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Political thought in early-modern Europa

Kurseinheit 3:
New politics
The enlightenment

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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

addressed in this chapter. Under way since the later sixteenth century, they led to a fundamental transformation of political thought into ways that we would now recognize as 'modern'. While we will discuss the actual break with tradition only in the next chapter, the present one will track changes that in retrospect rather appear to be a part of the disintegration of received ways of thinking.

7.1 Tacitus and Tacitism

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the Roman historian Tacitus was increasingly referred to in order to understand the possibilities and limits of kingship in a time of civil strife. Jean Bodin's treatment of Tacitus in his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (Paris 1566) is one of the early examples of this fascination with Tacitus. But the edition of the Leiden professor Justus Lipsius, *C. Cornelii Taciti Historiarum et Annalium libri* (Antwerpen 1574) marks the breakthrough of this source as a major new inspiration to political thought. Some hold that Tacitus was mainly used as a way to discuss Machiavelli and his ideas since Machiavelli had been put on the index. But interest in Tacitus was undoubtedly sponsored by the attempt to understand and find the true way of preserving and increasing power, and thought by many to be the most effective recipe to secure peace. Tacitus' history of the Roman emperors from the end of the republic and Augustus to Nerva seemed to provide an analytical survey of how princely power and the liberty – i.e. privileges – of the people, *principatus* and *libertas*, clashed and led to catastrophic turmoil in Rome. It could be used with quite different points of view in mind. Whatever one's own point of view, Tacitus provided, as to Lipsius himself, a theatre of contemporary life (*theatrum hodiernae vitae*), ready for analysis and understanding, because Tacitus' analysis appeared to be complex and realistic: it addressed motives and circumstances, not only of princes (the emperors), but also of people; it did not arbitrarily argue in favour of one side, but attempted to understand civil strife in its full complexity. His text clearly provided much more material to understand the real mechanisms of politics than the few lines on kingship in 1. Samuel 8. Tacitus was read and recommended both by readers in favour of strong princely power and by those who wanted to warn republics against submitting themselves to such power.