

# CONFRONTING LEVIATHAN

A HISTORY OF IDEAS

DAVID RUNCIMAN

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## PREFACE

This book is based on a series of talks I gave in the spring and early summer of 2020. That was the time when the UK, like much of the rest of the world, was under strict lockdown. Schools and universities were shut, most people were confined to their homes and a lot of us had time on our hands. The talks were put out as part of the *Talking Politics* podcast, which I have been hosting since 2016. I hoped to do two things: first, to offer some fresh thinking for politics students and others who were cut off from their usual places of learning; second, to try to relate the history of ideas to the big political themes thrown up by the pandemic. Being under lockdown is a singular political experience. We were being coerced for our own safety. We were being told to give up our freedoms in order to save lives. Never having been through a pandemic before, the starkness of these choices was a novelty for many of us. But I also felt that they were very familiar from key pieces of writing about politics over the past four centuries. In this book I identify twelve such pieces of writing and try to explain what they meant in their own time and what they might mean for us now.

The central organising theme is the idea of the modern state. I explain in the first chapter what I understand by this idea, where it came from and how its origins connect to many of the dilemmas we are facing today. Each of the chapters that follows can be read as a separate account in its own right, but together they form a single story, which explores what happened to the

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idea of the modern state from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the twentieth. It takes in wars and revolutions, the rise and fall of empires, the spread of democracy and the failure of communism, as well as feminist and post-colonial critiques. Almost everything about politics over the last four hundred years has changed beyond recognition, and yet the central puzzles of power, leadership, accountability and liberty remain. To be a citizen of a modern state in the early twenty-first century is to enjoy extraordinary advantages and to face unprecedented challenges. At the same time, it is to come face to face with the core paradox of modern politics: is the state that we built to keep us safe going to be our saviour or our destroyer? Could it somehow be both?

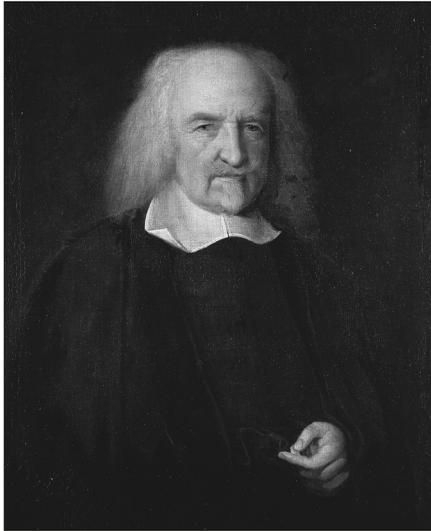
I have tried to retain the conversational style of the original talks as far as possible. I wanted to avoid getting bogged down in academic debates and have steered clear of technical language. This is a personal take on these classic texts, and it is very much in my own words. I have added a few quotations so we have some of the authors' own words too, which was not possible in the talks (when I was trying to speak as far as I could without referring to notes). Each chapter has a short biographical sketch of the author in question and the book ends with suggestions for further reading, listening and watching. There is a wealth of excellent material out there on all of the people and ideas I discuss in this book. Now that schools and universities are re-opening I am sure that some readers will also be getting alternative takes on these themes. This is not intended to be a definitive account. But I hope that, for anyone interested in the big ideas of modern politics that continue to shape how we all live, this book is a good place to start thinking about what is at stake.

Cambridge  
May 2021

## CHAPTER ONE

# HOBBS ON THE STATE

*Leviathan* (1651)



Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was born near Malmesbury in Wiltshire, the son of a poor clergyman. His uncle paid for him to go to Oxford as an undergraduate, where Hobbes complained about not being allowed to study mathematics. Instead, he learned the classics, and learned to dislike them. He subsequently went to work as a tutor for the wealthy Cavendish family in Derbyshire and he remained with the family for most of the rest of his life. He produced three versions

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of his political philosophy during the turbulent period of the English Civil War: *Elements of Law* in 1640 (which was a privately circulated pamphlet), *De Cive* in 1642 and *Leviathan* in 1651. His core political thinking remained broadly consistent throughout these three works, but its implications varied with the changing political circumstances. The *Elements* was strongly Royalist, *De Cive* and *Leviathan* somewhat less so. After the restoration of the monarchy he wrote a history of the conflict called *Behemoth*, which was very critical of the parliamentarians. It was only published posthumously. He also wrote widely on mathematics, optics, physics and the law, and he translated Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into English verse. He remained prolific into his old age, despite having 'the shaking palsy' (probably Parkinson's disease). He died a week after suffering a stroke, and there was some controversy, given his reputation for atheism, about whether he took Holy Communion before the end. He never married.

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Why begin with Thomas Hobbes and *Leviathan*? Why start in 1651? After all, the history of ideas goes back much further than that. Many of the concepts that we still use to organise our political life have their origins in the ancient world, with philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and with ideas such as democracy, justice and law. That is one place we could begin. But I want to start a lot later, and I want to start with Hobbes for two reasons.

First, because *Leviathan* is simply such an amazing piece of writing. There really isn't another book like it. It feels like a jolt in the history of ideas. It has some claims to be the most rational book ever written about politics, but it is also slightly mad, and Hobbes may have been a little bit mad when he wrote it. He produced it as a relatively old man by the standards of the time (he

was sixty-three when it was published). He'd been dangerously ill just beforehand and had nearly died. He may still have been suffering from the after-effects of what used to be called brain fever during its composition. *Leviathan* certainly reads like the work of someone who was a little feverish. Hobbes was, among many other things, a mathematician, and the book aims for a mathematical or geometrical understanding of politics. But it is also a work of art. The language in it is extraordinary. It is metaphorical and allegorical and analogical. The title *Leviathan* refers to a biblical sea monster. This is a book that is inspired both by Euclidean geometry and biblical imagery. As I said, there really isn't anything like it.

But another reason to start with this book and with Hobbes is that it marks the beginning of one particular story in the history of political ideas. You could say it is our story. Not of us as human beings: that's the older, longer story, the one that goes back to the ancient Greeks and beyond. This is the story of us as moderns – modern citizens or modern subjects of modern states. And the modern state, the idea of the modern state, is still the organising principle and institution of our politics and our world. It is the idea that I'm going to use to structure the themes that run through this book.

