

relationship Hobbes created a political entity that he called a ‘state’. A state can’t be identified with the sovereign because the sovereign doesn’t speak for himself; he speaks for his subjects. Nor can it be identified with his subjects because they don’t speak for themselves either: they are spoken for by their sovereign. So a state is what comes into existence when sovereign and subjects are locked together in a relationship of representation. It ceases to exist when that relationship breaks down. Hobbesian politics is both top-down and bottom-up: you need a sovereign at the top making the rules, but you won’t have a sovereign able to make the rules if he doesn’t speak for the people beneath him.

This is also a distinctly modern idea. Indeed, if you replace the terms ‘sovereign’ and ‘subjects’ with ‘government’ and ‘people’, you could say it is the modern idea of politics. Modern politics is neither top-down nor bottom-up: it is both at the same time. Pre-modern politics was different. Ancient and medieval political thinkers did not have much use for the idea of representation. They tended to see top-down and bottom-up politics as mutually antagonistic and imagined that the character of every political society depended on the distribution of power between them: the rulers vs. the ruled, the rich vs. the poor, the elite vs. the mass, the king vs. the citizenry. Politics was, always and endlessly, the few against the many, the many against the few. The only hope for stability lay in some kind of balance between these competing elements in political life: that, for instance, was Aristotle’s view. But political balance was a precarious business. It was always in danger of breaking down. For that reason

Hobbes hated the idea of balance; he hated distributions of power between the different elements of society; and he hated Aristotle. Representation said goodbye to all that. It meant you didn’t have to choose. In fact, it meant you couldn’t choose. Either you had government and people together, or you had neither.

We now think that representation *means* political choice. We have come to associate it with the idea of democracy: we use elections to choose our representatives, and if we don’t like the choice we made we use elections to get rid of them. Hobbes was extremely wary of democracy, suspecting that it would prove too contentious and destabilising in the long run. He was wrong about that. But at the basis of Hobbes’s philosophy lies a democratic idea: the thought that people must agree to be represented if politics is to work at all. Once that agreement is secure, then the space is cleared for peaceful co-existence. In that space all sorts of things are possible. One of the things that might be possible is an extended experiment with greater democracy. It is not inconsistent with Hobbes’s political philosophy to think that representative government could open the door to more consensual and interactive forms of politics, such as the ones we have today. He just wanted us to remember that having a nicer government was always predicated on the agreement to be governed, never the other way round. He was not wrong about that.

Making the move into the Hobbesian world of politics is not all bread and roses. It comes at a cost. It means giving up on grander political visions, including all the ones that suppose politics can make us better people. It dumps the possibility of political virtue for the