, Rorty (1999) who at the pinnacle of his fame advocated a humanist and iconoclastic stance; younger, non-established scholars might find it more difficult to take this position without losing credibility. Secondly, the effects of intellectual interventions depend on those of the other individuals at play within the same field. Shifts in the positioning of other individuals affect our positioning and self-positioning. In particular, the previous power of an intellec-
tual intervention might be undermined by an effective countermove or more subtly by the fact that a significant number of intellectuals have now moved onto different topics or issues. For instance, Foucault’s generation found Sartre and Hyppolite increasingly insignificant, drawing their attention to other thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger (Miller, 1993). Thirdly, the actual effects in terms of positioning depend very much on the specific intellectual or socio-political context in which the intellectual intervention takes place, on the historically rooted sensitivities. For instance, by arguing in Elements of Law and Leviathan that the sovereign is the sole judge to assess a threat, Hobbes positioned himself in line with Charles I in the context of the ship-money crisis, defending not only the King’s right to tax people in a military context but also his right (and not the public’s or their representatives’) to judge whether the Dutch were a sufficient threat to the crown to warrant increased military expenses (Tuck, 1989).

Given the significance of context, it follows that, through time, the same types of intellectual interventions might bring about different positioning even when the same people are involved. It also follows, crucially, that the same intellectual intervention might generate different positioning when transposed to different contexts. For instance, authors’ self-presentation within the local field that is familiar to them might acquire different meanings and connotations in a different context. Therefore, even when intellectuals are involved in carefully constructed or calculated positioning and self-positioning, not all effects of their intellectual interventions are within their control. Indeed, intellectual interventions can amount to very different forms of positioning and self-positioning once they reach different audiences.

One extreme scenario is when intellectual interventions (and the intellectuals behind those interventions) are posthumously reassessed by others in pursuit of their own intellectual agenda. As Gary Taylor (1996) pointed out, what appear to us now to be iconic literary figures or key intellectual interventions were not necessarily considered as such at the time; it was sometimes only at a later stage that those intellectuals and interventions were identified as important. Those who have been crucial in this process of “remembering” often had their own agenda, positioning themselves in the competitive intellectual or political arena at the time. In the American academic setting of the mid-twentieth century, for instance, Herbert Blumer (1969) championed G.H. Mead as a key figure in American pragmatism to promote his own school of symbolic interactionism, thereby forging his own position within the sociological field which at the time was dominated by Talcott Parsons’ structural-functionalism. In the process, Mind, Self and Society, a repetitive and flawed text based on student notes, became part of the canon whereas other writings—or indeed lectures—might have been more representative of Mead’s ideas (Carreira da Silva & Brito Viera, 2011). Sometimes this posthumous recognition can take several decades as in the case of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose Cours de linguistique générale, also based on student notes, only received broader attention within the social sciences and humanities from the
1950s onwards when self-proclaimed structuralists searched for and identified their intellectual predecessors, reading Saussure through Jacobson’s lens and focusing on Saussure’s theory of signs and synchronic analysis.

A related scenario—and in some respects a mirror image of the previous one—consists of the case where subsequent intellectuals, again in the pursuit of their own agenda, vilify earlier intellectual products. In the early twentieth century, British analytical philosophers repeatedly positioned their own intellectual agenda in opposition to what they saw as the dangers of foreign strands of thought, thereby coining the term “Continental philosophy” (Akehurst, 2010). Revealing a certain amount of smug patriotism, Russell, Ayer and several others depicted the alleged muddled thinking of Hegel and Heidegger as causally related to the emergence of totalitarian regimes, linking their own preoccupation with precision, logic and science to more responsible and liberal forms of government. Even subsequent British-based philosophers such as Berlin (1969) or Popper (1945; 1957), who did not strictly speaking operate within the framework of analytic philosophy, made their case for piecemeal liberal democracy by depicting several German philosophies as pernicious, either because they allegedly promoted a problematic notion of liberty or because they proposed closed, utopian schemes that were immune from empirical refutation.

