

private life. The avoidance of politics leaves anyone vulnerable to being swallowed up by politics without warning.

Leading a partly political life is never easy, however. There are so many distractions. Newspapers don't just report on what the politicians are getting up to. There is also sport, and art, and money, and travel, and celebrity, and sex. (Constant was keen on all these things, bar the first; he was keen on religion instead.) The internet makes it much worse: even if you wanted to inform yourself about politics, it's so hard to know where to start and when to stop. There is too much information and not enough time. We are still caught in the bind Constant identified. Political parties are dying, newspapers are disappearing and our political attention spans are spasmodic and haphazard at best. We allow government to drift away from us and then, when we discover that pockets of wealth and power and privilege have grown up unchecked, we lash out.

The fantasy of ancient politics doesn't have much pull any more. But other fantasies have taken its place: the anarchist fantasies of Occupy Wall Street, the originalist fantasies of the Tea Party movement. The prospect of revolution is remote, but occasionally there are outbreaks of real violence. The riots that took place in Britain in the summer of 2011 were not evidence of a broken society, as the doomsters imagined. They were evidence of a distracted society: alongside the pockets of privilege are pockets of real deprivation, and between the two are vast swathes of people who have failed to pay much attention to either. The randomness of the violence and the speed with which it flared up and then burned out

are typical of society in which most people are failing to live even a partly political life. Politics means too little most of the time, and then for a few moments it means too much. Long periods of indifference interspersed with brief spasms of fury is no way to do politics.



Stable, distracted modern societies can still be very different in how they deal with these outbreaks of violence. Some are much more punitive than others. Like everywhere else, Denmark has its prisons to lock up those who do significant harm to the persons and property