

Classical Liberalism's Impossible Dream

Editor's Pick. Written by Robert Higgs.

I can understand why someone might embrace classical liberalism. I did so myself more than forty years ago. People become classical liberals for two main reasons, which are interrelated: first, because they come to understand that free markets “work” better than government-controlled economic systems in providing prosperity and domestic peace; second, because people come to believe that they may justifiably claim (along more or less Lockean lines) rights to life, liberty, and property. These two reasons are interrelated because the Lockean rights provide the foundation required for free markets to exist and operate properly.

Like Locke, classical liberals recognize that some persons may violate others' rights to life, liberty, and property and that some means of defending these rights adequately must be employed. On this basis they accept government (as we know it), but only with the proviso that the government must be limited to protecting people against force and fraud that would unjustly deprive them of life, liberty, and property. They believe that government (as we know it) can perform these functions, whereas private individuals without such government would be at the mercy of predators and hence that their lives would be, as Hobbes supposed, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Nobody wants that.

So, to repeat, I can understand why someone might become a classical liberal. However, as the years have passed, I have had increasing difficulty in understanding why someone would remain a classical liberal, rather than making the further move to embrace genuine self-government in place of the classical liberal's objective, “limited government.” My difficulty arises not so much from a dissatisfaction with government's being charged with protecting the citizens from force and fraud, but from a growing conviction that government (as we know it) does not, on balance, actually carry out these tasks and, worse, that it does not even try to carry them out except in a desultory and insincere way—indeed, as a ruse.

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