A final scenario—not unrelated to the previous one—is where subsequent intellectuals regard earlier intellectual interventions as irrelevant for contemporary purposes. In some cases, the omissions are very selective. For instance, with the transition from communism in the early 1990s, Russian and East European intellectuals were, at least initially, keen to avoid the customary references to Marx and Marxist scholars, in the process implying that Marxist scholarship was no longer relevant to the contemporary societal context. In other cases, any reference to the past is severely restricted altogether. For instance, once analytical philosophy obtained a relatively dominant position in several high profile departments in the US, its proponents no longer expressed the need to distance themselves from Continental philosophy, with the exception, of course, of a few scattered outbursts. Likewise, orthodox economics, in its neoclassical form and with its prevalence of econometrics and rational choice theory, tends to be equally indifferent to the wisdom or otherwise of previous “classical” thinkers. In both analytical philosophy and orthodox economics, the omission implies that, however important “great works” might have been at the time, they are extremely unlikely to add anything significant to contemporary concerns within the field and they are therefore at best of an antiquarian value.

It is rare for a single intellectual intervention to bring about the desired effect. In most cases several interventions—often repeating the same position—are necessary to get a message across. However, even repeated sole interventions would not be sufficient because positioning depends on others. Firstly, positioning depends on broader intellectual networks. The networks of an intellectual comprise a large number of agents, who engage with him or her and confirm his or her
positioning, even if they disagree or are overtly hostile. The status and recognition of intellectuals is dependent partly on where they are acknowledged (in which journals or book series), and who precisely acknowledges them (what is their positioning and status). Secondly, positioning is likely to be more effective when accomplished in teams (e.g., Goffman, 1959). Teams are narrower than networks: teams of intellectuals actively cooperate in positioning themselves, for instance, by centring round a school or research programme, often using a label which makes their work and agenda immediately recognisable (e.g. the Frankfurt School; the Birmingham school of cultural studies; the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge; the strong programme in cultural sociology). Teams are effective but come at a cost: with the exception of the intellectual leaders, members of teams find it more difficult to position themselves as having an independent voice or as innovative. Ultimately the writings of the leaders will be remembered whilst the other works gradually fade away, unless other team-members break away and actively reposition themselves as dissenting from the team-leader.

Team membership is, however, crucial because positioning rarely goes uncontested. An intellectual might be able to position him- or herself for a certain period of time, but eventually rival intellectuals will mount a challenge, portraying him or her as outdated, insignificant, pernicious, erroneous, or as misrepresenting his or her self-proclaimed position. Even individuals who carefully position themselves may end up being pigeonholed differently by others and having to extricate from labels attributed to them. For instance, in spite of Richard Rorty’s attempts to associate his project with John Dewey, others have subsequently dissociated Deweyan pragmatism from Rorty’s and have labelled his work as “postmodernist” or “relativist”. Positioning, therefore, is an ongoing achievement, requiring continuous attention and maintenance, not just from the individual, but from all his or her team members. Sometimes teams are formed to advocate and defend a certain position, in the process ignoring crucial differences. One example of this is the alliance of Hayekians and Friedmanites who united around a neo-liberal political agenda in spite of differences, for instance, about the role of knowledge in the economy.

