Apart from culture in general, perhaps the most popular topic among European historians during the 1980s was the process of statemaking, from the Middle Ages down to our own day. The early modern European state proved to be particularly fertile as a field of research. The books by Collins, 't Hart, and Wienfort, although different in subject, methodology, and execution, are all tied to that larger field, the first two explicitly so. They also share a common interest in the question that was at the heart of the early modern state, if indeed it had a heart.

Any undergraduate in history should be able to explain on request that the king was the crucial figure in the early modern state, and that his power was by and large growing between 1500 and 1800, thanks to his ever larger standing army and to the rising capacities of his servants to tax the king's subjects. The growth of the power of the king was actively supported by eager bourgeois, who either saw outright profit in the growth of the "modern state," or at least hoped to secure positions in the king's new bureaucracy. At the same time, the rise of the "modern state" implied the decline of the traditional nobility. These three books, however, want to make our undergraduate think twice about the changes affecting the early modern state.

Collins is the most outspoken, as perhaps he ought to be, because his work is conceived as a textbook aimed specifically at undergraduate students, but providing valuable summaries of the state-of-the-art for advanced researchers as well. On page one Collins flatly declares...
his belief that Absolutism is a "myth," created by Louis XIV and his courtiers and merely carried on by historians. He then proceeds, in chapters that wonderfully combine topical analysis with straightforward histoire événementielle, to demonstrate how personal ties served, and continued to serve, as the cement of the French state. The Sun King is presented here as part of the Absolutist programme, in the great expansion of the military establishment, the fiscal reforms necessary to pay for that, as well as the changes in France's judicial organisation. But in the process he undermined the sacral nature of kingship to such an extent that it became conceivable to do away with the king altogether.

Whereas Collins proclaims his verdict on the reign of Louis XIV in a chapter entitled "The debacle," Monika Wienfort's book shows how the extraordinary success of Frederick the Great's reign in Prussia could also lead to a de-sacralisation of the monarchy. Frederick's personal genius left little room for alternative sources of royal power. The decline of religious legitimation was not necessarily a weakness, for the Prussian monarchs were now hailed as champions of modernisation, civic monarchs furthering the cause of equality before the law. It was a road that the English kings had explored from the Glorious Revolution onwards. Those developments are well-known. Wienfort's book makes an interesting contribution because she has worked her way through hundreds of pamphlets from Britain, Prussia, and Bavaria in a search for the public discourse of the monarchy. Although she claims to have uncovered the voice of the common folk, she actually has given us a picture of "public opinion," as it expressed itself in widely dispersed media. What gives her book its special quality is the careful analysis of the ways in which the monarchy and public opinion constituted themselves in relation to each other after the king had lost his divine status. Besides providing a clue to the predicament of the Windsors, she thus helps to answer that intriguing question of the survival of this ancient institution down to our own days.

Although monarchy was the general rule in early modern Europe, some states thought that they could afford to do without a king. The Dutch Republic proved that the alternative system was not necessarily fatal. Marjolein 't Hart's tightly argued book sets out to demonstrate how the Dutch managed to become a Great Power by the middle of the seventeenth century, despite being handicapped by a political system with weak central institutions and disunited as a consequence of rivalries between towns. The key, 't Hart suggests, was the success of the Dutch bourgeois politicians in securing the funds necessary to