GOVERNMENT COLLEGE FOR WOMEN (AUTONOMOUS), KUMBAKONAM
I M.A HISTORY

UNIT – I

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Introduction

Intellectual history (also the **history of ideas**) is the study of the history of human thought and of intellectuals, people who conceptualize, discuss, write about, and concern themselves with ideas. The investigative premise of intellectual history is that ideas do not develop in isolation from the thinkers who conceptualize and apply those ideas; thus the historian of intellect studies ideas in two contexts: (i) as abstract propositions for critical application; and (ii) in concrete terms of culture, life, and history.

Intellectual history is the study of ***intellectuals, ideas, and intellectual patterns over time***. Of course, that is a terrifically large definition and it admits of a bewildering variety of approaches. One thing to note right off is the distinction between "intellectual history" and "the history of ideas." This can be somewhat confusing, since the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably: "history of ideas" is a rather old-fashioned phrase, and not currently in vogue (though there is an excellent

journal for intellectual historians published under the title, The Journal of the History of Ideas.) But if we are worried about precise definitions rather than popular usage, there is arguably a difference: The “history of ideas” is a discipline which looks at large-scale concepts as they appear and transform over the course of history.

An historian of ideas will tend to organize the historical narrative around one major idea and will then follow the development or metamorphosis of that idea as it manifests itself in different contexts and times, rather as a musicologist might trace a theme and all of its variations throughout the length of a symphony. Perhaps the most classic example is the book by Arthur Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (originally given as the William James Lectures at Harvard University in the mid 1930s). This kind of exercise has many merits—for example, it permits us to recognize commonalities in thought despite vast dissimilarities in context, thereby calling attention to the way that humanity seems always preoccupied with certain seemingly “eternal” thoughts. But this advantage can also be a disadvantage. By insisting that the idea is recognizably the same thing despite all of its contextual variations, the history of ideas approach tends to encourage a kind of Platonist attitude about thoughts, as if they

somehow preexisted their contexts and merely manifested themselves in various landscapes. Lovejoy was in fact rather more nuanced than this suggests, however: his study of the "great chain of being" (as one example of what he called "unit ideas") demonstrated that there was an internal contradiction in this concept, a tension which eventually transformed the original idea and led ultimately to its self-destruction. As Lovejoy practiced it, the history of ideas was much like a history of large-scale concepts, in which the historical narrative showed how intrinsic tendencies in those concepts "worked themselves out" as if of their own internal logic.

Intellectual history is often considered to be different from the history of ideas. Intellectual history resists the Platonist expectation that an idea can be defined in the absence of the world, and it tends instead to regard ideas as historically conditioned features of the world which are best understood within some larger context, whether it be the context of social struggle and institutional change, intellectual biography (individual or collective), or some larger context of cultural or linguistic dispositions (now often called "discourses"). To be sure, sometimes the requisite context is simply the context of other, historically conditioned ideas—intellectual history does not necessarily require that concepts be studied within a larger,

non-conceptual frame. Admittedly, this last point can be controversial: some intellectual historians do adopt a purely “internalist” approach, i.e., they set thoughts in relation to other thoughts, without reference to some setting outside them. This method is usually most revealing when the relations between ideas helps us to see a previously unacknowledged connection between different realms of intellectual inquiry, e.g., the relation between theological and scientific modes of explanation, or between metaphysical and political concepts of causality. But this method tends to reproduce the Platonism which beset the older-style history of ideas approach. Even today, many intellectual historians remain—stubbornly or covertly— internalist in their method. They may pay lip-service to contextualism, but they are chiefly interested in conceptual contexts only. But because internalist styles of argumentation have in recent decades fallen out of favor amongst historians and humanists more generally, those who write intellectual history in the internalist manner often look rather tweedy and traditionalist to their more “worldly” colleagues both within and beyond of the historical discipline. Indeed, intellectual historians who practice this sort of concept-contextualism will not infrequently meet with accusations of quietism, elitism, or political naiveté. Internalism is nonetheless defensible on

methodological grounds, though it is important to acknowledge its risks and its limitations.

As this discussion makes plain, there are many types of intellectual history, and each of them has its own methodological peculiarities. Perhaps the most helpful way to think about the various tendencies in intellectual history today is to compare them with those disciplines—within and beyond the discipline of history itself—which they most closely resemble. These are: philosophy, political theory, cultural history, and sociology.