There is a real question, even as I write this – at the time of coronavirus and climate change, in the age of Facebook and machine learning – about whether the period dominated by the idea of the modern state is coming to an end. It may just be starting its great unravelling. We don't yet know. I will return to that question later on. For now, I want to go back to the beginning. Not to the very beginning of our human story, which is more than 100,000 years old, the rough age of *Homo sapiens*. Nor to the beginning of the story of politics, which perhaps dates from the point around 10,000 years ago when nomadic humans first settled in particular places; or to when humans began to construct the earliest cities, around 5,000 years ago; or to around

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2,500 years ago, when the Greeks first started to write down their sophisticated ideas of politics. My beginning in this book comes from only a few hundred years ago, when a very distinctive form of political organisation came into being.

Modern states are a relatively recent development in the grand sweep of human history. A significant part of this much shorter story originates with Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

Before I get on to Hobbes himself – who he was, what he thought, where he came from – I want to say a bit more about what I mean by the modern state. It's not at all obvious what it does mean, even if I say it is the organising idea of our politics. I will try to characterise it as simply as I can. The real story is more complicated than this, but that doesn't matter for now. I want to contrast in very broad terms what we might think of as a modern conception of politics, organised around the idea of the state, with what came before it, which I'm going to call pre-modern, and which is typified by the politics of the ancient world.

All political communities, wherever they are and whatever form they take, have two basic types of people in them. There are many other types too – the inhabitants of political communities can be divided up in multiple different ways – but there is a core separation at work. We can divide up political communities between the people that we would recognise as having a decision-making power, which includes the ability to set certain kinds of rules and to impose those rules, and the larger group, who live under those rules and who have to bear the consequences of those decisions. This more numerous group makes up what we might call the body of the state, as opposed to that narrower group, who have special powers within the state. There are lots of terms we could use to describe these different types of people: the many and the few, the mass and the elite, the ruled and their rulers. In a contemporary context we often call them 'the people' and 'the government'. Not all

these different words apply across the history of ideas. But it is possible to identify in almost all political communities those individuals we would recognise as having a form of governing power and those people we would recognise as constituting the ones being governed.

In many ways the fundamental question of politics arises out of this distinction. What is the relationship between these two sets of people: rulers and ruled, government and people? In pre-modern terms that question tended to present itself as a choice. You were invited to pick sides, or at least to say whether you primarily identified your state, your political community, with its head or its body, with the few or the many. Sometimes the question was whether you identified your state with its rich or its poor, because, it was assumed, the rich are always few while the poor are always many. There are lots of ways this division could play itself out, but at bottom there was always a choice. That choice was what Hobbes wanted to get away from. He wanted to come up with a form of politics that eliminated the need to take sides.

With the idea of the modern state, politics is specifically designed to preclude us from seeing it as a choice between the many and the few. Government and people do not stand in the kind of opposition that forces us to pick sides or, as often happened in ancient conceptions of politics, to construct an elaborate balance between them. In the ancient world political conflict could sometimes be avoided by weighing the different factions against each other. You could try to put them on the scales so that politics never tips too far one way or the other. You might set up your political community so that neither the rich nor the poor possess the means to tear the other apart: some power on this side, some power on that. That was the theory anyway.

But, as with any balance, it only takes a slight disturbance to upend the scales.

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In the Hobbesian – the modern – conception of politics, the state is constructed so that there is no choice. Government and people are still separate. They are not the same, and we can readily know they're not the same. Governments are made up of named individuals – a relatively small number – and it is possible to list them. You cannot list the members of the people. We are too many. We members of the people know we are not part of the government: we don't get to make those kinds of decisions. Government and people are still quite distinct. Yet the two sides of politics are locked together in a kind of mechanical embrace. We depend on each other for the system to function. We authorise them. They act for us. The two categories are still separate, but in the modern state it is extremely hard to prise them apart: separate but inseparable.

What's odd about this idea is that it's more confusing than the ancient idea. The ancient idea makes a lot of sense. Politics does often feel like a choice between being on the side of the people or the government. Is your state really a people's state or is it an elite state? Does it belong just to the few – the oligarchs, the lucky ones with the right connections? Or can the many truly have a say in it? Can they control its destiny? That still makes sense as a choice, and getting away from that choice often feels constraining and uncomfortable. Yet the idea of the modern state that tries to do away with this choice is the most powerful, the most successful and, as Hobbes shows, the most frightening idea in the history of political ideas. It is the idea that has come to rule our world, for now anyway, and maybe for a long time to come.

Let me give a couple of examples to try to illustrate both the strangeness and the power of this idea, in contrast to what went before. As an example of a pre-modern conception of politics, I'm choosing a book that could be the starting-point of an alternative history of modern political ideas. It is sometimes taken to be the first modern book about politics. Machiavelli's *The Prince*

pre-dates *Leviathan* by nearly 150 years, yet in many ways it feels more contemporary. It is certainly still read by many contemporary politicians. The word is that Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's press officer, made sure that everyone who worked in Blair's office in Downing Street had a copy of *The Prince* ready on their desks. It feels modern because it feels quite cynical. We still call cynical politicians 'Machiavellian' (we hardly call anyone 'Hobbesian' any more). *The Prince* is a book about the uses and abuses of power. It sets out to understand politics in its own terms, as a particular kind of ruthless enterprise that doesn't abide by the normal rules: above all, for Machiavelli, the rules of Christianity. Politics is not a holy business; it is a game of thrones. Many of those lessons still speak to politicians now as though they were written yesterday. 'It is better to be feared than to be loved', one of Machiavelli's soundbites, reads like a precept for the early twenty-first century as much as for the early sixteenth century. And yet I don't believe you can start a history of modern ideas about politics with this book because it's not a modern book.

