



# What Is a Ruling Class?

by **Paul Kivel**

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**A CLASS IS A SEGMENT OF SOCIETY** that, through its shared economic position and cultural values, participates in common social, political, and economic interests and specific forms of access or lack of access to power.

A ruling class is the segment that dominates society through its control of power and wealth. It influences and often determines the distribution of and control over resources; who has access to political power; which groups benefit and which do not from social policy; and which groups are central to the life, considerations, and attention of a society, and which are relegated to the margins.

Besides “ruling class,” other words used to describe the richest and most powerful segment of society are the elite, the upper class, the haves, the dominant class, the rich and powerful, the decision-makers, the owning class, the money power, and the top of the (economic) pyramid.

A ruling class owns a dominating share of the privately-owned land, the buildings, the stocks and bonds and other financial assets—whatever counts as wealth in a particular society. In other societies wealth might consist of cattle, slaves, minerals, or land. Members of the ruling class are the primary beneficiaries of public policy decisions determining budget allocations, taxes, decisions of war and peace and international trade, environmental policy, health, education, and criminal justice issues.

In every society with a ruling class, the ruling class uses the particular historical, political, and cultural traditions of that society to stay in power, to perpetuate its power through the generations, and to justify why this should be so. In general, a ruling class will use whatever means it can to gain and retain power and wealth. A ruling class chant might sound something like:

What do we want?

Everything!

When do we want it?



Now!

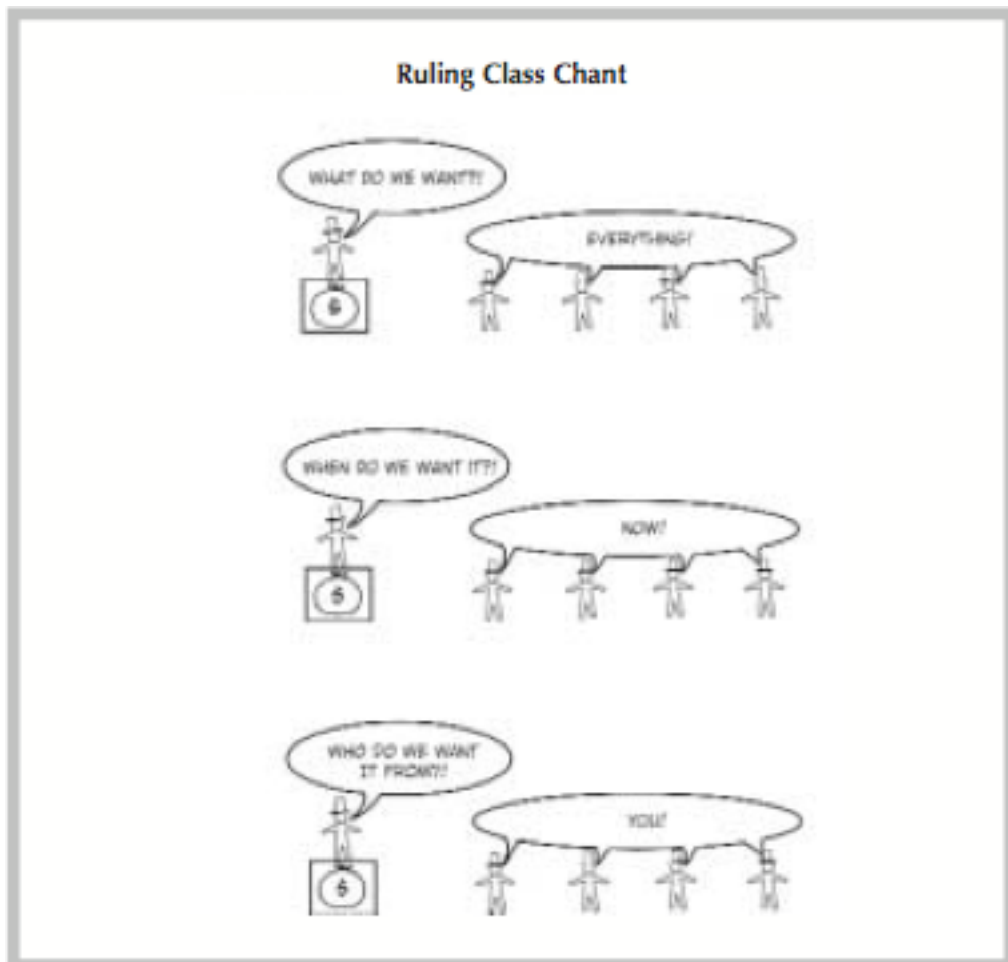
Who do we want it from?

You!

### **A Ruling Class Is Not...**

A ruling class is not a royal family, although a royal family can be part of a ruling class or a front for a ruling class. A ruling class is not the government, although government representatives can represent the interests of the ruling class, or be composed primarily of members of that class. A ruling class is not corporations in general, or transnational or international corporations in particular, although corporations can be run by members of a ruling class, or respond to the interests of its members. A ruling class is not a military dictatorship, although often military dictatorships operate to the benefit of a ruling class.

A ruling class is not a conspiracy. It is not a small group of men sitting around in a room in secret, plotting to take over, or to commit criminal acts. The U.S. ruling class operates publicly, through accepted channels of power such as the government, business, and the courts. There are many members of the ruling class who operate out of a shared understanding of their economic interests but who do not know each other and do not always agree on issues.



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