

Standing Up to RANKISM

An Interview with Robert Fuller

By Pamela Gerloff

MTM: You have said: “The country that identifies rankism and sets out to overcome it is going to lead the world in the next century.” What is rankism?

FULLER: Rankism is a new term, which I came up with while I was writing *Somebodies and Nobodies*. Before that, I experienced rankism, as we all do, but I didn’t have a name for it. If we are to combat rankism, it is as important to have a name for it as it was to have a name for sexism. The first chapter of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* is entitled “The Problem without a Name.” When, five years later, the word sexism was coined, the women’s movement really took off. By rankism I mean abuse and discrimination—which sometimes becomes exploitation—based on differences in power as signified by rank. In institutional contexts, we can regard rankism more narrowly as rule violations by those in positions of power to serve their own ends. Rankism is found in all hierarchical institutions and in society at large.

MTM: How do you distinguish rankism from some of the other “-isms,” like racism, sexism, or ageism?

FULLER: Rankism is broad and encompassing. Other -isms are more specific. The concept of rankism gets at the real culprit underlying all of them, which is abuse of power. For instance, with racism, white people, historically, have seen people of color as weak. That’s why they thought they could enslave them. Humans are predators! Fortunately, we’re smart enough now to rule slavery as out of order, even though it still exists



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in the world today. It is because rankism encompasses the other -isms that I say that whoever identifies rankism and sets out to overcome it is going to lead the world in the next century.

MTM: And that would extend to individual and organizational leaders, as well as countries?

FULLER: Yes, I believe so.

MTM: You’re talking about extending dignity to everyone, regardless of rank.

FULLER: Yes. I’m not against hierarchies and rank. I am against the abuse of rank.

MTM: Would you give some examples?

FULLER: Examples of interpersonal rankism are a boss harassing an employee, a customer demeaning a waiter, a coach bullying a player, a doctor disparaging a nurse, a teacher humiliating a student, a parent belittling a child.

I had a trivial reminder of rankism when I lost my title of president after I left Oberlin College. I say trivial because I can’t compare this experience with the level of rankism experienced on a daily basis by, for example, someone working at Wal-Mart who has three jobs and four kids. Nonetheless, rankism happened to me in little ways when I left that position. People who had kept their promises to me immediately felt relieved of that obligation when I was no longer a somebody. People would say, “I’ll call you” and then wouldn’t bother. If you’re someone who

Robert Fuller never graduated from high school or college, but he entered Oberlin College at age 15, and Princeton University graduate school at age 18. He taught physics at Columbia University, published a book on mathematical physics, and developed a course for dropouts at a ghetto school before becoming the dean of faculty at Trinity College, Connecticut, and then president of Oberlin College. At the time the youngest college president in the United States, Fuller initiated educational reforms to combat racism and sexism that drew national attention. He later began a campaign to influence the U.S. to end world hunger, which led to the establishment of the Presidential Commission on World Hunger. In the 1980s, Fuller made frequent trips to the USSR as chairman of Internews, an organization devoted to fostering independent media in emerging democracies. He also worked on other projects dealing with conflict resolution and economic development, traveling widely throughout the world.



With the collapse of the USSR, Fuller's work as citizen diplomat came to a close.

As he reflected on his career, he came to understand that, at various times, he had been a somebody and a nobody and the cycle was continuing. He had been a media darling in his 30s, had met with presidents and prime ministers in his 40s and 50s, but as a former professor, former college president, and former diplomat, he was now a nobody. His periodic sojourns in "nobodyland" led him to identify and investigate "rankism" and ultimately to write his latest book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (New Society Publishers, 2003).

has money in the bank, a house, and a fancy car, those kinds of indignities hurt you as much as they hurt someone with little money or status. Perhaps you feel the hurt so strongly because you're used to having promises kept. People with little money or status may become injured to it because they experience it all the time.

MTM: But you say it's not just about the dignity people accord you. It's also about experiencing your own inherent sense of dignity.

FULLER: That's right. For example, young people who inherit wealth often feel a deep guilt and shame about not contributing. Some resolve that by giving money philanthropically and getting involved in humanitarian projects. Without that, they don't respect themselves. So it isn't just about other people treating you with respect; it is also an inherent sense of dignity that comes from knowing you have contributed.

Your contribution may be seen as minor by others, but that doesn't matter. The important thing is that it brings dignity to you and makes you feel good.

MTM: Isn't money one of the biggest arenas for rankism in our society? We accord rank—that is, power and status—to those with the most money.

FULLER: Yes, and the rank one has because of money is easily abused, both in small and large ways.

MTM: You've noted that the effects of rankism can be measured in terms more concrete than loss of dignity.