The evidence it's not a modern book comes in its first line, which most people ignore as they race on to get to the juicy stuff. The opening is not the interesting bit of the book. It's not where you find the description of what goes on in the inner circles of power. But the first line of *The Prince* sets up what follows. It says: 'All the states that have held dominion over men are either republics or principalities.' Either/or is the pre-modern conception of politics. It divides politics up between republics – i.e., citizen states – and principalities – i.e., kingly states: either states where you identify the state with the body of the people or states where you identify it with its ruler. In truth, citizen states in the pre-modern world did not include most people: 'many' did not come close to meaning 'all'. These states excluded all those people from slaves to women to children who didn't count as being ruled because they didn't exist in the world

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of rules; they existed simply as someone else's property. The ancient world was no fun for most people. Machiavelli's world was not much better. But that's not what makes it pre-modern. It is pre-modern because it sets up politics, at a foundational level, as an either/or question. Machiavelli thought some of the guiding principles about politics might cut across that divide, but many of them didn't. This is the first line of his most famous book because he thought it really matters whether your state is a republic or a principality.

So if politics is a choice, and we need to say whether we live in a principality – which essentially means a state ruled by its head – or a republic – which means a people's state – what happens if we ask that question of our states today? Can we give an answer? Not really. Why not? Because we are moderns and ours are modern states, which don't divide up in that way.

Let's take two contemporary examples: the USA and the UK. Can we really not answer Machiavelli's question? Well, the United States of America is self-consciously a republic. It certainly calls itself a republic. In Machiavelli's terms – and many of the founders of the American republic had read Machiavelli very carefully – it is definitely, in theory at least, a state without a prince. By contrast, the United Kingdom is not a republic. It is a monarchy. We have plenty of princes. We probably have too many. Not just Prince Charles, our next king, but all the other ones as well, including the one who has now chosen to quit the royal family to live in the American republic with his American wife. But those aren't actually our princes in a Machiavellian sense. Even our head of state, the Queen, is not really our prince either. Our prince, as I write this, is Boris Johnson. And, of course, the United States of America has its princes too: Donald Trump, and now Joe Biden. Each presides over a kind of princely court, autocratic and fearful.

The British prime minister, along with the American president, has a power that goes beyond what Machiavelli would

consider acceptable in anything that passed for a republic or a people's state. And yet they aren't princes in the Machiavellian sense either, because a Machiavellian prince treats his state as his personal estate, as a kind of possession or private property. Johnson and Trump don't own their own states, much as they might wish they did. They have their power only thanks to us, because of us, on sufferance from us. They depend on the people. Yet at the same time they have a kind of power that goes beyond anything that could be tolerated in a true Machiavellian republic because we the people have almost no direct say in how we are ruled and in the decisions our rulers get to take. Once we put them in power, they have real power over us. Our states are not *either* republics *or* principalities. They are both, which actually means they are neither.

That conception of politics, where the government owes its power and its authority to the people and, as a result, the people are subject to the power and authority of the government is distinctly modern. It is a mutually co-dependent relationship. Even though we may think politics is still about the old choice, it is really hard to tease the two sides of modern politics apart. This is the idea that has some of its origins with Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. My aim is to make this idea seem familiar even though it is quite odd, and to make it seem odd even though it should be quite familiar. I want to familiarise and defamiliarise our politics at the same time. Hobbes is good for that, because he was so odd, yet his writing is so essential for making sense of our world. It's true that 1651 is a long time ago and almost everything about how we construct our lives has changed since then, but if we start with Hobbes, we should still be able to recognise something of ourselves in the world he describes.

Who was Thomas Hobbes? The first thing to say about the man himself is that a vital fact about his life is given simply by his dates: when he was born and when he died. He was born in 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, under Elizabeth I. He

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died in 1679, ninety-one years later, towards the tail end of the reign of Charles II. Even today that would be a long life. In the context of the seventeenth century it was a supremely long life. What's more, Hobbes lived during one of the most turbulent political periods in all of history. His longevity is not evidence of his secure personal circumstances. Quite the opposite. At the heart of his long life, right in the middle of it, there was profound political turmoil and danger. Hobbes's life was defined, at its core, by a kind of breakdown of politics, the sort of breakdown that posed an immediate threat to the lives of people just like him. It was this breakdown of politics that inspired him to write *Leviathan*.

The two great political calamities of this period were, on the one hand, the truly ghastly European trauma of the Thirty Years War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648, the very middle part of Hobbes's life (he was thirty when it started, sixty when it ended). This was one of the worst wars of all, a kind of war of all against all: a deeply violent, at times almost genocidal, conflict across the European continent, dividing people on grounds of religion, ethnicity, dynasty, economics, class and even family. It was hideous, brutal, interminable, the worst that politics can be. Hobbes did not see much of the Thirty Years War in person, but he heard all about it.

And then in Hobbes's own life, as a subject of the English Crown, the great trauma of his late middle age was the English Civil War, or the English revolution as it was more often known, which ran roughly from 1640 through to 1660 (so Hobbes was fifty-two when it began and seventy-two when it ended). At its heart, in 1649, was the execution of the king, followed by the attempt to create a new kind of republic. That attempt ultimately failed, and the revolution ended with the restoration of the Crown. *Leviathan*, Hobbes's masterpiece, appeared in 1651, so if you run the story of the English Civil War from 1642, when the fighting started, to 1660, when the king returned, it comes

right bang in the middle of the trauma. And it's the heart of the trauma that informs the book.

Hobbes liked to joke about the year of his birth that his mother went into labour when she heard the news that the Spanish Armada was sailing up the Channel because it so traumatised her. He was therefore born, in his own words, 'twinned with fear', and the circumstances of his birth made him throughout his life an extremely anxious and fearful man. He was what today we might call paranoid. He often felt that people were out to do him harm. But he had reason to be paranoid as well. It was a dangerous time to be alive, and mistakes – political mistakes, intellectual mistakes, religious mistakes – could cost you your life. As the saying goes: just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you.

