

The Secularisation of the West: Tacitism from the 16th to the 18th century

In the 16th century the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation led not only to fierce theological strife between the two confessions, but also to political tensions and wars between groups of citizens and between states. Conflict also erupted in dynastic competition between princes. By the end of the century several wars and civil conflicts were raging in Europe, resulting in innumerable casualties, refugees, and widespread destruction. In general states and princes appeared either unable or unwilling to restore peace and political discipline among their populations.

Naturally, scholars and political philosophers searched their books and theories for ideas that might help repair the crisis. Some turned to ideas of popular sovereignty and rights of resistance; others to the notion of the Divine Right of kings and a close cooperation of ecclesiastical and worldly authorities. A minority of political thinkers, however, concluded that the existing ideas of how politics should work, gave rulers *insufficient* freedom to effectively restore peace and order, because rulers' hands were tied too much by the demands imposed by churches, constitutions, and political ideals, which expected them always to act like model princes.

As a result these thinkers argued to 'emancipate' politics from the domains of religion, faith and ethics—at least to a degree—for they were fully aware that their ideas were morally controversial and could easily be misread as excuses for atheism, tyranny, Machiavellism, and abuses of power, which they abhorred. Nevertheless these controversial beginnings led to a large-scale modernisation of political thought and practice in the 17th and 18th centuries: that is, the separation of church and state and the rise of politics as an independent field (in science) and an independent competence in practice. Politics became a discipline not so much detached from legal, social or religious ethics, but a fourth factor in its own right next to the other three, an independent consideration against which the demands of the other considerations could be balanced. In turn, the rise of the modern state as an independent and developed institution can also be understood as result of this process.

For the small group who started this chain of thought, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus from the first century AD was their greatest inspiration; even more so than the Florentine writer Niccolò Machiavelli, whose ideas were too extreme to be advocated in reality --although Machiavelli and Tacitus indeed share a number of basic ideas. Given their intensive involvement with Tacitus' works, the scholars in question have been labelled as 'Tacitists' and their movement as Tacitism. Tacitus had described the history of the first few Roman Emperors in a pessimistic and un-glorifying way, putting the emphasis on the real mechanisms of power politics and the political psychology of the people and the aristocratic elites.

For the Tacitists, this analysis of the *actual* (not the ideal) workings of politics provided the beginnings of a new political science that might produce real answers to the crisis of their times. Given the controversial nature of their ideas, Tacitism was in many ways an 'underground' movement. Consequently an important hallmark of Tacitist publications is the complicated and elaborate rhetorical and literary strategies they employ to steer the reception of their ideas by their audiences, and to prevent misunderstandings.

In this project we shall use these strategies in Tacitist works to write a history of Tacitism via the struggles and controversies that surrounded it. By interpreting the rhetorical make-up and strategies of each of the selected texts in its contemporary social and political context, we can obtain a picture of the controversies and contested ideas at stake in that context. A series of these stories thus builds up into a history of the Tacitist movement. Eventually, by the end of the 17th century, Tacitism had lost its controversial edge and become part of mainstream European political thought, a clear indication that that political thought itself had changed. Meanwhile, the foundations of the modern discipline of political science had been laid by scholars of Tacitist inspiration, and they had made an important contribution to the foundations of economics as a science.

This history of Tacitism will not only shed light on a crucial early phase in the emergence of modern political thought and attitudes, but it will also show how European societies in the past dealt with the complicated interplay of politics and religion, and that of politics and law; how clashes between power and justice and between conflicting principles were perceived, interpreted and negotiated in society; how secularisation was contested and defended; and how clashes and tensions between majority and minority opinion were countered and (eventually, in most cases) resolved. Thus it will provide material for useful comparisons to illuminate the politics of the present.