**The intellectual’s reading list**

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Libraries, diaries and letters are some of the basic tools that can help us understand the ideas and perceptions of philosophers, literary writers and artists. The books that they read are a suitable means to gauge their interests and determine the list of authors that they regularly referred to.

In the case of Karl Marx, we can examine the biographies written on his life to understand how the work of other writers contributed to his own philosophy. Marx was a voracious reader. If he wanted to understand the work of any philosopher and writer, Marx would read all his books and then formed a judgment about his intellectual status. When he wanted to learn about Hegel’s philosophy, he confined himself to a room and immersed himself in his books. After reading Hegel’s work, he came out of his room and announced to his friends that he was now a Hegelian.

He also visited various libraries in Paris and read books on history and politics — especially those on the French Revolution. Soon after this, he expressed his opinion on the failure of the revolution. When he was in London, he spent most of his time in the British Museum collecting material for ‘Das Kapital’. The book not only contains details on economics, but also includes references to literary writers like Shakespeare and Balzac, alludes to reports published by the British government, and offers insights from sociologists and anthropologists. This entire process of learning shows his erudition as well as the originality of his thoughts.

A Canadian scholar has recently conducted research on the personal library of Karl Marx. After completing his exhaustive research, the scholar pointed out that whenever Marx would read any book, he underlined passages that he thought were important and wrote critical remarks in the margins. Once he completed reading a book, it couldn’t be used by anyone else because there were countless notes on every page of the book.

The other example is that of Nietzsche, a German philosopher whose library contained nearly 2,000 books. From his letters, we can determine which philosophers helped him cultivate his philosophy. He refers to Plato, Emerson and Schopenhauer in his letter. Nietzsche once told his friends that he had accidentally come across Schopenhauer’s book ‘The World as Will and Idea’ and purchased it. After reading the book, he was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

When he was teaching philology at Basel University, Switzerland, Nietzsche developed a close friendship with Jacob Burckhardt, who taught history at the varsity. He regularly attended his lectures and was heavily influenced by him. After resigning from the university, Nietzsche continued to send his books to the professor to obtain feedback. However, Burckhardt became somewhat disillusioned with Nietzsche’s work and stopped responding to his letters. Nietzsche was disappointed by his cold attitude as he had great respect for Burckhardt and valued his insights and suggestions. This anecdote offers a lens through which we can assess the evolutionary process of Nietzsche’s ideas and philosophical leanings. Nietzsche disliked going to libraries. According to the German philosopher, too much reading spoils the originality of thoughts. There is perhaps some truth in his perception because Sigmund Freud stopped reading Nietzsche as he feared that the originality of his own thoughts would be damaged by the former’s philosophy.

In the final years of his life, when Nietzsche was mentally ill and spent his time in the boarding houses of Italy, he would tells listeners that very few people were reading his books in his lifetime and his philosophy wasn’t noticed as much. However, he predicted that his books would be widely read in all colleges and universities of Europe in the next century. With time, his prediction came true and he was recognised as the greatest philosopher of the West. This compels us to ask whether reading too much can become a hindrance to producing original ideas. It is widely believed that nobody can produce any idea or thought without borrowing insights from other scholars, observing his/her own environment, and experiencing worldly affairs.

An empty mind isn’t in a position to create or innovate something new. The only difference is that an original thinker interprets borrowed ideas in a fresh manner and makes them relevant to his/her time. There is also a pressing need to conduct research on the libraries of our intellectuals in order to determine what books they read and find out more about the authors who inspired them to develop their ideas. This will also help us analyse the extent to which these great minds borrowed ideas and allow us to assess how much of their work is original.

Libraries are the best means of understanding an intellectual and the motivations that go into his/her work. In some cases, writers borrow the ideas from other scholars without providing any due acknowledgements or credits. This research will serve to discourage those who have plagiarised the ideas of others.

The writer is a veteran historian and scholar.