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Political thought in early-modern Europa

Kurseinheit 3:
New politics
The enlightenment

kultur- und
sozialwissenschaften

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7. The genre of the new politics

After introducing Machiavelli, we have been drawn into accounts mainly driven by the religious turmoil following the reformation and the subsequent arguments on the nature of regal power and the possibilities to resist it. Those in need of favouring resistance argued variably in favour of a late medieval sharing of powers between king and estates (as in Germany between Emperor and princes), the representation of the corporate community by the estates, the possibility of self defence in certain cases often drawing on examples from the biblical people of Israel. From the later 1580s, however, as a reaction to the catastrophic consequences of civil war, the indivisibility of government power and the divine sanction of kingship were emphasized in unprecedented terms.

By that time, reflections on the nature of the body politic, stirred by religious conflict, had not only led to mutually exclusive accounts on the nature of government, and of kingship in particular, but also brought about a fundamental transformation of the very way in which the issue of government was discussed. This transformation was due to a number of diverse influences and challenges. Bodin's challenge to identify a sovereign institution in any body politic was only one of these challenges. Indeed, from focussing on the nature of kingship and its powers, or the legal limitations of these powers, the crisis of Christian society led to attempts to understand much more systematically the true working of human society and of human actors, in particular beyond what could be learnt from Scripture. While Machiavelli would often not be used directly, attempts were made at a more realistic assessment of the sinews of power. Another influence was the reflection about the techniques to defend one's status in times of turmoil, focussing on the *raison d'etat* ('Staatsräson'), the inherent best strategy to pursue this goal according to circumstances, championed by Italian works on this issue. In this context, the history of the crisis of the Roman republic, and even more so of the later Roman Empire, gained particular interest.

The new ways to reflect on governing the body politic pertained less to the actual argument in favour or against strong government as such, but rather to the way the case was argued. Four fundamental changes will be