Introduction to Intellectual History

This reading seminar will introduce undergraduates to the study of intellectual history. By reading, discussing, and writing about works that examine and exemplify different approaches to the historical study of ideas, students will become acquainted with the range of practices characteristic of the field. Students will also be guided through the stages of writing a critical essay on a topic of their choice. The course is designed primarily for current and future history concentrators, but it will be open for credit, with the consent of the instructor, to those with similar interests. In the past, students concentrating in History and Literature, Social Studies, Government, English and American Literature, Government, and Philosophy have also enrolled in versions of this course.

All titles preceded by a number sign (#) are available for purchase at the Coop and are on reserve in Lamont. All titles preceded by an asterisk (*) are available on the course i-site.

All students will be required to attend class each week and participate actively in discussion (30% of your grade) and write three papers during the semester (10%, 20%, and 40% of your grade, respectively). Unless you are ill and provide a signed explanation from the University Health Service, the grades of late papers will be lowered for each day they are late (e.g., a grade of B+ becomes a B if the paper is one day late, a B- if two days late, etc.). The first paper (2-4 pages), on methods of analysis in intellectual history, is due Monday, Feb. 15, by noon. The second paper (3-5 pages), on competing interpretations of the role of Enlightenment ideas in democratic revolutions, is due Monday, Feb. 28, by noon. The third paper (8-10 pages), a critical analysis focused on a topic of your choice concerning intellectual historians’ interpretations of an issue, event, or individual, will be due Friday, May 6, at noon. Among the many possibilities, you might consider topics such as an aspect of the American or French Revolutions or issues relating to the thought of individuals such as Jefferson, Madison, Sieyes, Robespierre, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Abraham Lincoln, or John Stuart Mill.

My office hours, in Robinson 201, will be Thursdays from 3:30 to 5:00. To make an appointment, please contact Elena Palladino (epalladino@fas.harvard.edu).

1. Jan. 27: Introduction: An overview of the history of intellectual history

2. Feb. 3: Varieties of intellectual history

3. Feb. 10: What do Intellectual Historians Study?


4. Feb. 17: The Place of Ideas in the Professionalization of History


5. Feb. 24: Explaining Change: Can Books Cause Revolutions?


#Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life, 1845.
*John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle on slavery, 1850.

7. March 10: Antislavery, Self-Mastery, and Union


8. March 24: Liberty and the Subjection of Women

Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859; *On the Subjection of Women*, 1869

9. March 31: Self-Understanding and Self-Deception


10. April 7: Reports on interpretations of Douglass, Stowe, and/or Lincoln

11. April 14: Reports on interpretations of Tocqueville and/or Mill

12. April 21: Intellectual History and Contemporary Politics