Hobbes was frightened of political breakdown and he sought to avoid it. He literally avoided it in the case of the English Civil War, because the other crucial fact about *Leviathan* is that Hobbes didn't write it in England. He wrote it in Paris, where he went in part to escape the personal dangers of the war. It was a kind of safe haven, and the book was written – perhaps could only have been written – at one remove from the events that inspired it. Yet the paradox of Hobbes's life is that, even if he claims he was a fearful man, you would never know it from reading *Leviathan*, because *Leviathan* is intellectually and politically fearless. That's what makes it such a jolting book. It's as though nothing was holding him back. It was an incredibly dangerous thing for him to write. It did nearly cost him his life after the Stuarts were restored to the throne in 1660 because it's a book written right at the crux of the conflict, and so it was itself somewhat conflicted about whose side it was on, precisely because it was trying to get away from picking a side. When the king came back, it looked disloyal, and disloyalty to a king is always dangerous. More than that, it is a book that gave the impression, because of the way it tries to subsume religious

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divisions under a wider conception of politics, that its author was not just against religion but possibly against God too. As a result, Hobbes became known as an atheist. In the seventeenth century, atheism could also get you killed. So to be Hobbes was to be both fearful and also absolutely fearless. It's the fearless Hobbes, the brain-fevered Hobbes, the magnificent Hobbes, who wrote *Leviathan*.

What did he do in his life apart from write books? What did he do, we might say now, for a living? Well, he did lots of things, but he was, if we have to put a word to it, a kind of servant. He was born in relatively humble circumstances. He rose by his wits, his intelligence, and he came into the service, and then under the protection, of an aristocratic family, the Cavendish family (the earls, and subsequently the dukes, of Devonshire). He worked for them in lots of different capacities. He was a kind of house intellectual, their own celebrity author and pet mathematician. He was a tutor to their sons, and he took them on grand tours of Europe. So he was also a kind of travel guide. He was a correspondent, who exchanged letters with many other well-known intellectuals of his day. He looked after some of the Cavendish family's business affairs. In return for all this they provided him with protection and security, until they couldn't, until the Civil War made it too dangerous to be associated with eminent families. They protected him again as best they could afterwards. Part of the reason that Hobbes was in Paris was because that relationship of service and protection had broken down.

What did Hobbes believe? That is a difficult question to answer, as it is of anyone. But there is another word to describe Hobbes: he was a sceptic, scepticism being the philosophical position of doubt. The most famous sceptic of this period was a friend of Hobbes in France, René Descartes, the celebrated philosopher who came up with the catchphrase of scepticism. As we go through this history of ideas, a lot of the people I'll be

talking about also turn out to have a catchphrase associated with them. I'll get on to Hobbes's shortly. Descartes's catchphrase was 'Cogito ergo sum': 'I think therefore I am.' It's the sceptic's answer to the question, 'Is there anything we can know for sure?' If you doubt everything, if you say you want to be absolutely certain, there is only one thing you can be truly certain of, which is the existence of your own doubt. If nothing else, the universe must contain the doubter. You can't have scepticism unless there is someone or something capable of thinking sceptical thoughts. An alternative catchphrase might have been: 'I doubt therefore I am.'

Scepticism is a method of thought rather than a permanent state of mind. The sceptic is looking for a baseline of certainty on which to build. Descartes built from his base all the way up to a proof of the existence of God. From the doubt there could be knowledge came the knowledge there must be doubt. That for Descartes was enough to reconstruct both religion and science. Hobbes's scepticism didn't go quite that deep, and it wasn't quite that elaborate in what it tried to rebuild. His scepticism was an attempt to answer what he saw as the fundamental question of social and political life, at a time when the absence of a baseline of certainty was tearing communities apart. The choices posed by politics – your king or my parliament, your pope or my church, your family or my family, your tribe or my tribe – produced conflict and death. Was there anything that ran underneath all this conflict that was beyond doubt, even for the people who disagreed about everything else? Was it possible to find the one thing on which all rational human beings ought to be capable of agreeing? Hobbes thought it was possible. The key was to think about politics afresh by persisting with doubt until you found the bedrock of certainty on which a new idea of politics could be built, one that wouldn't break under the pressure of human division because it was anchored in something that ran beneath it.

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So what did Hobbes think were the things that we could all agree on? To start with, we can all know that we're alive. Like Descartes and doubt, Hobbes reckoned that to have these endless divisions, we have to be living them. And what does it mean to be alive? This was the dawn of the scientific revolution, when people were beginning systematically to explore what drives the natural world, what keeps it moving. To be alive is to be in motion. Life is a form of animation because the opposite of being alive is to be inanimate. The inanimate thing is dead. The animate thing has an animator. *Anima* means a kind of soul. But for Hobbes it was more like a motor. 'That when a thing lies still,' he wrote, 'unless somewhat else stir it, it will lie still forever, is a truth that no man doubts of.'

We are motivated to keep moving. That's what it means to live. It was the age when science was first uncovering the ways in which the heart was a kind of motor pumping blood around the body. People were beginning to think about – and Hobbes spent a lot of his own time thinking about – how light moves. The world is built out of motion, and we are creatures in motion. That's Hobbes's definition of being alive: to be a creature in motion. It doesn't rest on any overarching philosophy or theology. It's what we can know simply by observing ourselves. And to be alive is to want to stay alive. Creatures in motion want to keep moving, because to cease to move is to die. Of course, some people don't want to live – Hobbes understood about depression – but in his terms that's not a rational state of mind. If you are a thinking, reasonable person, you will want to keep moving.

This motion will bring us into conflict with each other. That's another thing on which Hobbes thought we ought to be able to agree, because we just have to look around us. He sometimes described life as a kind of race. We're all running because we're all moving. Who knows what we're all running towards, but we're certainly running away from death. We can't

do it indefinitely, but we will try to do it for as long as we can. This is not like a 400-metre race around a neat running track where we all stay in our lanes and the prize goes to the person who crosses the line first. It's more like – and this isn't Hobbes's image but it's what his argument makes me think of – that crazy annual race that happens in a village in Gloucestershire, where the participants chase a giant rolling cheese down a hill. After a while you can't see the cheese, it's long gone, but people are just careening down and bumping into each other, and some of them keep going and some of them don't, because there are no lanes. We're all pursuing the same object though with little idea of what. It's just what we do. We don't really have a sense of what's the right and the wrong path to take. We are bouncing around. We bounce into each other. We bounce off each other and we knock each other over. If you go down and you don't get up, then you have stopped moving and to stop moving in the race of life, for Hobbes, is death.

