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Political thought in early-modern Europa

Kurseinheit 1:
Concepts and approaches
The late-medieval and pre-reformation setting

Fakultät für
**Kultur- und
Sozialwissen-
schaften**

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1 Introduction

This course reviews the history of political thought in early modern Europe. The last thirty years have brought major changes in the approach to the subject which also affect our understanding of *modern* political thought. However, the major impacts of recent research in the field has been the awareness of the necessity to understand the formation of modern political thought within an *early modern* framework fundamentally different from our own, rather than back-projecting nineteenth or twentieth century ideas into the past. It is striking that the word 'politics' did not even exist in the early modern period. Today, it indicates the realm of normative discourse among different independent actors, organized into political parties, to argue over the best course of action. The idea that men could, by rational discourse and directed only by their rational mind, decide over the most fundamental issues of their secular life, is in itself a development of the later enlightenment.

The present course will address the beginnings of this latter change from the early enlightenment and during the eighteenth century in its final part. The main emphasis, however, will be on the fifteenth to seventeenth century and on those aspects of early modern political thought fundamentally different from our own. In order to describe the nature of these differences, introducing sections will have to deal with certain core notions developed during the middle ages, that is, before the actual period covered in this course. At various points throughout the text, key issues will be looked at in detail in order to illustrate the actual working of contemporary debate. In general, strong emphasis has been laid on the wider historical context wherever possible, rather than on a narrative of individual texts.

The history of political thought is both an old and a very new discipline, and in order to understand its problems, questions, methods and achievements, one has to review its making, which is, unfortunately, in itself inextricably intertwined with the meaning of the very term 'political'. Few other problems in history confront students and researchers as radically with the diverse and historically charged meaning or core terms, few others demand such a clear cut distinction between the words and concepts used by *modern historians* as opposed to the meaning of the words and concepts used by *contemporary actors*

in the past. Only an acute awareness of these differences allows us to grasp the fundamental conceptual shifts that occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that make even our most common assumptions so fundamentally different from those of the past. We cannot, thus, understand what the history of political thought is about today unless we are familiar with the most basic meaning and history of the making of the word 'political' and how history took an interest in the history of political thought. For this reason, a significant part of the core-text is reserved for a general introduction that starts with some preliminary definitions and ends with the suggestion that a number of competing meanings of 'political' can and should be alongside each other.

From the subject matter of this course follows the core aim of what is to be learnt. Students are supposed to develop an analytical approach to history, distinguishing clearly between sources and their vocabulary, the history of understanding these sources and the need for a critical approach to the secondary literature, and an analytical understanding of sources and problems within current research. Perhaps more than in any other discipline, progress in the the study of the history of political thought involves an increasingly sophisticated understanding of problems (including the history of the formulation of these problems), rather than the recovery of factual evidence as such.

After studying this course, you should be able to distinguish clearly between

- the vocabulary and the concepts used by historical actors
- the vocabulary and the concepts used in present-day discourse
- the vocabulary and the concepts used in historical research

even if, on each of these three levels, identical words are used.