



In the introduction I said that politics is about choice under conditions of constraint and constraint under conditions of choice. But we can be more specific than this. Lots of human activities fit that description: marriage, for instance. You can choose whom you want to marry, but if the other person doesn't want to marry you, too bad: there's the constraint. Likewise, once you have found a willing partner, getting married imposes shared burdens on both of you, backed up by the force of law. It is possible to argue, and many feminists do argue, that any marriage is basically political. That is certainly the case if one partner uses the threat of violence to condition the behaviour of the other. Abusive marriages are crude and very unpleasant forms of power politics. But not all marriages are like this. Human beings are capable of relating to each other through love, even when their choices are constrained. It would be a

big mistake to think that all human relationships can be reduced to politics.

What's specific to politics is the relationship over time between consensus and coercion. Politics presupposes a collective agreement about the use of force. Because there is agreement, force is not always necessary. Because there is force, agreement is not always sufficient. Politics needs both. This is what connects Denmark and Syria. Denmark looks like a highly consensual society. But even Denmark has an army, a police force and a prison system. Even in Denmark the state has the power to compel its citizens to behave in ways they don't like: it can make them pay tax, or force them to face the consequences. Syria, by contrast, looks like a highly coercive society. But even in Syria people must agree on the use of force for political institutions to function at all. There is currently no consensus between the various sides in the civil war, yet there must be some consensus on the different sides for the war to continue. Assad loyalists recognise the legitimacy of the regime and accept its right to defend itself. Their opponents reject that right while accepting the right of the opposition to use force against it. If Syria were nothing but a coercive society, there would be no civil war. There would just be anarchy, which is no politics at all. The fight is a political one between competing views about who is entitled to use force against others.

Denmark and Syria both exist on a spectrum in which consensus and coercion are combined. This is the single spectrum of politics. But they are at opposite ends of the spectrum. In Denmark consensus