What makes collisions in the race of life so dangerous – more dangerous than pursuing a giant cheese down a hill – is that they are going to look different to each of us. We are not going to perceive the danger in the same way because if I am careening towards you and you are careening towards me, I'm the threat to you but you're the threat to me. Still we ought to be able to agree, even if we can't agree on how to resolve individual collisions, that it would be better to avoid collisions in general if we can. Life will go better if we crash into each other less, if we can somehow keep in our lanes even though there are no lanes. Maybe if there were rules of the game, if there were guiding principles that would steer us away from the most destructive kind of clashes, we might be able to escape from a situation where, because you might be a threat to me, I feel I have to take you out of the race before you can even come close.

Hobbes thought we could agree on those rules. He called them the laws of nature. They're natural because they are laws

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that apply to us as living, rational creatures. There are quite a lot of them – in *Leviathan* Hobbes ends up listing nineteen laws of nature in total – but they can be summed up by a simple principle. We should all try ‘*to seek peace, and to follow it*’. Peace is the thing we’re after; not war, not collision, not conflict. Those are just accidental by-products of being alive. Life will go better if we all try to seek peace. That’s the basic law of nature, and we have to live by that law. So that should be what guides us. But – and this is the problem that ends up requiring a new kind of politics to resolve – the law of nature is also a right, a right of nature to do whatever we think is necessary to preserve ourselves. Peace presupposes our continued existence. No law would make sense if it didn’t allow for that.

This then is the fundamental problem. Our natural instincts – our drive to stay alive – generate both the constraint of the law of nature and the licence of the right of nature. We all have the right to interpret the law of nature in a situation of conflict in order to try to preserve our natural existence. This could be conflict over anything: religion, love, money, tax, war, aesthetics. I might fear you because I don’t like the way you look. It would be trivial, but it could also be deadly. Humans are capable of fighting about anything. The law of nature, which says ‘seek peace’, when translated into the right of nature, which says ‘do what you need to do to preserve yourself’, means the conflict will continue because the conflict will not look the same, depending on which side you are on. Hobbes was clear that rational human beings, even though they know everyone ought to seek peace, also know that everyone has the right to judge what counts as peace. As a result, rational human beings will seek to preempt each other. If they see a distant threat, a dimly perceived threat, something that might turn into a threat one day, they will try to take it out before it becomes an overwhelming threat. So the recipe of everyone seeking peace will morph into what Hobbes famously, chillingly, called ‘the war of all against all’: the

nightmare that in many ways was Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century.

But there is one more step to go. There is still one more thing that we can agree on. If we understand the nature of the problem, that seeking peace is a recipe for war because we cannot agree on what counts as peace, then we should be able to agree to let one person decide for all of us what counts as peace. We hand over our right to make that choice. We should do it rationally. We should do it willingly. And then everything changes. This is the magic of the arrangement – it's mechanical but it's almost alchemical too. It effectively creates something out of nothing. If everyone agrees to make the switch, the person with whom the right to decide on peace now rests has the power to force everyone else to abide by his (or her or its) decision. That person still exists in the state of nature. He (or she or it) has no special natural powers. But because that person's decision speaks for all; it has all our strength behind it.

Hobbes was not naïve. He knew that we might regret giving up our right to decide to someone else. We might not like the decisions being taken on our behalf. We might even think they are a threat to us – after all, what if the decision-maker decides that *we* are the threat to peace? Why give over your judgement about your personal safety to someone who might make you feel profoundly unsafe? Hobbes's answer was that in those circumstances you might well want to back out of the agreement. But if the agreement works, you won't be able to. If you are seen as the threat, then everyone else will have good reason to do what the decision-maker says. This is the scariest feature of Hobbes's state. You can run – he says explicitly that you have the right to run away – but you can't hide.

The two key terms that Hobbes used to describe this arrangement are words that still permeate our politics. The person with whom the power rests is called the 'Sovereign', and the process by which the power is acquired is called 'Representation'. The

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sovereign represents us by deciding for us about peace. That for Hobbes was the only way to achieve peace. But those two words don't really mean for Hobbes what they mean for us. They are narrower, more technical, more minimal, slightly more chilling than we might want them to be. 'Sovereign' for Hobbes is a neutral term. It just means the decider, the decision-maker. Hobbes is adamant that it matters more that there should be a sovereign than who or what the sovereign should be. He did have a personal preference. He thought politics went best when the decision-maker was a single human being: that is, a king or queen. It's worth remembering that the sovereign under whom Hobbes was born and spent the early years of his life was a queen, Queen Elizabeth, in many ways the best sovereign he ever knew. His preference was for monarchy. But in 1651 there was no monarch. Two years previously the king had been beheaded. So it was important for Hobbes to say that it doesn't matter. This got him into deep trouble afterwards, when Charles II, the son of the executed monarch, returned to the throne. But in 1651 the logic of Hobbes's argument in *Leviathan* required him to say that the sovereign could be a parliament. Indeed, in England in 1651, the sovereign *was* the parliament. It could be anyone, or anything. It could be a large group, a small group or it could be one individual. If it's a parliament, the decision will have to be made by majority voting. What matters is that there is a decision, and that decision is taken to be the decision of all. If parliament is taking the decisions, then even monarchists – even monarchists like Hobbes – have to accept this. He said as much in a special appendix he added to the final manuscript of *Leviathan*. It was fearless intellectual honesty, and it cost him his peace of mind and almost his life.

If you can accept the logic of this argument, you can get to peace. If you can't accept it, Hobbes thought, you will have no path to peace. Your politics will break down. Your jealously guarded right to make your own political choices will

destroy you. The thing that Hobbes wanted to emphasise above anything else is that what people think is the real political choice – republic or principality, Protestant or Catholic, me or you, us or them – is not the real choice. If that's how your politics boils down, something's gone wrong. The only true political choice is order or chaos. The political choice is you either have a state – with this tight, mechanical, interlocking relationship of representation, so that you cannot have a sovereign without the authorisation of the people, but the people have no rights against the sovereign because the sovereign is the decider – or you don't. You either have that arrangement or you have nothing. The alternative to this form of politics is not a better politics or a worse politics. It is no politics at all. That for Hobbes was the real choice.

