

The Classical Liberal is a Dreamer

Classical liberalism does not disavow the state. Indeed, it embraces and celebrates it, but only, the classical liberals insist, in the form of “limited government.” This regime, sustained by taxation, includes legislators who enact rules, executives who control police and armed forces to enforce the rules, and judges who settle disputes between persons and between persons and the state. In many versions it also includes active engagement in the construction and maintenance of public works (now often called infrastructure) and a system of government schools (now often with compulsory attendance). The classical liberal imagines that this setup will support free markets and more generally a free society and that it can be sustained indefinitely.

Yet, upon reflection, one sees that this regime has everything a state needs to function as an authoritarian or even a tyrannical system of rule. Legislators can enact tyrannical rules; executives can employ the police and the armed forces to enforce compliance with these rules; and judges can rule in favor of the state in disputes. Public works can be used mainly to serve state purposes, and the government schools can dispense indoctrination along with the academic and practical subjects. Moreover, notwithstanding admonitions of the need for eternal vigilance, nothing ensures that a classical liberal version of limited government will stay limited, and many considerations indicate that it will expand its size, scope, and power over time, especially during real or imagined crises.

In sum, the classical liberal is a dreamer. He places his faith in a setup that has little chance of persisting and may in fact be hostile to the people’s rights and liberties from the outset. He is the true utopian, the one who imagines that the viper can be not only tamed but transformed into the essential guardian of a free and flourishing society.