

A four-letter word is behind all our troubles

Rank, when mishandled, causes racism, sexism and ageism, says a former college professor

Somebodies and Nobodies

Overcoming the Abuse of Rank

By Robert W. Fuller

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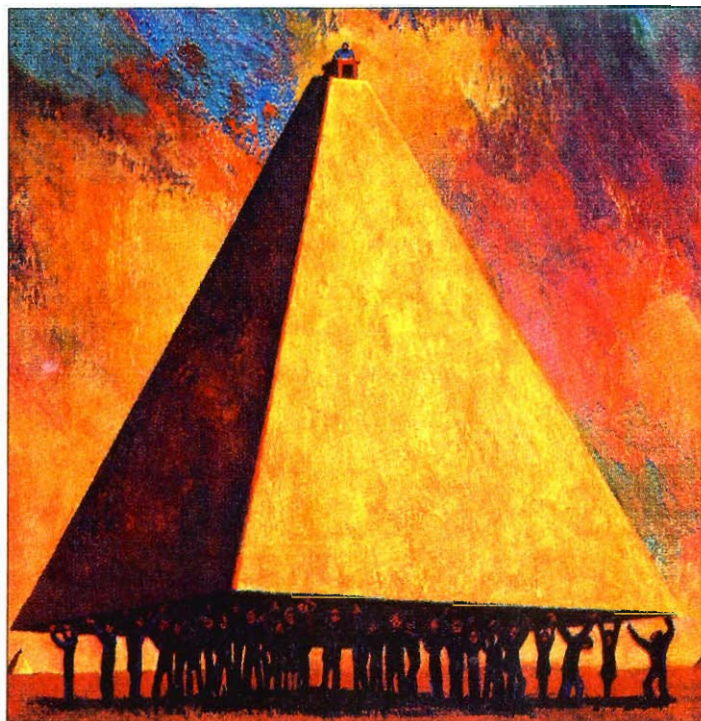
Reviewed by Roberto J. Gonzalez

All of us have, at one time or another, been slighted by people of greater status or power. In "Somebodies and Nobodies," Berkeley writer Robert Fuller gives a name — "rankism" — to the humiliations, indignities and abuses heaped upon "nobodies" by those of higher rank. The author, trained as a physicist, has spent much of his career as a university president (at Oberlin College) and as a "citizen diplomat" seeking to establish relationships with people in other countries to bridge gaps in understanding.

According to Fuller, rankism is the underlying cause of familiar "isms," including racism, sexism and ageism. He draws analogies between rankism and cancer, arguing that once its pathology is unraveled, steps might be taken "to eliminate a whole class of malignancies" threatening the health of our society and the world.

The consequences of not dealing with rankism can be destructive for individuals and entire societies. The effects may range from psychological problems, sexual abuse and "kicking the dog" (lashing out at those of lower rank) to war and corporate corruption. Fuller's examples take the form of brief anecdotes that he draws primarily from the workplace, schools and personal relationships. The book is clearly written and often compelling.

Although rankism is deeply embedded in contemporary U.S. culture, Fuller is remarkably optimistic about the chances



Detail from the cover of "Somebodies and Nobodies"

for improvement. He makes an important point early in the book: Rankism is not a part of human nature, although rank is necessary because power and status differences are a fact of modern life in our society. He makes good use of insightful comparisons: For example, some European countries may hold a lesson for us because people with blue-collar jobs are often treated with more dignity and respect than in the United States.

Fuller seeks to break the silence sur-

rounding the abuse of rank and is hopeful that a social dialogue will begin to address these issues. He suggests that "nobodies" will usher in a "dignitarian movement" to reclaim their dignity, which is critical for establishing peace and social order.

Although "Somebodies and Nobodies" provides few concrete strategies for initiating such a social movement, it may serve a much more important function: to potentially transform the attitudes and

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actions of individual rank-pullers. One can imagine scenarios in which this book might form part of an effective strategy to defeat localized rankism. For example, a group of maligned office workers might succeed in changing the behavior of an abusive supervisor by anonymously delivering him or her a copy of the book.

It will undoubtedly become an important manual for organizations seeking to increase employees' awareness about abuses of power in the workplace.

At times, "Somebodies and Nobodies" focuses so intently upon individual rank-pulling that the role of institutionalized rankism is minimized. Fuller provides us with many ideas for transforming our personal lives, but what can be done when rankism thoroughly permeates institutions of power such as Enron, Worldcom or Congress? Is a transformation in personal consciousness enough to correct the abuses of the "somebodies," or are more radical solutions (for example, grassroots mobilizing and collective struggle) required? These questions remain unanswered.

Fuller's book might also have made greater use of cross-cultural examples to examine the possibilities for creating a society in which hierarchies are relatively less pronounced. It seems logical that in a relatively egalitarian society, rankism would have less appeal. For example, cultural anthropologists have long noted that certain small-scale societies — for

instance, bands of hunter-gatherers — have traditionally tended to minimize differences in wealth, prestige and power. Some have created customs that effectively eliminate "rankism" before it ever begins by flattening hierarchies of wealth, prestige and status between individuals in the band.

An example comes from the !Kung of southwest Africa, who traditionally "insulted" giraffe meat after a successful hunt. The members of the band would barely discuss the hunter's remarkable achievement and would refer to the dead giraffe as a "tiny" animal with "little" meat. The hunter also adopted an attitude of extreme modesty, consequently minimizing the prestige that might be associated with extraordinary hunting skills. Some anthropologists have interpreted such customs as a means of impeding the formation of hierarchies, reducing jealousy, ensuring cooperation among peers and ultimately improving group survival.

Ultimately, Fuller's book is likely to make its greatest impact at the individual level, as a manifesto for personal transformation. His passionate and insightful examination of rankism encourages us to think critically about received notions of privilege and power and provides glimpses of an alternative future. ■

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