

politics fails to deliver.

Calling the recent plight of the DRC a civil war can make it sound more organised than it really is. Some areas of the country have effectively been reduced to a condition of anarchy, not far off a Hobbesian state of nature. The same is true of its smaller northern neighbour the Central African Republic, which has been described by its own prime minister as ‘an anarchy, a non-state’. There is no order and no security: armed gangs rule, the basic institutions of civil society have ceased to function, life is precarious and horribly unpredictable. In a civil war people are afraid of the other side winning. In parts of central Africa it can be hard to know how anyone could win. In these circumstances, it makes sense to be afraid of everyone. But if this is the Hobbesian nightmare, Hobbes is little help in showing how to get out of it. That’s because his thought experiment wasn’t designed for people in a state of nature. It was designed for people who have a functioning politics to warn them not to dabble with the alternatives. Hobbes explains *why* we need to escape the state of nature. He doesn’t explain *how* to escape if you’re stuck there.

The answer may seem obvious: these countries require a functioning state. They need to choose politics. But which politics? There are by now lots of alternatives to choose from. The best would probably be something like Denmark. But it seems absurd to say the DRC should strive to be more like Denmark, given the vast gulf that separates them. The stability of Danish politics is a product of Denmark’s own particular history and geography, and it has multiple

interlocking causes: the Protestant Reformation and the spread of literacy; the rise of organised farming and labour movements in the nineteenth century; the end of military conflict and the stabilisation of Scandinavian borders; the free exchange of ideas and goods with the rest of Europe. You can hardly take this package and transplant it to twenty-first-century Africa. But nor is it clear that you can cherry-pick bits of it to see if they can work their magic independently. Yes, the DRC could do with organised farmers and labour movements, peaceful relations with its neighbours, greater access to international trade. But how do you achieve these things in isolation from each other? How do you get to be Denmark without being Denmark?

Denmark is far from the only model available. There are plenty of other political options between chaos and peaceful security. The world is full of countries that are better off in political terms than the DRC but worse off than Denmark. There are authoritarian technocracies like China (on the largest scale) and Singapore (on the smallest), populist democracies like Venezuela, semi-constitutional theocracies like Iran, semi-militarised democracies like Sri Lanka and semi-democratic oligarchies like Russia. Political scientists call these ‘hybrid’ regimes: they are a mish-mash of different elements, often combining bits of democratic practice with elements of authoritarianism. All of these regime types have plenty of things wrong with them, including varying levels of corruption and abuse of power by their rulers. But they all have functioning states and a degree of political stability. So did Syria until very recently. At present its politics has broken down, but just a few years ago it was a