

This is not because most people are naturally vicious or because they enjoy violence (though a few may). It's because they can't trust each other: they are naturally suspicious. 'And from this diffidence of one another', Hobbes wrote, 'there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can.' Even if you know that you are better off living in peace, and even if you know that everyone else knows this, you can't be sure that other people won't see you as a threat. And anyone who might see you as a threat therefore poses a threat, because of what can happen when your back is turned. So you'd better take them out first. A world without politics is one in which violence is bound to run out of control: an endless series of muggings.

It is often assumed that Hobbes's 'state of nature' – where, as he notoriously put it, life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' – corresponds to a condition of civil war. It doesn't. There is a big difference for Hobbes between a world without politics and a world where politics has gone wrong. The English civil war was a result of a terrible falling-out about politics among people who couldn't agree what politics should be. Is it rule by kings or by parliaments? Does it require religious freedom or conformity? Is it meant to protect privilege or to correct it? Hobbes's answer to all these questions was that they were beside the point. Politics is meant to preserve the peace.

The English civil war, like the Syrian civil war, was not a state of anarchy. It was a fight between highly politicised groups that

possessed the power to keep the conflict going (one meagre consolation of the state of nature is that mistrust between individuals would make it hard to sustain war on this scale). The purpose of Hobbes's thought experiment was to transcend the world of politics gone wrong. He was looking for something that even the different sides in the civil war could agree on. They couldn't agree on what sort of politics they wanted. So Hobbes gave them a different choice: politics or non-politics. Faced with that choice, anyone in their right mind would choose politics.

What did it mean to choose politics? For Hobbes it meant agreeing that the only possible solution to the problem of violence in the state of nature was to put the power to control violence in the hands of a single decision-maker. Hobbes called this decision-maker the 'sovereign'. (It didn't have to be a single individual, just something capable of speaking with a single voice, whether a king *or* a parliament.) We all want peace, but we won't achieve peace among ourselves because we can never agree on who poses the most serious threat to our safety. The job of the sovereign is to take that decision for us: effectively to decide who or what poses a threat to peace. If we all agree to that, the sovereign will have the power to keep the peace, because no one will have the power to challenge the sovereign's decision. Sovereignty is therefore a kind of monopoly. It is not strictly a monopoly on violence, since there will always be pockets of domestic and criminal violence, even in the most peaceful societies. Instead, sovereignty is a monopoly on the right to use coercive force as a solution to human conflict. It is the power to make law and to