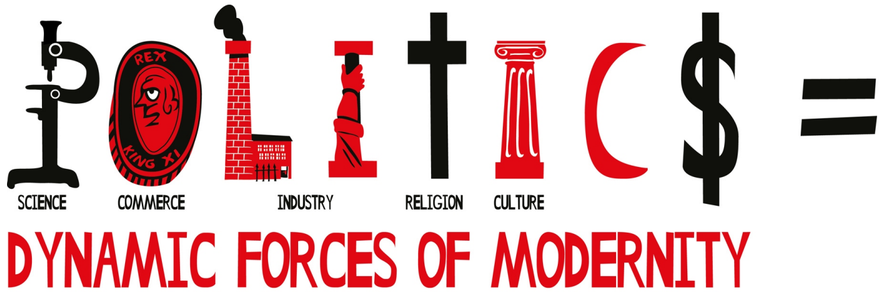
state (where they wrote 'LIBERTAS' on the walls of the city and allowed citizens to participate in government) or a Turkish sultanate (where all power was concentrated at the top and you could lose you head on the whim of the sultan)? Lucca sounds a lot better. But Hobbes thought it was an empty choice. 'Whether a Commonwealth be monarchical or popular', he wrote, 'the freedom is still the same.' In his view, writing 'LIBERTAS' on your city was never more than window-dressing: government is still government. It didn't much matter where you were in the seventeenth century. We can now see he had a point, though perhaps not quite in the way he meant. The difference that matters is between Lucca then and Denmark now. Compared with the paradise that is Denmark today, living anywhere three and a half centuries ago was pretty grim: poor, violent, confrontational, unpredictable and unstable.



Truly stable politics is transformative, as Hobbes predicted. Politics doesn't make the difference on its own. But it creates the space in which the dynamic forces of modernity – science, industry, commerce, culture, even religion – can interact to produce very wide-ranging social and material benefits. Once you live in a world where that transformation has been achieved in some places but not in others, your choices are bound to look different: being stuck in Syria could indeed be intolerable. I'll return to this in the third chapter, where I discuss the question of justice within and between different states in the twenty-first century. Wide-ranging social and material benefits may not in the end be enough. For now, let me just say that the choice between Denmark and Syria is a long way from the choice between Lucca and Constantinople. Our world is simultaneously an exemplification and a refutation of Hobbes's theory. Past a certain point, Hobbes's argument eats itself.