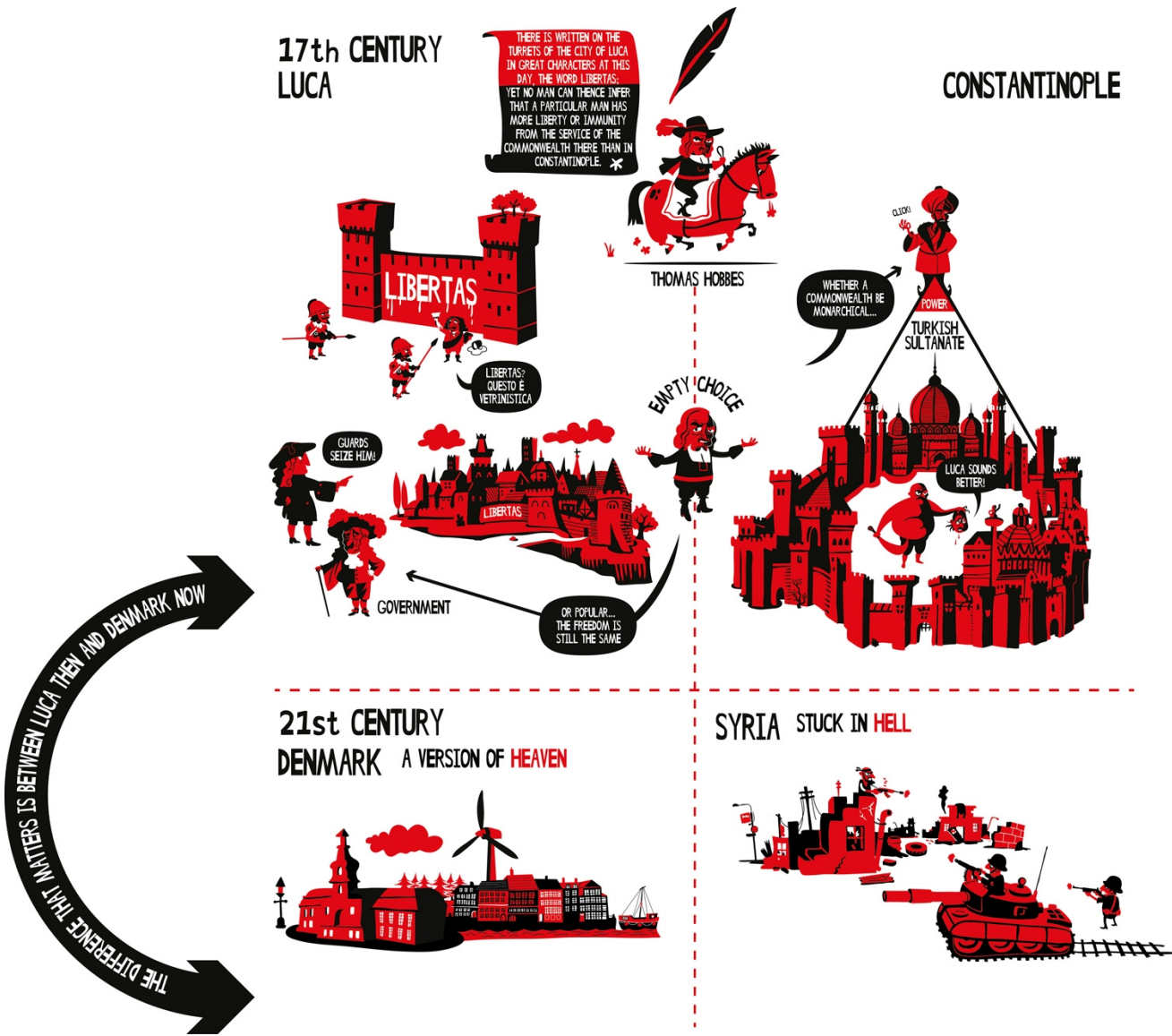


had succeeded in getting rid of him, he thought it desperate and stupid to prolong the misery. You always obey the people in charge. You never look for alternatives.

So, on this account, all Syrians ought to have stuck with the deeply unpleasant, oppressive and corrupt Assad regime rather than precipitate a civil war. It was wrong to complain about the injustice of living under Assad because, for Hobbes, political justice is only ever what the sovereign says it is. You must obey your rulers until they can no longer keep the peace (only then do you get to choose who has the best chance of protecting you, though once any fighting is over you must go with whoever has won, regardless of how you feel about it). You must never do anything to threaten the peace yourself. To modern-day readers (and to plenty of Hobbes’s contemporaries) it sounds like a counsel of despair. It means always putting up with bad government for fear of no government at all. But can’t bad government be even worse than no government, especially when it lasts a long time? (And it can last a long time, certainly longer than a single human lifespan: just look at North Korea.) Hobbes’s risk-averse approach to politics appears to make it impossible for politically oppressed people to do anything to make their politics better.

In this we are bound to have a different perspective from Hobbes. But that’s not because Hobbes was entirely wrong. It’s for some of the reasons that Hobbes was right. When he was writing, he wasn’t interested in comparing different types of government because he felt no one had yet got a grip on the fundamentals: his aim was to lay the

foundations for a new approach that might lead to lasting peace and prosperity. He didn’t want his readers thinking that the apparent political choices in front of them were the real ones. He wanted them to think outside the box of seventeenth-century politics. Now we are outside that box. We have Denmark.



In Hobbes’s world there was no equivalent to the choice between Denmark and Syria. The available choice was, as he said in *Leviathan*, between Lucca and Constantinople. Where would you rather find yourself in the seventeenth century: a free Italian city-