What are the implications of this radical, jolting, slightly mad, incredibly powerful argument? It is easy to misread them. There are various misconceptions about Hobbes. One of them is that he is a deeply pessimistic political thinker, because what he is best known for is not his description of the world after the state has been created but his description of the world beforehand, which he lays out in the first part of *Leviathan*. He calls that world – as did many other authors writing in this genre – 'the state of nature'. This is the state of human beings in their natural condition before they have created the artificial, peace-producing, decision-making machine that will save them: before they have built the Leviathan.

That description of the natural human condition is, in Hobbes's version, famously bleak and miserable. His catchphrase is 'nasty, brutish and short'. It describes the life of humans in the absence of a state, during the war of all against all, under the state of nature. And it leads people to imagine that Hobbes must have had therefore a bleak view of what humans are, indeed a negative or even a cynical view, that he didn't allow himself to think the best of us. It's assumed he thought the worst of us,

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that in the absence of a state we were liable to go around killing each other, because that's simply who we are. We appear in this version of the state of nature to be a species of killing machine. But that doesn't really capture Hobbes at all. Not least because to be a sceptic is not anything like the same as being a cynic. A cynic thinks the worst of people. A cynic always looks for the nasty motives behind human action. A sceptic doesn't think the worst of people, or the best of people, for that matter. The sceptic just wants to know is there anything we can know for sure. Hobbes was one of those.

It is true that some of what he writes, particularly in *Leviathan*, with its lingering traces of brain fever, is a little cynical. It's not a particularly rosy picture of what human beings are and what we're capable of. It's also quite funny. Hobbes writes a lot about the quality of human existence that he calls vainglory: not just vanity but vainglory, that preening, delusional pursuit of the favourable glances of others as everyone's careening down the hill chasing the cheese. 'Vainglorious men,' he wrote, 'estimate their sufficiency by the flattery of other men, without assured ground of hope from the true knowledge of themselves.' We still care about how we look in the thick of the chase. We want to fall gracefully. We build up all of these elaborate conceits to persuade ourselves that we look better than the person charging down the hill next to us. For Hobbes that makes us slightly ridiculous, because we are slightly ridiculous. So perhaps it is a little cynical. But Hobbes did not think that people were nasty. Nasty, brutish and short does not describe human motivation. It describes our lives in the state of nature: unpleasant, brutish, no better in a way than what an animal might expect, and short because we stop moving much sooner than we might. But it's not because we are nasty, even if we are ridiculous. It's because we can't trust each other, however much we may try.

One of the words Hobbes uses to describe the problem with the state of nature is what he calls our 'diffidence' of one

another. It means a kind of shyness. It also means a lack of trust. It is this wariness of what other people might do that leads us to take pre-emptive action: 'For from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can.' We aren't natural monsters or brutes. We are just our innocent, anxious, vulnerable, natural selves. We never know for sure what we're up against. We're shy. We're mistrustful. Our lives are solitary not because Hobbes thought that human beings were naturally solitary creatures. We're always trying to make alliances. We're always trying to forge little communities that could become bigger communities. We seek peace. We want it. We desperately want it. We know the cost of not having it. But we can't get it, not because we don't like each other but because we don't trust each other. The state of nature of Hobbes's *Leviathan* describes a world not of solitary, grumpy individuals wandering around looking for opportunities to do each other harm but a world of tragic, futile attempts to build communities around family or religion, around prosperity or commerce, of trying to create stability, trying to pass things on from generation to generation, and we keep seeing it break down, keep seeing it fail. The fragility of political community was, among other things, what the ancient world taught us. It taught us that if you do politics that way – the either/or way – you can build the most amazing political structures, but they won't last. Everything natural is fragile. Balance is fragile. The choice is always precarious in pre-modern politics. If you can get away from the choice, it might be ugly to start with. It will certainly be highly artificial. But artifice – the artificiality of the well-constructed machine – is what lasts. This is a sceptic's, not a cynic's, account of politics.

Another misconception about Hobbes, because of the way he constructs the state through an agreement to have a state, is that he belongs to what is often called 'the social contract'

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tradition. This is a tradition that significantly precedes Hobbes and had a life well after Hobbes. He certainly did not originate it. But Hobbes doesn't belong to that line of thinking anyway. His argument is different – crucially, uniquely different – and the difference is what's so distinctive about *Leviathan*. The conventional social contract tradition says that to build a state out of nature the process has to happen in two stages. You can't do it all in one go. First of all, those individuals living a natural existence have to make themselves into a society. They have to do this because the social contract is going to have to be between a society and the political entity that will have the power within that society. It was thought that it couldn't be between government and individuals because that wouldn't be a 'social' contract; it would just be thousands of individual contracts. So first you have a contract between a group of individuals to turn themselves into a people – a community, a society, some kind of collective unit – and then you can have a contract between that people and its government. Two contracts, not one. The social contract tradition, certainly as it preceded Hobbes, tended to have within it the echoes of the pre-modern conception of political choice. These contracts were trying to get away from that choice by turning choices into contractual arrangements. But the two contracts constitute the two sides of politics, the people and the government. The lingering possibility remains of being asked to choose which contract you prefer.

Hobbes needed to get away from that for his own intellectual purposes. He had to remove the possibility, the lingering taint, of that choice: he had to collapse the double contract into a single arrangement. His word for it was a 'covenant'. 'Covenant' means an agreement about the future. I'll do it if you say you'll do it. And if you'll do it, then I say I'll do it. But the agreement had to happen in one go. There couldn't be first a society and then a government or a sovereign. The natural state of human beings – consisting of what Hobbes called 'a multitude', just a

crowd of individuals – had to create government and society all in one go. That’s the argument that he makes in *Leviathan*. He says, in one of the most important passages in the whole book:

A multitude of men are made ‘one’ person when they are by one man or one person represented, so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular. For it is the ‘unity’ of the representer, not the ‘unity’ of the represented, that maketh the person ‘one’. And it is the representer that beareth the person, and but one person; and ‘unity’ cannot otherwise be understood in multitude.