FULLER: Yes. For example, in terms of the demographics of electoral politics, rankism afflicts no group more than the working poor. In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich makes a compelling case that the working poor are, in effect, unac-

knowledgeed benefactors whose labor subsidizes those who are more advantaged. In *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*, Kevin Phillips explores how the rich and politically powerful create and perpetuate privilege at the expense of the middle and lower classes. A *New York Times* magazine article ["Ghetto Miasma: Enough to Make You Sick?" by Helen Epstein, October 12, 2003] described the chronic stress suffered by those of low socioeconomic status as a significant public health problem.

MTM: In our culture we talk about people wanting money because they think it will bring them happiness, but I don't really think that's the main motivator, at least in many cases. I think a major reason is that people want to protect themselves from being nobodied. People pursue money because it will bring them status and rank—they'll be a somebody. Would you agree with that?

FULLER: Oh yes. We seek titles and the protection of somebodyness as a way of shielding ourselves against rankism in our society, exactly as some blacks once sought to pass as white and women writers of the nineteenth century assumed the names and identities of men. Part of our motivation in wanting to be somebodies is that we want to protect ourselves from the chronic humiliations suffered by nobodies.

MTM: The curious thing is that even somebodies get nobodied. People with important positions or titles or lots of money may have high rank in our society, but they, too, experience being nobodied by others.

FULLER: Yes. Rankism is contextual. Most of the time, no matter how high up we are, we can look around and see someone of higher rank than we are. A number of years ago, I was in the White House when a famous singer came to see the president of the United States. I watched as each of continued on p. 8

Robert Fuller *continued from p. 7*

these extraordinarily powerful and famous men began to feel insecure around each other, clearly feeling like a nobody in comparison to the somebody they thought they were shaking hands with.

MTM: This happens with money, too. Someone with \$1 million feels like a nobody in comparison to someone with \$5 million, who feels like a nobody next to someone with \$10 million, who feels like a nobody next to someone with \$40 million. There is always a somebody above you.

FULLER: Money still greatly skews things in a rankist way, in that people defer to those with money because they fear the power of the money and hope to get some of it for themselves. Most people instinctively defer to money, unless they are among a very small, counter-cultural group who don't.

My wife and I recently had a new counter installed in our house. We were scheduled for installation when the carpenter received a much bigger order from someone else. He immediately put us out of rotation and honored the bigger order. He was even a friend of ours, but it didn't stop him from immediately deferring to the client with more money. In that example, the rankism consists less in his shifting to honor the other contract first, but in not being honest with us. If he had said, "This is my livelihood. I can't afford not to do the other job first," I would have said, "That's O.K. I'm glad you told me."

MTM: Not being honest about it violated your dignity.

FULLER: Yes, rankism is felt as a lack of dignity. You experience your relative worthlessness; you feel you are worth less as a person when someone treats you in a rankist way.

MTM: It seems important for people in

Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank

By Robert Fuller

(New Society Publishers, 2003)

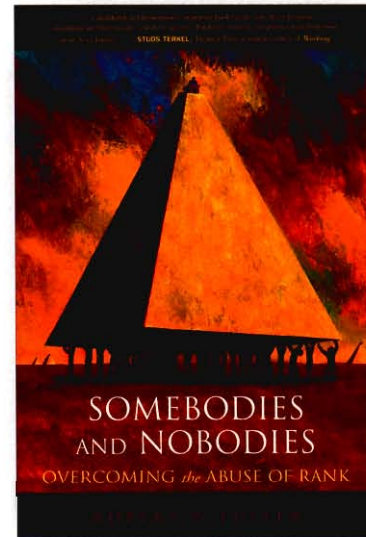
Reviewed by Mark McDonough

In this groundbreaking book, Robert Fuller argues that there is an abuse of power broader than that of racism and sexism; he calls it "rankism" because it is based on differences in power as signified by rank. Fuller does not object to rank, per se, but to the abuse of rank. Rank and some of the privileges that come with it can be useful—such as the library privileges afforded professors who need special access to do their jobs well. But when one takes advantage of privileged status—such as demeaning or sexually harassing a student—that is rankism.

Although everybody seems to want to be a "somebody," Fuller makes the fascinating observation that being a "nobody" has advantages, and that we often switch back and forth between being a somebody and a nobody at different times in our lives or even at different times during the day. Being a nobody is wonderful, for example, when you need time to try out a new identity under the cover of invisibility. Being a somebody can be a burden when people over-generalize and don't see who you really are. For those who have rank because of money or leadership positions, this book can help develop greater sensitivity to the circumstances of both somebodies and nobodies.

The author's observations also serve as cautionary signposts for well-mean-

ing activists. He notes: "The fact that you can't overcome rankism with rankism explains the puzzling ineffectiveness of many progressive social groups. If a tone of moral superiority pervades an organization and infects its rhetoric, some adherents are attracted because membership affords them an opportunity to feel superior to nonmembers—the unenlightened." The message being promulgated, no matter how timely and important, will remain unheard and unheeded by the vast majority until, in its content and presentation, it is shorn of moral rankism."



