

A Dignitarian Movement

By Robert Fuller

Two recent books suggest that America is in danger of forsaking its dual commitment to liberty *and* justice. In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the working poor are unacknowledged benefactors whose work effectively subsidizes everyone else. In *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*, Kevin Phillips warns that America is well on its way to becoming a plutocracy.

Few critics have challenged these portraits of contemporary America. A common response has been wonder at why millions of Americans put up with such indignities. Why do so many acquiesce in chronic humiliation? Why has no grassroots movement risen up against the glaring inequities of present-day America?

Social protest movements of the past were organized around either labor or identity groups distinguished by a recognizable trait (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). Today's victims share no common trait or trade. They are isolated and vulnerable. They're "nobodies."

In America today, it is not race or gender, not even occupation, that marks you for abuse and discrimination. It is rank—low rank signifying the absence of power.

Victims of indignity cannot make common cause until they have a name for the rank-based abuse that lies at the root of their suffering. Here, the movements for civil and women's rights afford a parallel. When abuse, discrimination, and injustice are race-based, we call it racism; when they're gender-based, we call it sexism. By analogy, *rank-based* abuse might be called "rankism."

In itself, rank, like color and gender, is neither good nor bad. When rank is earned and exercised appropriately, it's a legitimate, virtually indispensable tool of organization. But when the high-ranking abuse their authority, those of lower rank experience discrimination and injustice not different in their material and psychological effects from the discrimination and injustice that we have learned to disallow when the targets belong to identity groups.

Rankism occurs when rank-holders try to preserve their own privileges and status by denying would-be challengers the opportunity to compete on equal terms. It occurs in government, corporations, families, the workplace, schools, and religious and healthcare organizations. Recent front-page examples include corporate corruption, sexual abuse by clergy, school bullying, principal investigators taking credit for assistants' research, and elder abuse in life care facilities. As Ehrenreich details, rank-based discrimination is an ever-present reality in society at large, where it takes its greatest toll on those lacking the protections of social rank—the working poor.

It might be claimed that rankism is human nature. Yes, but it is equally human nature to

circumscribe the authority attached to rank. We have overthrown kings and tyrants and placed political power in the hands of the people. We have reined in monopolies with antitrust legislation. We have limited the power of employers through unionization. Blacks, women, homosexuals, and the disabled have all built movements that succeeded in replacing one social consensus with another.

A movement against rankism is not a movement against power differences. Power differences, and the gradations of rank that mirror them, are in the nature of things, a consequence of variations in native and acquired human capabilities. The movement envisioned here is “dignitarian,” not *egalitarian*. In our talents and abilities, we are different; in dignity, we are equal.

People acquiesce in rankism because they fear the consequences of resisting: demerit, demotion, ostracism, or job loss. The muffled complaints and occasional outbursts and that we do hear echo the blacks and women who suffered in solitary protest before popular movements made it impossible to ignore their demands.

Overcoming rankism requires a more inclusive strategy than overcoming racism or sexism because victims and perpetrators of rankism are more apt to overlap than victims and perpetrators of racism and sexism. A shrinking “nobody” in one context can be a bullying “somebody” in another. In a dignitarian movement, it becomes everyone’s responsibility to protect others’ dignity as if it were their own.

A dignitarian movement targeting rankism stands in sharp contrast to a Marxist strategy targeting class. Communism created a new, dominating elite, whereas a rank-based strategy anticipates a continuous redistribution of rank and recognition. A dignitarian movement moves us, by incremental democratic means, toward the more just, decent societies that moral philosophers have long envisioned.

The identity-group movements succeeded by creating the safety in numbers that persuaded millions of oppressed individuals to stop acquiescing in their own degradation. A dignitarian movement can do the same for the millions now afflicted by rankism. When it is safe to reject rankist indignities, people will do so, en masse.

What would rankism’s chronic victims then demand? They would seek a living wage, quality education, and health insurance for all. In the absence of these, competition for rank and recognition cannot be equitable. In their presence we have the opportunity to honor the dual commitment to freedom and justice that the nation’s founders imprinted on the American psyche.

[Robert W. Fuller taught physics at Columbia University, and served as president of Oberlin College and Chairman of Internews, a nonprofit organization supporting open media worldwide. *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* will be published by New Society Publishers in 2003. A web site on rankism is www.breakingranks.net.]