What this means is that you cannot create a society until everyone has a single representative: i.e., until you have a sovereign. There is no unity in multitude except through representation, so there can never be a choice between society and government. You either get both or you get neither. The risk of the double contract is that it re-opens the possibility of taking sides. If society contracts with the government, then perhaps the government will be seen to have broken the terms of the contract, and then maybe individuals will take the side of their society against the government. In Hobbes’s terms, that route leads to civil war.

Crucially for Hobbes, under his arrangement there is no contract with the sovereign. The only contract, the only covenant, is between the individual members of the multitude. We agree among ourselves to let someone decide for us. We do not come to an arrangement where we say, ‘You are allowed to decide for us but only if you agree to do this or do that’ (most likely, ‘we’ll obey you if, and only if, you agree to protect us’). We say to each other, ‘If you’ll agree to it, I’ll agree to it, so if I agree to it, will you agree to it?’ The sovereign does not have any obligations under the covenant. The sovereign is still in the state of nature: the only person in that state. The sovereign retains those natural

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rights we all once had to decide on what counts as peace. So there will be only one definition of peace: the sovereign's. Not because we have instructed the sovereign under terms to do it, but because we have left the sovereign with the right to do it, and the right then becomes the power to do it, because we've all agreed to abide by our covenant with each other. That's how it's meant to work. It's a strange, puzzling idea, because everything has to happen in one big-bang moment. First you had nothing, and suddenly you have a society and a state through the creation of a sovereign. They all go together, which means you can't have any one part of that package without the whole package. There is no choice. There is no society without government. If you don't like your government, then you can't have your society. You can't have any kind of politics at all.

Another thing that's sometimes said about Hobbes is that he's a forerunner of a kind of totalitarianism because, if it's true that the sovereign is under no obligation to us, we have nothing to hold the sovereign to. We have no rights against extreme abuses of power, no grounds to complain. Hobbes is very clear about this. The sovereign has absolute power. Our 'representative' does not answer to us. The sovereign decides, and we have to live with the consequences because we have authorised the sovereign to decide. And because we have authorised the sovereign to decide, if some of us break away because we're not happy with the arrangement, the rest of us will pull the defectors back. That looks like a really nasty form of politics, and even at the time many of Hobbes's critics said so: isn't this out of the frying pan into the fire? Who would want to sacrifice their natural rights for this? It's still a very real question. But it's not totalitarian. It's not even close.

Absolutism is not totalitarianism. One way to characterise the difference is that under a totalitarian system – Stalinism, for instance – the sovereign power tries to decide about everything. Politics permeates all of life. The decisions made at the top by

the head of the state, and by the small, privileged group around that person, cover everything. There is no escape. People are not allowed to move away from a political life because politics is total. Under an absolute system, by contrast, the sovereign does not decide about everything. It's simply not possible. But the sovereign can still decide about anything. That's the difference: totalitarianism is everything politics; absolutism is anything politics.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes is quite clear that it would be absurd to think that any sovereign – whether king or parliament – could pass laws, issue edicts or make commands that covered every aspect of the lives of the members of the state. This is the middle of the seventeenth century. If you are in power as a king or a parliament, in Whitehall or in Westminster, you barely have any idea what's going on five miles down the road. Communication is terrible. Transportation is awful. Information is more often just guesswork. You are completely reliant on news that's always out of date by the time it reaches you. People five miles away can't be controlled by you. People fifty miles away barely even exist for you. People three hundred miles away are just a rumour to you. Totalitarianism under those conditions is a laughable idea. It is also, Hobbes says, a terrible idea. Why would any sovereign, why would any person left with this right of nature, think their job was to pass laws about everything? Not least because it's very unlikely to lead to peace. The definition of peace will become incomprehensible if there are too many laws and not enough clarity. The job of the sovereign remains – though the sovereign cannot be held to this job except by God and it's not clear that Hobbes thought God even exists – to make the lives of subjects go better. It would be absurd to try to engineer this in each and every case. It would also be unachievable. As he wrote: 'There is no Commonwealth in the world, wherein there be rules enough set down, for the regulating of all the actions, and words of men (as being a thing impossible).'

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Where there is no law – and most aspects of life will not be covered by law – Hobbes insisted that people should be free to do ‘what their own reasons shall suggest, for the most profitable to themselves’. That word ‘profitable’ makes many critics – including some of the critics I’m going to talk about in later chapters – think that Hobbes was a proto-capitalist, that this was about defending the rights of the profit-makers. What he really meant by ‘profitable’ was simply to do whatever seems best, as creatures in motion, as we pursue the objects that we’re drawn towards and seek distance from the objects that repel us. That’s just life. It’s what we all do. We’re all seeking profit in some way or another – not narrow economic profit, but we are seeking to be better off than we were yesterday. And we must be free to do that. It’s the inevitable consequence of this political arrangement because most parts of our lives will not be covered by law. Yet crucially, under the Hobbesian arrangement, the sovereign gets to decide which those parts are.

There’s the rub: you can never be sure that the sovereign won’t suddenly decide that something that seemed to you to be your personal concern has become a threat to the state. You might live in a Hobbesian state where the laws are pretty minimal. Some things are almost certainly going to require sovereign decision, including literal questions of war and peace. The sovereign decides when the state goes to war. The sovereign decides how to pay for it. The sovereign will decide about tax. In all states, Hobbes argued, the sovereign will need to manage the money supply. He also said that the sovereign will need to look after the basic welfare of the poorest people in the state. It would be a danger to peace in any state to let some people fend for themselves when they can’t. But on the issue of religion, the biggest source of conflict in the seventeenth century, Hobbes is relatively agnostic as to whether the sovereign ought to heavily regulate, partially regulate or actually be pretty tolerant about the public manifestation of personal beliefs. If it’s not a threat

to peace, let people believe what they want to believe. Possibly, even, let them worship how they want to worship. Anyway, at some level regulating belief is another impossible task because no one truly knows what anyone believes in his or her heart.