Intellectual History and Philosophy

Intellectual history can frequently involve a close reconstruction of philosophical arguments as they have been recorded in formal philosophical texts. In this respect intellectual history may bear a noteworthy resemblance to philosophy, and most especially, the history of philosophy. But intellectual history remains importantly distinct from philosophy for a number of reasons. Most importantly, philosophy tends to disregard differences of history or cultural context so as to concentrate almost exclusively upon the internal coherence of philosophical arguments in themselves. One often says that the task for intellectual historians is that

of “understanding” rather than philosophical evaluation. That is, intellectual historians want chiefly to “understand”—rather than, say, to “defend” or “refute”—a given intellectual problem or perspective, and they therefore tend to be skeptics about the philosophers’ belief in decontextualized evaluation.

Intellectual History and Political Thought

As it has been customarily practiced, intellectual history has more often than not devoted itself to understanding the history of political thought. Why this should be so is an interesting question and merits some comment. The traditional emphasis on politics surely has something to do the origins of modern historical scholarship in nineteenthcentury Germany. The earliest practitioners of historical Wissenschaft (“science,” or “knowledge”) were heirs to the Greek ideal of political-historical narration, an ideal traceable to Thucydides. Modeling themselves consciously after the Greeks, German nationalist historians of the nineteenth century tended to believe that history is first and foremost a study of political narrative. This idea gained reinforcement from philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel, who saw world history as the unfolding idea of freedom. And, for historians such as Leopold von Ranke, “history” and “political history” were taken to

be nearly synonymous. The German conception of history as a political narrative proved especially attractive in the nineteenth century, when, following Napoleon's defeat, a great number of German intellectuals (many of them liberal if not quite democratic in their political commitments) were preoccupied by the question of what distinguished the German states from the rest of continental Europe. Yet the idea had earlier precedents. A similar tendency can be detected in the work of the 18_{th}-century philosopher of history, J.G. Herder, who believed that history is the expression of national differences. All of these tendencies conspired to reinforce the view that history should be chiefly about political change, and this is the view that still implicitly governs the practice of history throughout most of Europe and North America.

Intellectual history, too, continues to reflect the broader historical emphasis on politics. Even today, most intellectual historians continue to believe that their primary task is to understand not just ideas in general, but rather political ideas in particular. If one looks at the publications and syllabi of intellectual historians, this assumption is immediately evident.

Intellectual History and Cultural History

Over the past three decades, the historical profession has seen a dramatic shift—away from social and political history and toward the study of a greater variety of themes and topics in a field broadly termed “cultural history.” The line between intellectual history and cultural history is not always easily discerned. To understand the distinction, it is worth pausing first to consider in greater depth what cultural history means.

Cultural history is a blanket term for a wide variety of topics and methods addressing everything that has to do with “culture,” from the fine arts to popular crafts, from religious rituals to folk magic, from the public symbolism of commemoration and national identity to the most intimate matters of sexuality and the body. Cultural history arose partly thanks to the early-twentieth century practitioners of the “Annales School” in France, who investigated long-duration patterns of European life as experienced by the broader populace as against the conventional historiographical concern for statecraft and the maneuvers of political elites. But in the 1970s and 80s, cultural history made a second appearance—in North America and also in Europe—as a reaction against the more economic or statistical-structural methods of “social history”. This new wave of cultural history

was spearheaded by scholars such as Carl Schorske, who examined the many facets of fin-de-siècle Viennese culture, Natalie Zemon Davis, who opened the way for a culturally attentive study of early modern popular life (especially in France), Lynn Hunt, who helped to inaugurate study concerning the "political culture" of the French Revolution, and Robert Darnton, who investigated the history of the book and is especially interested in habits of popular reading in eighteenth century France. Cultural history today also reflects the impact of new French theoretical models in structuralist anthropology and literary theory; it has especially adopted many of the broader insights and methods developed by the French social theorist, Michel Foucault.

Conclusion :

It should be obvious that intellectual history continues to mean many things. I believe this is very much for the good. Indeed, one of the great benefits of intellectual history today, in my view, is that it functions as a kind of preserve for interdisciplinary within an increasingly streamlined and regimented university system, where most disciplines are quick to police their boundaries against methodological transgressors, and where departmental administrators cast anxious glances at the numbers

that indicate funding and enrollment rates in rival departments. Intellectual history sustains its intellectual

character in part because it recognizes the protean nature of thought itself: its boundlessness, and its refusal to confine itself to any one discipline. It is of course helpful to erect canons of legitimacy, to insist that certain topics or methods are proper to a given discipline whereas others are excluded. But such canons often function as barriers against creativity. Intellectual history at its best traces out the paths of thinking, without excessive regard for the rules of the disciplines, wherever those paths may lead.