I am now able to elaborate on one significant difference of this positioning theory from the new sociology of ideas. As intimated earlier, the notion of positioning avoids the stability bias of Gross’ and Bourdieu’s writings on intellectuals: it accounts for a certain element of fluidity in how intellectuals project themselves and how they locate others. There are, of course, limits to this flexibility. It is indeed rare for intellectuals to reinvent themselves on a regular basis, but I wish to explain this relative durability differently from Gross or Bourdieu. Rather than identifying factors that are linked to the individual (for instance, the habitus or self-concept) I explain the relative solidity of positioning more sociologically by pointing out two distinctive features of the intellectual arena that make regular re-positioning less likely. Firstly, as pointed out earlier, positioning is not a one-off event, but an ongoing achievement involving teams and indeed broader
intellectual networks. It takes many years to achieve the work and contacts that bring about effective positioning, not to mention the formal training that often precedes it. In sum, substantial re-positioning takes time and is costly. Secondly, given the focus of intellectuals on the internal coherence of the arguments presented (and indeed the internal coherence of someone’s biography), re-positioning might be noticed by other intellectuals who might demand justification. Not every explanation will be deemed acceptable; if it is not, the credibility of the intellectual involved might be affected. In the absence of a major extraneous event (e.g. a war, a forced exile or a long detour outside the intellectual arena), radical repositioning is rarely attained without loss of credibility. The more the intellectual is known, the more likely he or she will have to account for the repositioning. In sum, re-positioning entails reputational risks. Both factors—the costs and the reputational risks—explain why re-positioning tends to be found amongst either firmly established intellectuals, such as tenured academics, or those who are just starting off and have not yet publicly cemented their position.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

It is worth elaborating on the precise status of the use of the term positioning and what type of explanation can be provided. When initially used in military settings or in marketing, the concept of positioning brought up the image of a rational, calculating agent who is aware of the effects that are being produced. In the military the agent attempts to outmanoeuvre his or her opponent, whereas in marketing he or she carefully fills the untapped niche and projects the right brand. It is certainly possible to think of other social realms where intentional positioning is equally prevalent. Politics is one, and indeed we often assume that politicians skilfully position themselves, and reposition if need be. Interestingly, politicians often criticise each other for doing precisely that (e.g. the infamous accusation of “flip-flopping”) whilst positioning themselves as devoid of any such manoeuvring. However, moving away from marketing and politics, to what extent are intellectuals involved in intentional positioning?

At one level, the answer is straightforward. Given the premeditated nature of intellectual interventions, the amount of work that goes into them and the high levels of education of the authors, it is sensible to assume that the intellectuals are often involved in intentional positioning. That is, they will often be consciously aware of some of the effects produced and we can expect them to craft their interventions with those effects in mind. Almost every formal presentation of new intellectual work begins with a “position statement” identifying the work on which it builds, the work that complements and supports it, and the work by other authors that it contradicts or supersedes. This is, of course, not to say that intellectuals are aware of all the effects produced given their potentially infinite number. Nor is it to say that the interventions of intellectuals necessarily comply
with the various requirements of rational, self-interested action (e.g. clear preference ordering, transitivity, etc). It is, however, to acknowledge that intentional positioning is widespread in the intellectual realm, and increasingly necessary when justifying new work for publication. Indeed, explicit positioning is built into the modern scientific and social-scientific paper, which usually begins with an explanation of how the present article relates to existing published work, and how it differs from and advances beyond past contributions.

The picture becomes more complicated once we are dealing with empirical research on intellectuals that involves specific case-studies. Whilst we may agree that intellectuals are often involved in intentional positioning, it often proves difficult to know in a particular instance whether at the time of the intervention the intellectual was conscious of the effects produced and whether the intended effect caused him or her to intervene in the way in which he or she did. It often proves difficult to identify the possible motives or calculations underlying the intellectual intervention. The solution to this problem, as I see it, is not to search for more circumstantial evidence because it is likely to be equally inconclusive.

The solution lies in abandoning a vocabulary of intentions for a vocabulary of effects. That is, I suggest using positioning differently, denoting certain effects of a particular intellectual move within the intellectual field. So I am proposing that no claims are made about whether the agents involved were necessarily aware of those effects, let alone that this awareness played any role in making that particular intervention in the first place.

