

# 3

## JUSTICE

### AS BAD AS IT GETS

Present-day Syria, as bad as it is, is not the most afflicted place in the world. For a long time that title possibly belonged to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). A civil war has been raging there on and off for nearly two decades (currently more off than on). The Syrian civil war has confounded the international community, which has not known what to do to stop it. But at least it has been thinking about it; occasionally it has been thinking about little else. The war in the DRC rarely got international attention, and almost no one was thinking about how to stop it. Few people outside the country were thinking about it at all. Like Syria, the DRC is a past victim of imperial exploitation. But nothing that happened in Syria can compare to the horrors inflicted on the Belgian Congo at the end of the nineteenth century. The country was pillaged for its rich supply of natural resources (above all, rubber), and its native population was brutally worked to extract the wealth for their imperial masters. Many millions died as a result. The Congolese have been the victims

of genocide and persistent exploitation. The country remains impoverished and divided. Life expectancy is currently around forty-five, not very much higher than it was in England in Hobbes’s time. Per capita GDP is \$300 per year. This is more than ten times lower than Syria. It is more than one hundred times lower than Denmark.

These aren’t God-given facts. They don’t reflect racial differences. This is a man-made catastrophe. We did it. So why don’t we do more to fix it? The people of Europe, only a few thousand miles to the north, lead lives that are entirely remote from those experienced by the inhabitants of central Africa. This is one reason why they don’t do anything about the gulf between them: it doesn’t impinge. But that is no justification for doing nothing. The gulf is real, and it is grotesque. It raises an obvious question: how can it possibly be fair? Why should one group of people, simply because of an accident of birth, have the chance to lead comfortable and secure lives while others have little chance, through no fault of their own? The population of the DRC is close to 80 million, roughly the same as the population of Germany. The number of people in Africa who live on less than \$1.25 (or 1 Euro) a day is nearly equivalent to the total population of Western Europe. One planet: two worlds.

Of course, it would be a mistake to paint the DRC as nothing but horror. The West of the country is much more stable than the East. Congolese society contains pockets of prosperity, just as prosperous societies contain pockets of misery. Moreover, happiness is not just a material concept. Even the very poorest people can experience it: it’s horribly patronising to assume otherwise. Nor are the grimmest