

# WHY THE WORST RISE TO THE TOP

Reading time ~ 2 min.

Can dictatorships or authoritarian regimes be better than democracies?

Friedrich Hayek received a Nobel Prize in economics, but most of his writings were dedicated to political philosophy. Hayek worked and lived in Austria, Germany, Britain, America; taught at the London School of Economics, University of Chicago and was always surrounded by brilliant minds such as John Maynard Keynes, Sir John Hicks, Bertrand Russell, Milton Friedman, to name a few. Hayek passed away in 1992, at the age of 93.

One of Hayek's most famous works is *The Road to Serfdom*. My favourite chapter in that book is called *Why the Worst Get On Top*. Could we argue, asks Hayek, that as long as good people come to power in authoritarian regimes, they can and will use the immense power of that system to everyone's benefit? Could we argue, therefore, that there is nothing wrong with an authoritarian system per se, what matters is the character and quality of the people who get to the top of that system?

Hayek argues that in authoritarian regimes people with worst – rather than best – qualities make it to the top, for three main reasons.

**First**, educated and intelligent people usually have differing values. They constantly question, debate and discuss. But in order for an authoritarian system to survive, large groups of people must unite around similar values. Since educated and intelligent people constantly question and argue about values, the largest group of people whose values are very similar are those without an education: “a high degree of uniformity and similarity of outlook, ... where the more primitive instincts and tastes prevail.” Therefore, the first thing an authoritarian regime must do is get in bed with the most uneducated layers of its society.

**Second**, people with common and primitive values (as opposed to educated people) are “prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently. It will be those whose vague and imperfectly formed ideas are easily swayed and whose passions and emotions are readily aroused...” Why think about values when it is much easier to accept what everyone around you accepts?

**Third**, it is easier to unite the primitive layers and strata of a society against another group of people: “...it seems to be almost a law of human nature that it is easier for people to agree on a negative program – on the hatred of an enemy, on the envy of those better off – than on any positive task.” This is what all authoritarian regimes do – rally people against rather than for something or someone.

## Conclusion

Hayek argued that authoritarian regimes, by their nature, attract and promote people with worst human qualities. Authoritarian regimes rely on uneducated masses, with brute human instincts, which can be easily manipulated. The trouble is that even a democratic system can quickly become authoritarian if it concentrates too much power in the hands of a single person. The only solution is to decentralise power. Benevolent dictatorships exist only in theory because in practice they don't remain benevolent. For more on this topic please see one of our previous reports entitled “*Economically Benevolent Autocracies*” available on our website.

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