Whether or not the intellectuals anticipated those effects and whether this awareness had anything to do with the intervention, it is possible to trace the effects, assessing whether the intervention and the ideas in it were disseminated and whether the agents were rewarded accordingly. Crucially, it is possible to account for the diffusion of the ideas and institutional and symbolic rewards in terms of positioning. Effective positioning is likely to enhance the diffusion of ideas and corresponding institutional and symbolic rewards. This is not to say that the search for effects is immediately transparent to the sociologist of intellectual life or without any methodological difficulties. It can be an arduous task to establish, for instance, how a particular intellectual intervention helps to locate the author within a particular context, and indeed the task is likely to be more daunting if that context is unfamiliar to us. This explains why the focus on positioning needs to be accompanied by an in-depth analysis not only of the socio-political milieu and institutions in which the intellectual interventions are made but also of those in which they “travel”, as in some cases a particular positioning might be effective within a given local context (and indeed lead to considerable rewards), but less likely to lead to the broader dissemination of the content that is being propagated. This is, for instance, the case in Latin-American social science where literary, humanistic approaches have a local appeal but are less likely to generate interest within an international market, whereas in elite research universities in the US, the local system of incentives and rewards is conducive to the type of positioning.
that is likely to lead to broader diffusion within the subject area. This example
gives some indication of the in-depth research that needs to accompany the search
into positioning. Nevertheless, it is feasible. However laborious the task of tracing
the effects in terms of positioning and strategic advantages might be, it remains an
achievable intellectual exercise—imminently more accomplishable than the
elusive search for what went on in people’s minds.

By substituting a vocabulary of effects for a vocabulary of intentions, it is
possible to use positioning theory to make sense of the research findings in the
new sociology of ideas whilst avoiding some of its pitfalls. With the framework
of positioning theory, it becomes possible to reappraise Camic and Gross’
research findings without replicating their errors. From this point of view,
Camic has shown convincingly that Parsons’ writings, by omitting certain allies
and emphasising others, were likely to be well received within the Harvard
context and were instrumental in his professional rise in the local institutional
setting in which he found himself. Harvard, with its prestige and central place
within the American academy, provided an excellent basis for the diffusion of
his ideas across the discipline of sociology. Likewise, Rorty’s flexibility in adapt-
ing to the demands for the “new rigour” of analytical philosophy was crucial in
obtaining first a junior and subsequently a senior position at a high profile
department like Princeton. If it had not been for this repositioning, Rorty might
not have been in the comfortable position from which to launch his attack on
epistemology and his appeal for an edifying, hermeneutically sensitive type of
philosophy.

However, the applicability of the theory of positioning does not remain limited
to the realm of the academy; it holds equally well in the public intellectual arena.
For instance, during World War II (and especially towards the end of it), Jean-
Paul Sartre repositioned himself as a politically engaged writer, distancing himself
from his earlier a-political attitude and from the notion of art for art’s sake that
had been associated with Gide and Drieu la Rochelle (Baert, 2011a). At the end
of the war, many intellectuals saw this depoliticised notion of writing as perni-
cious, associating it with the attitude of collaborationist writers. The trials of
collaborationist intellectuals further fuelled the notion of the writers’ responsibil-
ity, which fed into the frenzy around existentialism (Baert, 2011b). Key intellec-
tual interventions in 1944 and 1945 enabled Sartre to reposition himself as an
intellectuel engagé, allowing him to occupy a central place in the immediate after-
math of the war. There has been a considerable debate as to whether Sartre was
intentionally representing himself in a different light to gain advantage in the
intellectual and political climate at the time. The evidence remains inconclusive
(e.g., Galster, 2001), showing the limitations of a vocabulary of intentions in the
context of the intellectual sphere. There is no need to resort to arguments about
intentional positioning. The effects speak louder than words: regardless of Sartre’s
intentions, his intellectual interventions gave him symbolic recognition and
helped the diffusion of his ideas.
My version of positioning theory, outlined in the above, rectifies some errors of the new sociology of ideas and provides the first theoretical building blocks for a fruitful research programme into the study of intellectual interventions. In contrast with the new sociology of ideas, this research programme presents a coherent theoretical framework, avoids a speculative search for underlying motivations and challenges the notion that intellectuals are pursuing authentic projects. It explores the impact of intellectual interventions rather than its causes, and therefore avoids the sociological fallacy of the new sociology of ideas; that is, its tendency to provide sociological explanations for individual cases.

