



Yet perhaps what is most alien about Hobbes for a contemporary readership is how minimalist his account of politics seems. Hobbes pares politics down to the absolute basics: power and obedience, coercion and consent. The sovereign makes the laws, and the people obey them. We expect politics to be about much more than this. Where’s the room in Hobbes’s account for argument and debate, for confrontation and compromise? What’s happened to all the posturing and positioning and the endless back-and-forth that we associate with the activity of politics? But in fact Hobbes’s minimalism is deceptive. His view of politics lays the foundations for modern political life as we know it. The arguments that we associate with politics – arguments about tax and welfare and rights and responsibilities – are made possible only by a distinctive modern understanding of what it means to exercise political power. Hobbes provides it.

Hobbes understood that you can’t have productive political argument without basic political agreement: the back-and-forth depends on an underlying consensus. Sometimes the two sides of politics may still react on each other to produce surprising results: any political argument, however seemingly trivial, always has the capacity to challenge the established political order. A fight about tax rates can lead to a revolution. That’s why Hobbes tried to make the relationship between coercion and consent as tight as he could. But what really marks Hobbes out is that he saw that the two go together and that they depend on each other. This approach underpins the idea of the modern state, which is the institution that has come to