So *Leviathan* – despite its reputation – is a book that not only allows for but seems actually to favour the idea of a tolerant sovereign and a broadly liberal state. Hobbes never wants the sovereign to pursue futile forms of control. Yet on Hobbes's terms you can never be sure. One day the sovereign might decide that your personal practices, your religion, your sex life, those parts of your life that you think have got nothing to do with politics, what goes on inside the place where you live, inside your bed, even inside your head, any of these might be deemed a threat to the security of the state, to be in some sense destabilising the public order. It's always a possibility. And then you have no recourse. That's what makes Hobbes's *Leviathan* terrifying. It's not that all aspects of your life will be controlled, but that you never know from one day to the next with absolute certainty which aspects will be controlled.

This arbitrariness is what gives Hobbesian politics its distinctive flavour. Arbitrariness is not what Hobbes wanted. He was a fearful man, and he didn't like uncertainty. He was a sceptic searching for solid ground. But he thinks the final price of security is the knowledge that the sovereign ultimately must be allowed to decide what counts as a threat, which means there is always the risk of arbitrariness. It is the risk in all modern states, even the ones, like ours, that have manifold, multiple safeguards against this. There is always the risk in a modern state that the sovereign power in the state will decide that the threat is you.

There are two really profound implications of this conception of politics. They connect because in each case, although the pre-modern choice has been neutered, it has not gone away. That choice – what was once the fundamental choice – has been internalised into the body politic, into the lives of people who

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are living in this state, both at the top and at the bottom, so that everyone, in order not to have to make that choice, is leading a kind of double life. There is a doubleness all the way through this conception of politics, and there is a doubleness all the way through our conception of politics too. That is why, for all our distance from it, we are still inhabiting Hobbes's political world.

The sovereign will lead a double existence. To be a sovereign in Hobbes's state is both to have extraordinary power and also to have ordinary power. Remember how the original arrangement is set up: the covenant that produces the state does not actually give the sovereign any power that did not exist in the state of nature. It leaves the sovereign as the only person with that power, the power that we once all had to decide for ourselves. Once we could all decide what counted as peace. Now just one person gets to make that decision. But if only one person is deciding, that makes this one person completely different from everyone else. It's almost as though the sovereign is the only one still leading a natural life. And yet it's a completely unnatural life because, as Hobbes says, it's a wholly artificial role. It's been created mechanically. Using the machinery of the state, the sovereign has to rule by fear, by terror, in order to corral the members of the state when they might be thinking of backing out of their undertakings. Hobbes wrote: 'He hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to conform the wills of them all.' At the same time the sovereign is meant to produce peace. And more than that, comfort too – 'By safety here, is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other contentments of life.' That's the job. The role is to be both a stabiliser and a terroriser. A comfort and a fright.

It remains the job of sovereign powers in modern states. Sovereignty always has both of those elements in it. Politicians with sovereign power are still somewhat terrifying, and yet their role is to make us all safer and more secure. Hobbes wanted to

strip the fear out of politics by putting it all in one place, where it wouldn't go away, but so that we could at least be sure where it is. If we know where it is, in an ideal version of this system, perhaps we can over time increasingly forget about it. The terror will abate. The sense of security will endure. That was Hobbes's hope. It wasn't a futile one.

But if you just think about what it would mean to be such a sovereign, it's going to be really hard. At times it's going to be profoundly confusing. Are you meant to be like the people who left you with the power, or are you meant to be different from them? There is at the heart of Hobbes's conception of politics, going right back to the beginning, to the original scepticism, a feeling that we are all equal because we are all equally vulnerable. That's what makes natural security a false promise. Yes, we're all different in some respects. Some are smarter than others. Some are more powerful naturally. Some are stronger. Some more adept. Maybe you're more wily; maybe I'm more cunning. Some people are going to look better. Running down the hill, some are more elegant than others. But we're all equally vulnerable to each other because even the weakest, even the least cunning, person has the power to end the life of the strongest in the state of nature. None of us is ever secure. To escape that condition we create a sovereign who hasn't been chosen by us, is not necessarily smarter than us or stronger than us, who is just another, equally vulnerable, human being or group of vulnerable human beings. If it's a parliament, it's still the same people that we are, or were, when we were all vulnerable together. But now with this extraordinary, artificial power, which changes everything. It's not at all clear just how human it is to be those people and to have that power.

The other deep division that Hobbes leaves us with is for everyone else, those of us who aren't the sovereign, who aren't the government – the vast majority who are living in this peculiar state because we understand that it's the only way to rescue

ourselves from political conflict. There is also at the heart of the Hobbesian account of politics a kind of paradox, which is that this extreme version of politics, this extreme form of power, is the only thing that can save us from politics. If this state goes well, then increasingly we should have to think less and less about politics. The laws will be there in the background. As long as we don't disobey them, we can get on with our lives and do the thing that is most profitable for ourselves. We can carry on running down that hill, chasing that cheese, and some of us might catch the cheese. Some of us might even share the cheese. Many of us might do something better with our time than to keep chasing the cheese. All of us will do something else with our time because we will have the peace to make that choice. Our state protects us. It keeps us safe, and so we don't have to worry about it so much. This is project fear to rescue us from fear. But we will be leading a divided life under this form of politics because we never know when the fear is going to come back, and we know that the power to bring the fear back, to take the life-and-death decisions, does not reside with us. We have authorised someone else to take that decision, which means that in the soul of every subject who thinks of themselves as a citizen of a modern state is a kind of division that never goes away, and if you nag away at it, it could keep you awake at night. Here's the puzzle of the modern state: the only thing that can rescue us from politics is this form of politics, which means that we're never rescued from politics.

That puzzle, that dilemma, is with us now. Our states are increasingly far removed from Hobbes's original conception – the ideas that lie behind that growing distance will be the subjects of the following chapters. But I write this during a twenty-first-century pandemic that has seen states around the world take life-and-death decisions on behalf of their citizens. We have been locked down in our own homes for our own safety. We have found ourselves at the mercy of judgements being made

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by people – by politicians – who are not so different from us yet who have a power over us that we sometimes struggle to comprehend. That these people are not so different from the rest of us: is that reassuring, or is it terrifying?