violence to run out of our control.

The thinker who saw this paradoxical feature of modern political life most clearly was Benjamin Constant, a French-Swiss romantic, novelist, constitutional theorist and intermittent politician. Constant lived two hundred years ago, and he enjoyed the benefits of modern life and the freedoms it offered, including the freedom to follow your heart (like many romantics, he fell in love with the idea of falling in love). Constant lived through the French Revolution and the Terror that followed (though, as with Hobbes during the English civil war, he survived it by making sure he wasn't around for the worst bits – he went to Germany), then the rise and fall of Napoleon and the subsequent restoration of the French monarchy. So he also saw the downside of modern politics: its capacity to wreak havoc when it went wrong. What made him unusual was that he believed the two things were connected: the pleasures of modernity and its dangers. People who concentrate on their private satisfactions leave themselves vulnerable to spasmodic outbreaks of uncontrolled violence. Why? Because if everyone is busy following his or her heart, no one is keeping an eye on what the politicians are doing.

BENJAMIN CONSTANT

Constant gave a famous lecture in 1819 in which he compared ancient to modern political liberty. In the ancient world citizens were required to participate in politics as the focal point of their existence and the bedrock of their freedom. They could hardly ignore the threat of violence: it was everywhere in societies that were built on slavery and organised to fight endless wars. Peace was the rare exception, not the rule. Modern citizens, if they are lucky, can forget about violence and learn to downplay the importance of politics. Constant acknowledged that the Hobbesian idea of representative government lay at the root of the transition. But he thought Hobbes had only got it half right. Hobbes had understood the need to franchise out political decision-making but had neglected the risks of giving all