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This wise and thoughtful book gives us all a metric to better understand when we are in fact abusing rank, and offers insight into how and when rank may be used productively, without harm to others.

rankism and what we can do about it?

FULLER: Institutional rankism is the rankism we encounter when we deal with bureaucracies, nonprofit organizations, schools, hospitals, churches, and governments. In police states it takes

the form of exploitation and oppression of the citizenry. In democracies it consists of the daily indignities of dealing with institutions whose *de facto* goal is self-preservation and aggrandizement rather than service.

Although somebodies who neither perpetrate nor tolerate rankism can help legitimize protests against rankism (much as white liberals helped legitimize the civil rights movement), much of the impetus for eliminating rankism must come from nobodies. Social justice is never just handed to those who lack it. Only when the victims of unfairness are aroused and demand dignity and equity for themselves does the status quo change. Not until blacks found their voice and protested the injustice of racism did Americans outlaw segregation. Not until women built the modern women's movement and targeted sexism were they able to win a measure of equity. In America today, what primarily marks people for mistreatment and exploitation is not race or gender but low rank and the powerlessness it signifies.

MTM: So how do we get rid of rankism?

FULLER: In the same way we have diminished sexism. Women made men aware of what they were doing and also persuaded women to stop colluding in their own subordination. With sexism, it has been mainly a consciousness shift. In addition, crucial legislation has been passed, such as laws against sexual harassment and mandating equal pay for equal work.

We already have a lot of anti-rankism statutes on the books, but mostly they are ignored. We don't generally indict corporate crooks, for example, just as we never used to indict lynchers. Only in the 1960s did lynching come to be seen as the murder that it is. We have recently begun to witness some indictments with corporate scandals that have occurred. I cannot imagine that corporate corruption will be a common occurrence once society ceases to sanction rankism.

More than enacting new laws against

rankism, we need to enforce those that are already on the books. Bullying isn't against the law, but it is against most schools' regulations and is undignified. If we transform the social consensus from condoning to disallowing rankism, it will dry up in a generation.

The other thing is, you can't end rankism with rankism. To actually end rankism, you have to preserve the dignity of perpetrators while offering correction. You have to protect other people's dignity as you would have them protect yours. It's like the golden rule.

MTM: Do you think there has to be an organized movement?

FULLER: I don't think it will look like the civil rights or women's movements. Instead, it will take the form of building a dignitarian society. If it's true that serious, chronic health problems stem from rankism, we will end up creating a dignitarian society to lower our health care costs. We will create dignitarian workplaces because we want to stay in business. Efficiency, productivity, and creativity all soar in the context of dignified workplaces. All fall in the presence of rankist workplaces. We will be pressured into creating dignitarian institutions not by demonstrations in the streets, but because dignitarian institutions outperform rankist institutions.

MTM: Rankism seems so pervasive, and much of it is very subtle. Do you think we can actually eliminate it?

FULLER: I know we can reduce these chronic indignities, just as we have reduced the indignities of racism and sexism, and I believe that, eventually, we will be able to eliminate rankism. When people begin to see it, a lot of progress can be made. That's why it's so important to talk about it—and to keep on talking. The women's movement never let us stop talking about sexism, and it made a difference. With a couple of generations of work on rankism, we'll be there. ■

The Downside of Leadership: Living in Somebodyland

"When *Fast Company* magazine did a review of *Somebodies and Nobodies*, they titled their piece "I'm a Somebody—Get Me Out of Here!" Everybody loves the plus side of living in Somebodyland, for the opportunity and security it brings you. When I was a young college president, everybody returned my calls, no one broke promises to me, and women wanted to dance with me. It's amazing what happens when you gain power, wealth, or fame. But all somebodies know how hard it can be, day after day, to have to be a model for others, to have to be an exemplar when everyone is looking to you for leadership. And, of course, the flip side of the public's obsession with wealth, celebrity, and power is its resentment toward those receiving the attention.

"Another downside is that somebodies end up repeating the same mantras, the same slogans, over and over. If you're an author, you have to keep saying the same thing when you go on your book tour. When, as a company president, you have to keep egging people on to high performance, it can drain you empty. It did me, after seven years of college administration, during which I was cheerleading the elimination of racist and sexist practices in higher education—and having a good number of people hate me for doing it. It takes a toll.

"That's when you might want to slip back into Nobodyland. In Nobodyland, you can be creative, because no one is paying attention to you. In Nobodyland, you can renew and refresh yourself. If you want to be a new somebody, you have to be willing to be a nobody."

—Robert Fuller in an interview with Pamela Gerloff for *More Than Money Journal*