
UNIT4 INTELLECTUAL TRENDS

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit introduces you to new ideas that emerged between mid 18th and mid 19th centuries in Europe. After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- explain the meaning and ideas associated with the Enlightenment,
- learn about Liberalism, the ideas of Utilitarians and the doctrine of Laissez-Faire, and
- describe the development of early Socialist ideas.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries many thinkers and writers through their ideas and writings influenced significantly socio-political and economic developments in Europe. Developments in philosophy, literature, art and science marked a new shift into European consciousness and reflected the beginning of modern world view. It is considered a new epoch not only because of the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) but primarily because it inaugurated a new intellectual culture, which transformed the world-view of Europe. Political revolutions which took place in Europe during this period to a large extent were influenced by a new intellectual spirit. Industrial Revolution which began first in England in the second half of the eighteenth century had a far reaching impact on existing social and economic structures and there was a strong reaction by a section of intellectuals to the distress of the poor people. In this Unit we are going to introduce you to the developments of new ideologies, some major thinkers and how their ideas challenged the prevailing institutions of power and marked the beginning of revolutionary thinking.

4.2 ENLIGHTENMENT

The beginning of Enlightenment thinking was 17th century when Hobbes in his book '*Leviathan*' outlined a new political system based on scientific enquiry and rationalism. Eighteenth century witnessed new awakening among the middle and upper classes that emerged as a social force. Economic prosperity,

technological progress and the new printing technique had influenced and promoted fresh ideas. In an age when questioning either government or Church was unthinkable and punishable under the law; Enlightenment thinkers criticized both. They proposed a broad range of reforms to eliminate abuses and to promote individual freedom. They were critics of absolute monarchy and developed new ideas about government, economy and religion. Christian myths were replaced by scientific, rational arguments. Religion was challenged and they believed that reason and science would improve lives. Human progress through logic, reason and criticism was their goal. The notion of Divine Right monarchy came under attack. In place of the existing systems of ethics based on religion and custom, enlightenment thinking granted importance to a rational system of ethics. In an essay *What is Enlightenment*, written in 1784, **Immanuel Kant** defined Enlightenment as a revolt against ignorance and declared ‘Dare to know’/Have the courage to use your own understanding as the guiding spirit of society. Kant wrote, “This enlightenment requires nothing but *freedom* –and the most innocent of all that may be called “freedom”: freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters.” The most popular belief among philosophers and intellectuals of eighteenth century was their faith that the world worked without a word from God. They advocated the idea that proper education and application of reason could free the human mind, which till date was dominated by Christian theology. This thinking questioned all received ideas and values. Charles de Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau were exponents of Enlightenment ideas and their works had a profound influence in shaping the intellectual milieu of Europe. A new world view emerged. However, it should be noted that though broadly speaking most of the thinkers shared the belief in reason yet there was a great deal of divergence in their views and they differed from each other in many respects. Let us introduce you to ideas of some of the Enlightenment thinkers.

Montesquieu (1689-1755) was born into the family of provincial legal nobility of Guyenne near Bordeaux. Although he began his career as a lawyer, he took keen interest in learning various subjects and studying different civilizations. His work, *The Spirit of Laws*, published in 1748, had more than two thousand references on enormous variety of subjects. This reflected his interest in learning and range of knowledge. He was a jurist, political philosopher and a social critic. Montesquieu grew up during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), one of the most powerful absolutist rulers in Europe. He was able to understand the relations between politics, economics and religion. He rejected the theory of ‘Divine Right’ advocated by autocratic monarchs. His major concern was to avoid despotism and to ensure liberty. He wrote, ‘...most people are governed by despotism, because any other form of government, any moderate government, necessitates exceedingly careful management and planning, with the most thorough balancing and regulating of political power. Despotism on the other hand, is uniform and simple. Passions alone are required to establish it.’

In *The Spirit of Laws* Montesquieu made an analysis of governmental institutions; his opinion was that governments varied depending on circumstance. He advocated political freedom and suggested the separation of different branches of government-executive, legislative and judiciary. This separation of powers he envisaged would check concentration of powers in one absolute tyrant. He wrote, ‘In a true state of nature, indeed, all men are born equal, but they can not continue in this equality. Society makes them lose it, and they recover it only by the

protection of laws.’ *The Spirit of Laws* played significant role in shaping political thought of that time. By his ideas and support for liberty Montesquieu inspired two greatest revolutions of late eighteenth century, the American and French revolutions. It is argued that Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and the Rights of Man was inspired by his ideas.