A research programme, centred round my version of positioning theory, is well placed to investigate a range of questions, including, for instance, why certain intellectuals receive symbolic and institutional recognition and others do not. It also helps to establish why some intellectual interventions and related ideas disseminate and become influential within a specialised circle whilst others have little impact, and crucially why some texts achieve canonical status and others fade. Finally, it proves useful in establishing why some intellectuals and their ideas manage to reach and inspire broader audiences whilst others remain confined to a limited circle of specialists.

This is not to deny that the intrinsic quality of intellectual interventions play a significant role in the issues involved in these questions. However, my position is that intrinsic quality is not the full story. For instance, the fact that various significant authors and authoritative texts only achieved recognition at a much later stage gives some indication of the extent to which other factors come into play. The version of positioning theory, as developed here, draws attention to the significance of the performative dimension of texts and speeches for explaining the subtle mechanisms of symbolic and institutional recognition, as well as selection and diffusion within the intellectual sphere. It should be noted that, within the academy, these performative aspects gain in importance as universities and their social-science faculties cease to expand, and competition for recognition (and for the posts and promotion that go with it) increases.

My focus on the effects of intellectual interventions should not be mistaken for a functionalist argument. The latter purports to explain the recurrence of social practices by showing how they are beneficial to the social system in which they are embedded, even if, as the case may be, the individuals involved are unaware of those societal benefits or do not intentionally bring about those effects. In contrast, a research programme, centred round positioning theory, explores the selective advantages or disadvantages for the agents and for the intellectual interventions that different types of positioning might provide within a given intellectual and political context. As such, it is compatible, not with functionalist reasoning, but with an evolutionary logic, such as Harre’s, that accounts for why some intellectual interventions are rewarded and diffused and others are not. As explained
before, the individuals involved might be aware of the competitive advantages and disadvantages of various forms of positioning and strategize accordingly. Meanwhile, the interventions themselves always have the potential to affect and alter the intellectual and political fields in which they have emerged and which ultimately affect their dissemination. All this makes the transmission of intellectual products (as indeed the evolution of cultural artefacts in general) as somehow operating in between the contours of Darwinian and Lamarckian evolution (see also Harré, 1993; Ingold 1986, pp. 368ff.).

So far I have compared positioning theory with dominant contributions to the sociology of intellectual life. The question remains, however, how this theory compares to influential approaches in neighbouring disciplines such as intellectual history. Exploring the “linguistic” or “ideological context” in which intellectual interventions take place, the Cambridge school of intellectual history has been particularly useful as a corrective to the type of intellectual exercise that postulates perennial questions or conceives of a past text in terms of concerns that were alien to the cultural landscape at the time when it was conceived (Skinner 1966; 1969). The theory proposed here is in line with Pocock and Skinner’s view that it is vital to study the “intellectual milieu” (Skinner, 1966, p. 317) of the authors concerned and to conceive of writing in performative terms. It does not share, however, their attempt at “… decoding the complex intention on the part of the author” (Skinner, 1969, p. 49) because, as explained earlier, the reconstruction of the intent or purpose underlying intellectual interventions can lack the necessary empirical basis, ending up as a more speculative endeavour than Skinner dares to admit (see also Pocock 1985, pp. 4–7). Whereas in practice members of this school (in its original, Skinnerian mode) tend to take the meaning of an intellectual intervention within a given context to be synonymous with the intent behind it, I prefer to hold onto the distinction between the purpose behind an intellectual intervention and its illocutionary effect. So rather than speculating on what certain intellectuals through their interventions intend to achieve, positioning theory provides the conceptual tools to investigate how they and their products might acquire strategic (dis)advantages within the cultural and political arenas in which they find themselves or in which those texts or ideas are appropriated. Further, like their predecessors in the intellectual history which they rightly criticise for a lack of historical sensitivity, the Cambridge school too takes for granted the canon in political philosophy, ignoring its historical formation. In contrast, the theory suggested here opens up conceptual space for the exploration of the social mechanisms through which some intellectuals come to prominence and others do not and, related, certain texts acquire classical status and others do not.

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