

limits coercion: there is enough agreement that the use of force can be kept to a relative minimum. In Syria coercion limits consensus: there is enough violence for the scope for agreement to remain minimal. One spectrum, two ends: that’s what makes it possible to compare these two societies and also fundamentally to distinguish them.

There is a more cynical view. Christian Jungersen’s novel *The Exception* (2006) is set in a Danish humanitarian organisation whose employees are tasked with investigating war crimes in the former Yugoslavia. What could be more different than a comfortable office in Copenhagen and a Bosnian death camp? The Danes in the story are women with safe, comfortable lives; the criminals they are trying to track are displaced and deeply dangerous men. But Jungersen shows the two worlds mirroring each other. The women in the office bully, threaten and persecute each other; small acts of aggression – a slammed door, a hostile glance – escalate into life-threatening violence. In this telling, consensual societies are simply hiding the horribly coercive impulses that stain all human relationships. Nice Denmark is as nasty underneath as anywhere else. If anything, the niceness makes the nastiness harder to control because the aggressors are in denial about what they are doing. Do-gooding politics can be a façade that enables the horrible things it is meant to prevent.

Cynicism always has a place in politics. But this is too cynical. It’s true that any form of consensus has the capacity to hide violence instead of limiting it. The BBC, one of the most respectable and do-

gooding institutions in British public life, turned out to be an excellent place for paedophiles to operate because no one was looking for them. It’s also true that societies in which violence is visible everywhere – such as present-day Syria – can conceal the myriad acts of kindness that take place within private life and between personal friends. Bad things happen in nice places, and nice things happen in bad places. But that doesn’t mean the places themselves are hard to tell apart. There is still a fundamental difference between Denmark and Syria. Societies in which violence is under an agreed system of political control are better places to live in than those in which it is not.

Political consensus doesn’t abolish violence: pockets of horror exist everywhere. In some circumstances political consensus encourages violence, especially on the part of the people charged with controlling it. Policemen can still do the most terrible things. These are the dark themes of Scandinavian crime fiction and one reason it’s so popular all over the world. But the backdrop for Scandinavian crime fiction is societies in which violence has not been allowed to run out of control, unlike in Syria. That’s the difference.

THE INVENTION OF THE STATE

The philosopher who did most to put the control of violence at the heart of thinking about politics was a seventeenth-century Englishman called Thomas Hobbes. In doing so, he explained what lies at the basis of modern political life and what makes it different from what went before. Violence was out of control in Hobbes’s