

enforce it. Only sovereigns are allowed to hurt people without any comeback.

Present-day readers often find Hobbes shocking. ‘Hobbesian’ has become a by-word for the bleakest possible view of human nature: one that imagines we are all trigger-happy paranoiacs who need strong government to stop us from killing each other. This is totally unfair. Hobbes was essentially an optimist who thought that people were killing each other only because they had failed to ask the basic question about politics: what is it for? If they could focus on that, the reasons for fighting would fall away. In fact, Hobbes seemed to think that a political society in which everyone accepted the right of a sovereign power to take the life-and-death decisions would be happy and free. The miserable depiction of the state of nature for which he remains famous is only one half of the story. It’s designed to point out how different life with a stable government could be: for ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ read ‘convivial, rich, nice, civilised and long’. In other words, think Denmark. If you showed Hobbes contemporary Denmark, I don’t think he would feel confounded by all the niceness. He would more likely feel vindicated. ‘I told you so’, he might say: take the religious feuding and the fearful insecurity out of politics and you can get to paradise, or at least the closest thing to paradise this world has to offer.

Of course, Hobbes would still recognise the cruelty and paranoia described in *The Exception*: given how human beings are, a murderous free-for-all is still possible anywhere, even in a Copenhagen office. But he’d think it a big mistake to assume that the

state of nature is the default condition of all human relationships or that civilisation is just a veneer to conceal the nastiness. Stable politics gives human beings the chance to escape from violence. If some refuse to take that chance, more fool them. Most of us will use the opportunity to create a new set of relationships based on trust and mutual benefit. Hobbes called this civil existence ‘artificial’, because it was man-made, not natural. But artificial in this context doesn’t mean fake. It means solid, reliable, durable (like a well-made car). It means real.

Much more genuinely shocking for us is not what Hobbes’s argument says about Denmark but what it implies about Syria. The point of Hobbes’s thought experiment was to get his readers to accept that any form of political rule is better than the alternative: chaos. Given a choice of political systems, Hobbes’s own preference was for monarchy because he felt there should be no confusion about who the real decision-maker was (parliaments, in his view, were far too prone to in-fighting). But Hobbes’s real message was that there is *no* choice: you have to stick with what you’ve got. When England still had a king, in 1642 – Charles I – Hobbes insisted that nothing should be done to undermine his authority, however unhappy his subjects might be about how he was using it. Don’t like his religion? Don’t like the taxes he makes you pay? Don’t like the wars he’s fighting? Tough. But in 1651, when Charles was dead and parliament was in charge, Hobbes instructed his readers to obey their new rulers. Same philosophy, different outcome. Hobbes thought the rebellion against the king had been a desperate, stupid, treacherous act; but once it