

Can We Escape the Ruling Class?

Written by Roderick Long, as published at the Center for a Stateless Society.

We tend to think of the “ruling class” as a Marxist concept; but the notion has a long history before Marx, particularly in the ancient Greek and Roman historians, and class analysis played a central role in 18th and 19th century classical liberalism as well.

Whenever the decisions and actions of the political machinery are largely controlled by a particular group, and serve to advance the interests and reinforce the power of that group, such a group is properly called a *ruling class*. A ruling class is, obviously, a bad thing to have. This raises two questions:

- How does a ruling class operate and maintain its power?
- Is it possible to construct a political system that will not fall prey to a ruling class?

With regard to the first question: I do not believe that a ruling class needs to exercise its will or advance its interests consciously. That does often happen, of course. But what more usually happens, I think, is that as various policies are proposed or adopted in the governmental arena, those that adversely affect powerful, influential, and concentrated interests will get noticed and vigorously attacked, while those that affect the average person — too busy to keep track of what the government is doing, too poor to hire lawyers and lobbyists, too dispersed to have an effective voice — will be largely unopposed. This creates a kind of filter mechanism, that strains out legislation that harms the powerful, while allowing legislation that harms the weak to pass unhindered. The result, whether intended or unintended, is that government power tends to be turned more and more, by a kind of malign invisible hand, in the direction of advancing the interests of the powerful at the expense of the interests of the weak.

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