

So, What Should I Read?

It's impossible to read everything, and there's plenty that's not worth the effort. Here is an attempt to prioritize (not canonize) things to read if you want to work in a sophisticated way with theory in the social and human sciences.

Philosophers

The basic assumptions behind most contemporary theories trace their intellectual origins back to philosophical writings. European-trained researchers are well aware of these connections, but they are often neglected in U.S. higher education. Without this critical background, you will often miss significant aspects of the meaning of major writers in other fields, and fail to perceive serious misunderstandings and identify plausible alternative viewpoints. Read the philosophers, however boring some of them seem at times. For the older ones especially, remember that translations are very imperfect and basic assumptions have changed a lot even in 200 (much less 2000) years.

The Classics

- Pre-Socratics: Herakleitos, Parmenides; defined issues of dynamism vs. static universalism (Greek)
- Plato: defined Idealism, useful on dialectic and dialogue; read *The Republic* (Greek)
- Aristotle: defined formalism and empiricism; *Poetics*, *Rhetoric* are still relevant (Greek)
- Rene Descartes: defined mentalism, skepticism; read *The Meditations* (French)
- Gottfried Leibniz: the anti-Descartes, newly fashionable again; read *The Monadology* (German)
- Immanuel Kant: defined modernism; try a few times to get through *The Critique of Pure Reason* (German)

The Precursors

- Gian Battista Vico: origins of constructivism, alternatives to Descartes and Kant (Italian)
- Friedrich Nietzsche: serious critical theory; *Genealogy of Morals*; *Birth of Tragedy* (German)
- Georg Hegel: defined dialectic; *The Phenomenology of Mind* (German)
- Karl Marx: still fundamental; *Capital*; *Grundrisse*; *The German Ideology* (German)
- S. Freud: as a semiotician; *The Interpretation of Dreams* (German)

The New Classics

- Edmund Husserl: founder of phenomenology, very influential today; the *Phenomenology* (Czech-German)
- Martin Heidegger: most important modern philosopher; *Being and Time* (German)
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty: French phenomenologist, influential; *Phenomenology of Perception* (French)
- Henri Bergson: on *durée*, an alternative model of temporality

The Major Theorists

Other than Marx and Freud, above, we include theorists relevant to social semiotics and dynamics primarily.

C.S. Peirce: the best formal semiotician; his *Collected Works* are mammoth, you need to read a guide to what to read first; key terms: Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness; Icon, Index, Symbol; Interpretant; Habit-taking (U.S.)

F. de Saussure: linguist-semiologist; *A Course in General Linguistics* (Swiss-French) [see also P. Thibault's Re-Reading Saussure]

M. Bakhtin: unsurpassed insights; *Discourse in the Novel; Speech Genres; Dostoevsky's Poetics*. (Russian) [See also V.N. Voloshinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language]

L. Hjelmslev: semiotics of language; *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Danish)

L. Vygotsky: social theory of mind; *Thought and Language* (Russian)

B.L. Whorf: language and culture; *Language, Thought, and Reality* (U.S.)

G. Bateson: communication theory and much more; *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (U.S.)

M. Foucault: discourse, history and culture; *Archeology of Knowledge; Order of Things* (French)

M.A.K. Halliday: grammar and meaning; *Language as Social Semiotic; Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2nd edition) (English)

I. Prigogine: self-organization and dynamical systems; *Order out of Chaos* (Belgian-French)

P. Bourdieu: the best sociologist; *Logic of Practice; Distinction; Language and Symbolic Power* (French)

C. Geertz: the best modern anthropologist; *Interpretation of Cultures; Local Knowledge* (U.S.)

B. Latour: the newest social theory; *Science in Action; We Have Never Been Modern* (French)

N. Luhmann: social systems theory; *Social Systems; Social Structure and Semantics* (German)

B. Bernstein: unifying macro- and micro-social theory; "Codes, modalities, and the process of cultural reproduction" is a brilliant synthesis, read it twice. Also several volumes under title *Class, Codes, and Control* (English)

Other Useful Starting Points

J.L. Lemke: *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics* (1995), with Bibliography

S. Salthe: *Development and Evolution, Evolving Hierarchical Systems*

S. Kauffman: *The Origins of Order;* evolution and development, self-organizing systems

A. Wilden: *System and Structure,* semiotics ala Bateson and Lacanian psychoanalysis

R. Hasan: *Ways of Saying, Ways of Meaning;* one collection of many brilliant essays

J.R. Martin: *English Text*, neo-Hallidayan discourse linguistics
P. Thibault: *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body*; sophisticated insights
J. Butler: *Bodies that Matter*, radical feminist theory
D. Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*; feminist perspectives
G. Deleuze, F. Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, radical postmodern philosophy

A Note on non-European Intellectual Traditions

My own work, and most of the work I cite, is based almost entirely in the European intellectual tradition and its colonial extensions. In a few places one can trace explicit influences from other cultural traditions, particularly Asian. Much of the achievement of European culture is historically based on borrowings from other cultures, particularly Egyptian, Persian, and Mesopotamian for the ancient sources, and Byzantine and Islamic thereafter. From the 18th century on there is also a considerable flow of ideas from China and India, and later from Japan. African influences are harder to trace until the peak of the slave trade era, and then mainly in music and visual arts. It is something of a scandal that scholarly traditions today, which claim to speak to a global audience, almost never cite classic works from non-European cultural traditions, and rarely cite scholarship done and/or published outside Europe and euroculture-dominated countries. There is, at least, a much greater voice today for these traditions through immigrants from these countries who have become respected scholars elsewhere.

So, I wish to add to my list of useful readings a few non-European classics that have strongly influenced my own views, and a few contemporary authors who bring such viewpoints:

Classics

- *Bhagavad-Gita, Upanishads* (Hindu)
- *Tao Te Ching, Analects, Chuang-tse* (Chinese)
- *Genji no monogatari* (Japanese)

Contemporary

- **H. Bhabha:** *Location of Culture*
- **A. Appadurai:** *Modernity at Large*
- **Trin, T. Minh-ha:** *Woman, Native, Other*