Voltaire (1694-1778) was born in Paris and was an ardent advocate of religious freedom, tolerance and civil liberties. He was influenced by ideas of philosopher John Locke and scientist Sir Isaac Newton. He raised his voice against religious dogma and intolerant governmental practices. In his *Essay Upon the Civil Wars in France* he attacked the intolerance of religious institutions and proposed the separation of Church and State. He rejected theological framework and the importance given to political and military history and emphasized cultural history, history of arts, customs, etc. His writings, *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751) and *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations* (1756) marked a shift from existing tradition of history writings which was full of wars and deeds of great men. In *A Treatise on Toleration* (1763) he did not deny the existence of a Supreme Being, but in place of faith he emphasized on reason in understanding God. He was against institutionalized religion and advocated that, regardless of religion, all are brothers. He wrote, ‘So long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men.’ Writing on freedom of expression he said that ‘It would be the height of madness to pretend to bring all mankind to think exactly in the same manner about metaphysics. We might, with much greater ease, conquer the whole universe by force of arms than subject the minds of all the inhabitants of one single village.’ His fight for freedom of thought and religious tolerance annoyed the Catholic Church authorities.

Rousseau (1712-1778) was born in Geneva but later moved to Paris. His most influential writings are *The Social Contract* (1762) and *Emile* (1762). In Rousseau’s opinion human beings are born good but are later corrupted by the evils of society. Writing on political theory he began by saying, ‘Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains’. He talked about a collective ‘general will’ which represented the common good and said that all citizens should be committed to this common good. Individual will or interest should be sacrificed for the general will or collective interest. He wrote, ‘Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole’. He believed that this will help in promoting liberty, equality and fraternity. In *A Discourse on Inequality* he showed how with the growth of civilization wealth, power and social privilege created inequalities in modern society. He believed that good government must have the freedom of all its citizens as its most fundamental objective. Laws should be universally applicable to all members of the state and they should ensure that individual freedom is upheld. It is said that the main inspiration of the French Revolution came from Rousseau’s ideas.

Diderot (1713-1784) was a French philosopher and one of the major thinkers of the Enlightenment period. He is known for editing and publishing for the first time a 28 volume Encyclopedia. Encyclopedia was not just a collection of articles but was a compendium that was designed to change people’s way of thinking. It is said that ‘The Encyclopedia’ encapsulates the spirit of the French

Enlightenment’. Criticism of despotism and emphasis on democracy contributed greatly to the causes of the French Revolution. Encyclopedia covered issues concerning social, political, art, religious and science. Through writings in Encyclopedia he wanted to build public opinion against abuses by government and religious establishments. He did not hesitate to disagree with the Church. Although he did not question God’s existence but he wrote, ‘The manner of adoring the true God ought never to deviate from reason...He has desired it to be used even in the judgment of what is suitable to do or not to do in respect to Him.’

We get an idea from the above how thinkers waged war against tradition, despotism and abuses in the name of religion. Through their writings they tried to make people aware of new scientific ideas and values of reasoning, toleration, equality and liberty. The French Revolution of 1789 is considered the product of the Enlightenment vision of making a new political order based on rationalism and egalitarianism.

Check Your Progress-I

- 1) Make a list of books written by the above mentioned thinkers.

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- 2) Write in brief about major contributions of the enlightenment thinkers.

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4.3 LIBERALISM

Compared to liberalism of twentieth century, the liberalism of the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries is described as ‘classical liberalism’. The movement for liberalism grew in a particular historical context and ideas of John Locke contributed greatly to development of classical liberalism. In Locke’s view individuals have certain fundamental rights i.e. right to life, liberty and property which are also described as natural rights. Classical liberalism gave primary emphasis on securing individual freedom by curbing power of the state and considered property rights an essential component of individual liberty. It would be pertinent here to refer to Lord Acton’s definition on individual liberty. ‘By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes is his duty against the influence of authority and custom and opinion’.

