

# Intellectual, moi?

Memorise Thomas W Hodgkinson's guide to five key French thinkers and you'll hold your own at any soirée

*Thomas W Hodgkinson* Published: 17 January 2016

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Camus at home (Getty)

## **Albert Camus (1913-60)**

The James Dean of philosophy, Camus remains a hero among students worldwide because he looked cool while smoking and died tragically young in a car crash. He was an existentialist, meaning he pondered the big ones, such as: “What is the point of existence?” His answer? There isn't one, but don't worry about it. Just get on with things and you might find you're happy after all.

## **Paul Eluard (1895-1952)**

After the Second World War, practically everyone in France claimed to have been secretly working for the Resistance. The poet Paul Eluard actually did. His ode *Liberté* was so inspiring that the allies dropped it into occupied France with the aim of boosting morale. Google it, learn it and have Eluard's masterpiece ready to recite over the *crème brûlée*.

## **Thomas Piketty (b1971)**

The French tend to be suspicious of the Anglo-Saxon free market — none more so than the enfant terrible of economics, Thomas Piketty. His hefty

tome *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (a surprise bestseller if ever there was one) argues that the gulf between rich and poor will inevitably continue to widen unless there's heavy state intervention.

**Simone Weil (1909-43)**

Another terrific example of someone who did her bit for the French Resistance. She wasn't terribly good at it, though, once dropping a case containing secret documents, which spilled out into the street. Weil is now revered for her brilliant theological essays on subjects such as the problem of evil — if God is all good, why does he allow pain?

**Roland Barthes (1915-80)**

Amid the celebrations last year to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Roland Barthes, the fashion house Hermès designed a scarf in his honour. Hard to imagine that being done for an intellectual in the UK. It was the anti-commercialism of this cultural commentator that endeared him to the intellectual left, specifically his belief that the advertising industry had infiltrated the fabric of our lives.

*How to Sound Cultured: Master the 250 Names That Intellectuals Love to Drop into Conversation* by Thomas W Hodgkinson and Hubert van den Bergh is published by Icon at £12.99. To buy it for £11.69, inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop)