

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Arise, nobodies, and throw off the tyranny of the somebodies

Of all the social ills, 'rankism' is the most pervasive

BY PETER G. PRONTZOS

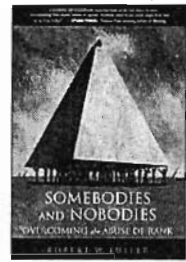
REVIEW | Everyone has had experience with the abuse of power, whether it has been in the home, at school or on the job. When I discuss democracy in my Political Ideologies class, I ask students if they have ever been unfairly treated by a boss or manager. Almost all of them say they have, even though they are too young to have spent much time in the workforce.

While hardly scientific, such anecdotal evidence points to a fundamental social problem that goes largely unrecognized in public discourse — that of the abuse of rank, or "rankism." Robert Fuller coins this phrase in his vitally important book *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*. He contends that rankism trumps most other social ills, since "[r]acism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism and others all depend for their existence on differences of social rank that in turn reflect underlying power differences..."

One of the strengths of Fuller's book is his understanding of the way rankism fans out throughout society. He demonstrates how the concept applies in relations between employers and workers, between citizens and governments, and between nations — especially the most powerful states.

One aspect, often overlooked in books about "big" issues, is that of family dynamics. Fuller points out that ridicule, humiliation and spanking — in addition to being counterproductive — are always abuses of power.

Rankism, Fuller argues, leads directly to the concept of being either a "somebody" or a "nobody." How we treat others — and how we are treated — is usually based on assumptions



SOMEBODIES AND NOBODIES

Overcoming the Abuse of Rank
BY ROBERT W. FULLER

New Society Publishers,
188 pages (\$33.95)

about status. People who are "somebodies," like movie stars or athletes, get far more respect than nurses, who in turn get more respect than clerks. People who are rich are treated better than those who are middle-class; so are people who are considered attractive. Worse, we often judge ourselves by such ultimately meaningless criteria.

To be a "nobody," on the other hand, is to be disrespected, to be at the mercy of powerful "somebodies." Deconstructing the "somebody mystique," Fuller shows that the power flowing from superior social status is not only fleeting but also often undeserved.

Interestingly, though, he doesn't go so far as to call for the abolition of differences in rank or power. He thinks these may be natural, fair and even necessary. But he says when power differences allow one human being to "abuse, humiliate, exploit, and subjugate" another, they

become illegitimate.

Combating rankism requires recognizing the inherent dignity and equality of all. Fuller sees the golden rule as an indispensable value in a truly democratic society. He believes progress will take place only when people understand the problem and demand changes. Change certainly won't come about due to sudden generosity on the part of the rich and powerful.

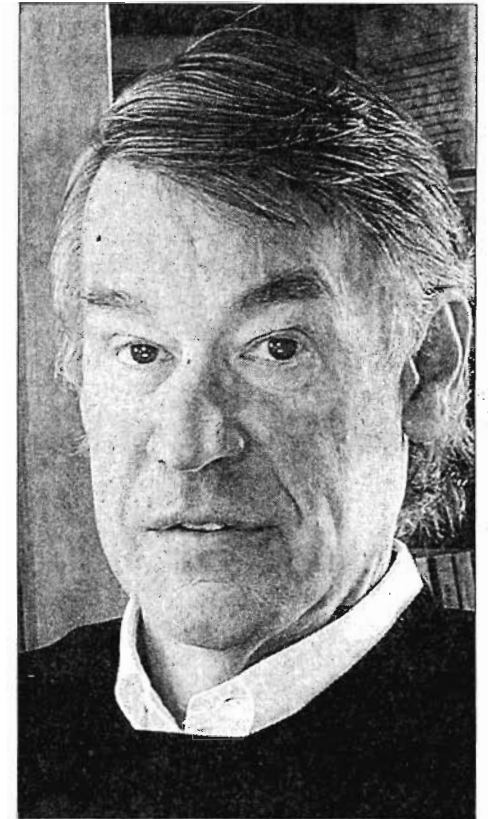
Fuller has a PhD in physics and has previously written about quantum mechanics. To make sure I understood his ideas about power and democracy, I spoke with him and found him unpretentious and open-minded. He told me the approach he takes in his book, with its emphasis on the "democratization of authority," is a tactical one because American readers might consider arguments for economic justice too radical.

Demands for an end to rankism have been central to many philosophies, from Jesus' "love thy neighbour" to socialist calls for equality and respect. One of the virtues of Fuller's work is the way he takes these subversive notions about dignity and self-determination and explains them in a way that connects to everyday experiences.

The changes he hopes to promote cannot take place until some of the larger questions of institutional power, both political and economic, are specifically addressed.

Yet, given the daunting problems that face us, from overwork to poverty to ecocide, Fuller should not be ignored when he calls for eliminating rankism and recognizing the dignity of all. Taking these steps is both a moral goal and a practical necessity in the 21st century.

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Robert Fuller says 'rankism' trumps other 'isms,' like racism and sexism.

July 30, 2003