Acton believed that securing liberty 'is the highest political end'. Classical liberals advocated for a social order in which individual liberty can be maximized. The Marxist historian E. J. Hobsbawm wrote, 'for classical liberalism the human world consisted of self-contained individual atoms with certain built-in passions and drives, each seeking above all to maximize his satisfactions and minimize his dissatisfactions, equal in this to all others, and "naturally" recognizing no limits or rights of interference with his urges'. Therefore there is the need for rational conduct which ensures individual's duty and obligation to others. It is said that liberals were suspicious of the state and governmental interference. It is important to remember that all liberals believe in private property. For classical liberals liberty and private property are intrinsically linked to each other. Freedom is the ability to live one's life on your own terms, employing one's labour and capital in the manner one considers most appropriate. Some liberals even assert that private property is the only effective means for the protection of liberty, the argument is dispersal of power in a free market economy that based on private property safeguards the liberty of individuals from the encroachments of the state. The American Revolution, the French Revolution and the political developments in early nineteenth century England represent the experiments of liberal political ideology. We would now explain to you two major strands of liberal thought-Utilitarianism and the Laissez-Faire.

4.3.1 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is defined as a philosophy which believes that it is the overall utility in maximizing happiness which solely determines the worth of an action. Any future action should follow the course of action from the past which ensured the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Government which fosters the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the best government. Utilitarianism began as a philosophy of human happiness which emphasized the role of liberty in the pursuit of happiness. **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832) was the founder of Utilitarian philosophy and said that in place of unsubstantiated religious beliefs and unreliable traditions Utilitarianism was committed to an objective study of human behavior. For him, human utility is the only intrinsic good against which acts can be evaluated. Hobbes' account of human nature and Hume's account of social utility influenced Bentham's ideas. Contemporary problems motivated Bentham to search for utility. The requirement of emerging industrial society was foremost in his mind when he articulated his approach to morality. Bentham was an ardent political reformer. He was against orthodox morality. He desired to change corrupt laws and social practices. In his work 'Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)' he criticized legal and political institutions. Based on the principle of utility Bentham tried to find a rational approach to legislative action. In his first publication in 1776 entitled 'A Fragment on Government' Bentham set the goal of his ideology by stating that 'it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong'. Bentham observed that humans were ruled by pleasure and pain and they 'govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think...' He argued for individual freedom, freedom of expression and the separation of church and state.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), son of James Mill, grew up with the philosophy of Utilitarianism and was influenced by Bentham. Mill was critical of English society in which real individuality was unable to flourish. He wrote, 'In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as

under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship'. He was defender of personal autonomy, civil liberties, creativity and individuality. In his view power can be used against one's will only to prevent harm to others. In his *Essay on Liberty* (written in 1859) he stated that 'The main point of this essay is to argue that the only justification for society limiting the liberty of an individual, whether by the government or the force of public opinion, is to prevent harm to others. If the purpose instead is his own good, or some other goal, then only persuasion and non-coercive means can be justified. Ultimately the defense of this or any other normative claim rests on the principle of utilitarianism, that it produces more total pleasure and less total pain for all affected by it.' Explaining Utilitarianism he wrote that 'The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.' Happiness consists in experiencing more pleasure and absence of pain. Mill was concerned with the concept of justice and he advocated that 'it is unjust to deprive some one of his legal rights to liberty and property, deprive some one of that to which he has a moral right.' He believed that free thought and free speech could ensure liberty and democracy would strengthen political institutions. Government should not only function efficiently but it must work for the betterment of its citizens. Mill's writings on utilitarianism and liberty challenged the domination by upper classes and demanded happiness for all.

In Utilitarian philosophy happiness was the supreme goal of an individual and the greatest happiness of the greatest number was the ultimate aim of society. Its challenge to traditional institutions and concern for individual freedom made Utilitarianism a popular ideology with the emerging middle class.

4.3.2 Laissez-Faire

In opposition to feudalism and the doctrine of mercantilism which believed in trade restrictions, government regulations of product and minimum wage laws the philosophy of laissez-faire or free trade developed in late eighteenth century Europe. Believers in free economy were of the opinion that too many regulations prevent healthy competition and work against economic progress. Early exponents of laissez faire were the physiocrats in France. **Physiocrats** were a group of economists during the second half of eighteenth century. In contrast to emphasis on trade by mercantilists, physiocrats believed in agriculture as the economic foundation of a nation's wealth. They were against regulation of commerce and protective tariffs. They advocated that self-interest was the guiding force in an economy and there should not be restrictions on individual efforts to achieve a desired goal. They also wanted to rationalize rents. Their ideas were powerful and influenced the development of classical economy opposing the doctrine of mercantilism. **Francois Quesnay** (1694-1774), a French economist, was the founder of the physiocratic school of thought. However, it was **Adam Smith** (1723-1790), a Scottish philosopher, who was considered the most important ideologue of laissez faire philosophy. Influenced by economic ideas of Quesnay, Adam Smith provided justification for free economy and capitalism. In his book '*Wealth of Nations*', published in 1776, Smith refuted mercantilist arguments that protectionist tariffs serve the economic interests of a nation. Institutions of feudalism put various restrictions on the rising industrial bourgeoisie in Europe and Smith provided the bourgeoisie with a philosophical understanding with which to fight feudal control. According to Smith desires for wealth govern human

