

## Nobodies: The other N-word

*Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, by Robert W. Fuller, New Society Publishing, ISBN 0986571486X

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for *ACROSS THE BOARD*

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In 1968 I had the chance to hear a young Jesse Jackson invite an Arlington Heights, Illinois congregation to repeat with him his famous proclamation, “I ... am ... *somebody!*”

I have since wondered what Jackson’s secret was, that even white middle-class people sat forward in their seats that day to repeat his words. Jackson’s notion corresponded with the writings of African-American novelist Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* described the plight of those whom society could not and would not see.

Curiously, a similar proposition was being put forth at the same time by candidate Richard Nixon, that a “silent majority” of Americans, to whom the media paid no attention, insisted on being heard on public policy. From the left and from the right came a similar lament, that people felt invisible or silent and did not want to feel that way any more.

This was a new thought. While the Declaration of Independence posited our rights to life and liberty, and while the Constitution explicitly granted the rights to speak our minds and vote, people today insist on being *acknowledged*. As technology has democratized in the decades since, with chatrooms, weblogs, and instant polling, it’s become apparent that there is hardly an American who doesn’t chafe at the way we continually divide ourselves into *in-people* and *out-people*, people who matter and people who don’t.

We are all of us *somebodies*. It’s just the system hasn’t wised up to the fact.

Most curious is that even obviously “in-people,” individuals of position and influence, often feel that they are out, that they are *nobodies*. On some level, we all feel we occupy rungs on a great stratified ladder of being, and someone right above us is giving us the raspberry.

Now comes educator Robert Fuller with the thesis that this hurtful hierarchization is the next big hurdle democracy must clamber over. Fuller is a former professor of physics who did a stint as college professor, then went on to serve as chair of Internews, a global nonprofit that promotes democracy and international understanding via free and independent media.

But when he was not wearing the hat of head honcho, Fuller felt like a nobody like everyone else. And from those humiliating experiences he crafted the thesis of *Somebodies and Nobodies*, that democracy is profoundly conflicted by rankism, the everyday practice of culling out the people who are worth two hoots from those who are plainly not – and letting the nobodies know just how low their status is.

Rankism isn't just another grievance to toss on our already tall pile. It actually makes the pile smaller because it includes most of the other "isms" that are so rankling to so many -- racism, sexism, jingoism, ageism, and all the other belittlings based on nationality, creed, globalpolitik and biology. Rankism is, according to Fuller, the mother of all prejudices.

Fuller's beef is not with authority or the necessity that people with ability be in charge while others follow. That arrangement strikes him as natural and effective. The problem is when meritocracy fades and incumbency takes over, and talent and good work no longer count.

Nations pull rank this way all the time. The Persians, the Greeks, The Romans, the French, the British, and today the Americans have all claimed to be number one, each to their own time. When you are top dog, the rules often don't apply equally to you. You get a free pass, which causes resentment, which ultimately undermines empire. Historians ask, What brought the empires down? And the usual answer is that the groups they mistreated found ways to undermine or overthrow them. And that it was a pleasure.

Foreign affairs commentator Thomas Friedman, following the events of September 11, coined a phrase that belongs in Fuller's book. While the country rushed to ask how our enemies could hate us, he supplied the phrase "poverty of dignity." The Muslim world ruled the roost during our medieval period, and hundreds of millions of people worldwide still feel dissed by history. It's not that Americans deserve to die, is the thought; but that it might be good for them to feel, as the supreme superpower, what it's like everyday at the nobody end of the rope.

In politics, every vote is supposed to count, and elected representatives are subject to periodic review and removal by voters. In reality, however, the influence of campaign donors far outstrips the influence of individual donors, and the system is skewed by elected officials to give them every possible electoral advantage. Rightly or wrongly, President Bush summed up all our feelings early in his administration when he turned to a heckling protester and asked him, "Who cares what you think?" Ouch.

Imagine the effect on those in charge if companies, hospitals, schools and universities had websites for posting complaints regarding abuses of rank and power. Instead of gossiping to a few sympathetic friends, where exaggeration and distortion are expected and forgiven, complainants would have to argue their accusations carefully and accurately or find them ignored.

Those who decry this kind of egalitarianism as "class warfare" ignore that rank is a meta-theme of American history. Our two-party system came into being in the early 1800s not so much on ideology as on constituency – the Federalist *Ins*, ironically led by illegitimate West Indian Alexander Hamilton, versus the Democratic-Republicans *Outs* led by the patrician Thomas Jefferson. America has been locked in a struggle about social rank since its inception, and continues to this day. It is what links Jesse Jackson to Andrew Jackson.

In business, the struggle is especially persistent. Management enjoys, in many people's estimation, too high a portion of an organization's proceeds, while the rank and file are the first to suffer when hard times strike. In between, relations between corporate strata range from the Dickensian to the Dilbertian. As consolidation and globalization extends

the hierarchic effect, feelings of indignity and disposability up and down the ladder have the potential to paralyze organizations from within, and prevent them from achieving their goals.

The opposite of rankism isn't a procrustean society, in which the powerful are cut down to size until everyone is equal. Achieving false equality isn't his goal; identifying and discouraging abuse of rank – bullying, sadism, “lording it” over the rest of us, is. Fuller makes no specific demands for legislation, and offers no laminable 10-point plan. He asks rather that we step back and see the long-term harm this short-term response causes.

Fuller favors modeling of respectful behavior by top executives, and exposure of those who habitually pull rank and a campaign, to heighten organizational consciousness of the consequences of this kind of bullying to our businesses and our economy.

A syllogism for change is not difficult to construct:

1. Organizations need a free flow of knowledge and a positive spirit of teamwork in order to function dynamically.
2. Rankism stifles the flow of knowledge and the sense of common cause, pitting organizations against themselves.
3. *Ergo*, no competitive organization can tolerate rankism.

Is rankism an inherent part of human nature, like the dominance instinct in dogs? And if so, are efforts to eradicate it hubristic and hopeless? Yes and no. Yes, Rankism is one tool in our instinctual toolkit, along with the “fight or flight” adrenaline response. It is one that served us well in less complex, more authoritarian times.

But we are not, despite many doggy proclivities, dogs. Dogs can't replace monarchy with constitutional democracy. Dogs are incapable of self-assessment and improvement like our real successes against slavery, colonialism, racism and gender inequity. Dogs think short-term; we take a longer view, which enlightened self-interest requires.

In nearly every culture, a “Golden Rule” counsels against the thoughtless and destructive consequences of brutal behavior. A spirit of fairness and generosity suffuses every world religion. But Fuller suggests we are ready to go beyond nostrums to a changed order, one that is open to its true potential, and has curbed the self-perpetuating behavior of those in charge.

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