

is both a symptom and a cause of the transition. Politics works in Denmark because it has made Danes more tolerant. But it also works because Danes have learned a tolerance for politics. These are the two sides to any successful political arrangement. There is the politics that is produced by stable institutions: all the arguments and disagreements that somehow stop short of war. And there is the politics that produces stable institutions: all the arguments and agreements that somehow bring war to a stop. Politics cannot be reduced to any particular set of institutions. It precedes them, and it emerges from them.

What these two sides of political life have in common is that they both combine choice with constraint. Politics is about the collective choices that bind groups of people to live in a particular way. It is also about the collective binds that give people a real choice in how they live. Without real choice there is no politics. If it were the case that successful political institutions were the automatic product of particular historical circumstances – give me the right climate, culture, economy, religion, demographics, and I'll give you democracy – then life would be a lot simpler. But it's not that simple. Political institutions are still shaped by human choices, and human beings always retain the capacity to screw them up. Equally, if it were the case that the right political institutions did away with the need for choice – give me democracy, and I'll give you peace, prosperity, fancy restaurants, a quiet life – then life would also be simpler and a lot duller. But even in Denmark the successful functioning of political institutions depends on the choices people make: choices made by

politicians and by voters, choices about what laws to have and about whether to obey them. Some of these choices can be agonising: even in rich, happy countries some political decisions are matters of life and death. Nothing is automatic in politics. Everything depends on the contingent interplay between choice and constraint: constraint under conditions of choice; choice under conditions of constraint.

So we can say that the difference between Syria and Denmark is simple: it's politics. We can also say that the reason for the difference between Syria and Denmark is complex: it's politics. In this short book I want to try to bridge the gap between the simplicity and the complexity by answering three big questions. First, how can the same word – *politics* – encompass such different societies as safe, boring Denmark and chaotic, miserable Syria? What do heaven and hell have in common? It is tempting to think that one represents the absence of politics (heaven) and the other represents the failure of politics (hell). But in fact they reveal the different sides of politics. In the [first chapter](#) I aim to show what they have in common. The point of connection is the control of violence, which is the defining characteristic of every political society. Thinking about violence is a starting-point for considering where politics comes from, what makes it different from other activities and why it still makes all the difference.

Second, how can politics continue to make all the difference when we are living through a time of such rapid technological change? Denmark is a tiny player in the globalised economy. But even the big players – China, the United States – often seem at the mercy of