activity. Self-interest or profit is the driving force behind any task performed by an individual. He wrote, 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from our regard to their self-interest'. But in what way is the individual's selfish desire beneficial for the society? To this his answer was that by pursuing self-interest individuals indirectly contribute to the economic wellbeing of their community. Competition works to check an individual's greed for profit. It is the market which should determine trade rather than governmental regulation and control. He advocated free trade and the abolition of monopolies. Smith emphasized manufacture (in contrast to the Physiocrat emphasis on agriculture) as the ultimate source of wealth. Smith also for the first time talked about the division of the labour force and specialization of labour for the improvement of productive powers of labour. His ideas marked the beginning of classical tradition in economic thought and the issues he raised dominated economic ideas a long period. **David Ricardo** (1772-1823) and **Thomas Malthus** (1766-1834) followed Smith's laissez-faire economics. However in contrast to the ideas of Smith, Ricardo found society highly competitive where workers were disadvantaged in terms of wages. His understanding of the iron law of wages suggests that all attempts to increase subsistence of workers will be futile. In his view capitalists engaged in maximizing profit would face fierce competition which may eventually not be very productive and may even reduce profit. In his book '*The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*' Ricardo argued against protectionist policies and increase in wages. Thomas Malthus was pessimistic about capitalism for different reasons. In his *Essay on the Principles of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* Malthus cautioned against the perils of increasing population. The increase of population will take place, if unchecked, in a geometric progression, while the means of subsistence will increase in only an arithmetic progression. Therefore, human hopes for happiness will be obstructed by an increase in population that will inevitably outrun production. Writing on ideas of the classical economists supporting the triumph of capitalism E. J. Hobsbawm observed that these men who wanted to remove obstacles on the way to progress were not 'special pleaders for the vested interest of businessmen. They were men who believed, with considerable historical justification at this period that the way forward for humanity was through capitalism'. Although in real life social and economic results of capitalism were less satisfactory than what had been envisaged by classical economists.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What do you think was the major focus of the Utilitarian philosophy?
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- 2) Explain in about 100 words the central argument of the Laissez-Faire doctrine.
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4.4 SOCIALISM

Other intellectuals were skeptical of the liberal ideology and doubted the formulation about progress advocated by liberals. Based on a new ideology of progress and common ownership these thinkers were against selfish individualism which claimed to promote individual happiness. The early socialists Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen represented this kind of thinking. They argued that industrial society was not only just unjust but that it worked against the interests of the poor. The French Revolution and Industrial Revolution provided the immediate background to the birth of socialist ideas in Europe. With new technology and means of production basic social structure and economic relationships started changing all over Europe. The importance of work, labour, production and their relation to politics and society was an area of major concern for the early socialists. They were concerned of social inequality, child labour and distress of the poor. The industrial society ushered a new era which brought in its wake major problems for the working classes. Socialism in its early phase was deeply influenced by moral philosophy. Without attacking capitalism as a system early socialists advocated ways for redistribution of wealth. They desired to develop a society where there would be harmony between different classes. They wanted to bring change through peaceful means and rational discussion. They relied on voluntary efforts of people of good will to bring change in society. Early socialists were also referred as ‘utopian socialists’ (by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who advocated scientific socialism) because of their idealist (in contrast to materialist) beliefs about social transformation. Let us introduce you to the main ideas of some of the early socialists.

Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was born in Paris and his ideas were conditioned by the feudal and military order of that period. He advocated for an economic system where in industry would be controlled by government. He suggested a reorganization of society organized for productive labour by the most capable men, with the elites leading a peaceful process of industrialization. He supported a social hierarchy in which one would be placed in society according to ones capacity of work. He was not opposed to social hierarchy and private ownership. He prescribed reorganization of society for achieving physical and moral improvement of the poor. Simon did not visualize any conflict between capital and labour. **Charles Fourier** (1772-1837), a contemporary of Saint-Simon, was critical of the effects of industry. He envisaged reconstruction of society based on communal association of agricultural producers known as phalanges. In his *Theory of Social Organization* Fourier stated that ‘Liberty, unless enjoyed by all, is unreal and illusory. . .to secure liberty a Social Order is necessary which shall (1) Discover and organize a system of industry; (2) Guarantee to every individual the equivalent of their natural rights; and (3) Associate the interests of rich and poor. It is only on these conditions the masses can be secured a minimum of comfortable subsistence and enjoyment of all social pleasures.’ Being concerned of the plight of the working class he desired to make work enjoyable. Fourier believed that the reorganization of society based on small communities, called Phalansteries, would satisfy people’s desire for pleasure. Another socialist ideologue was **Robert Owen** (1771-1858) who had seen closely the effect of industrialization on the workers in Britain. He was not against industrialization but advocated paternalistic policies for improvement in the lives of working class. Rejecting Christianity and custom he believed in reason and natural order

and hoped that with the change of environment human nature would also change. He himself was an entrepreneur and social reformer. Based on his experience of managing cotton mills and the problems related to production Robert Owen gave expression to his ideas in essays entitled '*A New View of Society*'. He wrote, 'man is motivated from birth by a self-interested desire for happiness; he possesses natural, God-given inclinations and mental faculties, which direct and develop his actions and ideas; he is influenced by his surroundings and by the instruction of his elders and these in turn determine the extent of his misery or happiness. If the knowledge he gains is based on rational truth, he will enjoy happiness. He relies perforce on reason and teaching. Irrational instruction merely confuses the power of reason and causes inconsistencies ...evil and misery... The end of government is to make the governed and the governors happy...The primary and necessary assumptions of all existence is to be happy, but happiness cannot be obtained individually; it is useless to expect isolated happiness; all must partake of it or the few will never enjoy it.' Disagreeing with the early socialists, **Karl Marx** and **Friedrich Engels** proposed that in capitalist society the growing distance between the capitalists and the working class would lead to class struggle and through class struggle the workers would be able to establish their rights. Their ideas were presented in the '*Communist Manifesto*', published in 1848. We are not going to explain in this Unit the development of communism. What is important to note in this context is that the vision of a world by the early socialists where all will be happy was far from reality. It was Karl Marx who gave new meaning to socialism by advocating proletarian revolution for the overthrow of capitalism.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Is it correct to say that early socialists did not advocate for class struggle?

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- 2) Write in about 150 words on the contribution of early socialist thinkers.

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

Europe from mid-18th to mid-19th century witnessed major political developments and a growing challenge to authority of Church and absolute monarchy. This was a period of significant developments in the sphere of ideas. Scientific discoveries and the spirit of reasoning influenced many intellectuals of the time and led them to question received wisdom and suggest new ways to change the existing socio-political and economic order. We have explained to you how enlightenment thinkers gave precedence to reason over faith. Political philosophers of this period prescribed new ideology of progress which was rationalist and secular. They believed that people could create a better world according to principles of reason. Classical liberalism talked about unlimited individual liberty and freedom and happiness were considered each individual's ultimate goals. Utilitarians emphasized on an objective study of human behavior rather than religious beliefs, traditions and philosophical abstractions which caused ignorance and superstition. Society was expected to work for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In its economic thought advocates of liberalism were for property, free trade and free market. Touched by the misery caused to people by the Industrial Revolution, early socialists advocated for a society based on cooperation rather than competition. Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen argued for a new social system where in production and distribution of goods would be planned for the general well-being of society. Thus since mid-18th to mid-19th century we find in different spheres of life intellectuals based on their understanding of the world they lived, prescribing new forms of socio-political and economic order.

4.6 KEY WORDS

Capitalism: An economic system in which production and distribution is owned by individuals and private companies. It encourages free market, open competition and profit.

Divine Right Monarchy: Divine Right Monarchy states that monarch is chosen by God and he derives his authority to rule the country from God only. Except God no one can take away king's power.

Feudalism: An economic system in which agriculture is the source of wealth. In feudalism political power is monopolized by land owners and society is hierarchically ordered.

Industrial Revolution: Dramatic economic development following unprecedented changes technology which began in the second half of eighteenth century in Britain is referred as Industrial Revolution. From Britain Industrial Revolution spread to other countries of Europe later on.

Mercantilism: An economic system that encouraged government regulation of trade and other commercial interests to gain wealth. This economic thought dominated Europe from 15th to 18th centuries.

4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) You have to find out from section 4.2
- 2) Read section 4.2 and then in your own words summed up major ideas of enlightenment thinkers.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See sub-section 4.3.1
- 2) See sub-section 4.3.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read section 4.4
- 2) You have to focus on major ideas of the early socialists after reading section 4.4.



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