Somebodies and Nobodies
The Abuse of Rank

As a student at Oberlin College during the 1950s, I was taught to be proud of its early advocacy of equal opportunity for women and blacks. But by the late 1960s, Oberlin students, like their counterparts across America, were in rebellion. The few dozen black students on campus were protesting their paltry numbers. Women students were criticizing the status of women in the college and the country. And many students who were upset over national policy on Vietnam turned their ire on whatever college policies impinged on their rights as young adults.

When Oberlin’s Board of Trustees appointed me president of the college in 1970, the choice was clear: either embrace the changes “blowing in the wind” or be blown away. Within a few years, Oberlin, like most other colleges, added many African-Americans to its student body, faculty, and staff. Simultaneously, a feminist revolution transformed the College in a thousand subtle ways, and student pressure brought overdue reforms to social and educational policies.

The simultaneous activities of the black, women’s, and student movements made me realize that there was something deeper going on. Something beyond differences in color, gender, and educational credentials underpinned the racism, sexism, and disenfranchisement of students that lay claim to our immediate attention. I sensed that the familiar “isms” were all manifestations of a more fundamental cause of discrimination, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It was not until I had left the presidency and had become a target of this kind of discrimination myself that I was able to identify it.

Lacking the protection of title and status in the years after Oberlin, I experienced what it’s like to be taken for a “nobody.” I found myself comparing the somebody-nobody divide with the white-black polarity of racism, the male-female opposition of sexism, and the teacher-student dichotomy in schools. There were differences, but there were similarities as well, the most important ones being (1) indignity and humiliation feel pretty much the same to a nobody, a black, a woman, or a student, and (2) no matter the excuse for abuse, it persists only in the presence of an underlying difference of rank signifying power. No one would dare to insult Queen Elizabeth I or General Colin Powell.

In the US, perhaps twenty percent of us have suffered directly from racism, and about fifty percent from sexism. But virtually all of us suffer from rank-based abuse—which I shall be calling “rankism”—in one context or another, at one time or another. Sooner or later, everyone gets taken for a nobody. Sooner or later, most of us treat someone else as a nobody. It always hurts to be “dissed,” no matter what your status. Yet if it weren’t for the fact that most everyone has known the sting of rankism, would there ever have been empathy for victims of racism and sexism?

At first I thought that rankism was just another ism, one more in the litany of isms with which we were growing weary, and I resisted the notion. Then it dawned on me that the familiar isms could be seen as subspecies of rankism. Racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism and other isms all depend for their existence on differences of social rank that in turn reflect underlying power differences, so they are forms of rankism. Overcoming rankism would therefore undermine racism, sexism, and other isms that have been fought under those names but ultimately derive their force from power differences woven into the social fabric.

Gradually, I realized that the gains would go much further. For example, the reason so many students—regardless of color—hold their hearts and minds from learning can be traced to the fact that their top priority and constant concern is to shield themselves from the rankism that permeates education from kindergarten to graduate school.

Rankism erodes the will to learn, distorts personal relationships, taxes economic productivity, and stokes ethnic hatred. It is the cause of dysfunctionality, and sometimes even violence, in families, schools, and the workplace. Like racism and sexism, rankism must be named and identified and then negotiated out of all our social institutions.

How could a scourge like rankism have gone thus far unremarked? Well, of course, it has not. We’ve been traumatized and battered by one or another of its manifestations for centuries, and many of these have
long been recognized and acquired individual names. The situation is analogous to the era in medicine when malignancies peculiar to different organs were seen as disparate diseases. In time they were all recognized to be various forms of one disease—cancer.

Regardless of surface distinctions such as ethnicity, religion, color, or gender, persistent abuse and discrimination is predicated on power differences inherent in rank. Race-based discrimination is called racism, gender-based discrimination is called sexism. By analogy, rank-based discrimination can be called rankism.

Rankism is the “cancer” that underlies many of the seemingly disparate maladies that afflict the body politic. Unnamed, it will continue to delegitimize one another, damage, and destroy; named, we can begin to unravel its pathology and take steps to protect ourselves. Attacking the familiar isms, one at a time, is like developing a different chemotherapy for each kind of cancer. To go after rankism directly is to seek to eliminate a whole class of malignancies.

Once you have a name for it, you see it everywhere. The outrage over self-serving corrupt executives is indignation over rankism. Sexual abuse by clergy is rankism. Elder abuse in life care facilities is rankism. Scientists taking credit for their assistants’ research is rankism. More generally, 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. In her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the working poor are unacknowledged benefactors whose labor effectively subsidizes everyone else. The “living wage” movement is a harbinger of a “dignitarian” movement against social rankism.

The casualties of pell-mell globalization—economic and environmental—are attributable to rankism. International terrorism has complex origins and multiple causes, but one of them—and one within our control—is rankism, both inadvertent and intentional, between nations. There is no fury like that borne of chronic humiliation.

The effects of rankism on its targets are the same as those of racism and sexism on minorities and women. But unlike these familiar isms, rankism knows no limits and plays no favorites. It afflicts people of every race, gender, age, and class.

It is crucial to get one thing straight from the start: power differences, in themselves, are not the culprit. To bemoan power differences is like bemoaning the fact that the sun is brighter than the moon. And rank differences merely reflect power differences, so rank differences are not the problem either, any more than color or gender differences are innately a problem. Difficulties arise only when these differences are used as an excuse to abuse, humiliate, exploit, and subjugate. So it is with power and rank. Power differences are a fact of life. Making it okay to discuss the uses of power with those holding positions of authority, with an eye towards distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate uses of their power, is what this book is about.

Typically, the abuse of the power vested in rank-holders takes the form of disrespect, inequity, discrimination, and exploitation. Since hierarchies are pyramids of power, rankism is a malady to which hierarchies of all types are susceptible.

Let’s begin with a simple example of interpersonal rankism:

An executive pulls up to valet parking at a restaurant, late to a business lunch, and finds no one to take his car keys. Anxious and fuming, he spots a teenager running toward him in the rearview mirror and yells, “Where the hell were you? I haven’t got all day.”

He tosses the keys at the kid’s feet. Bending to pick them up, the boy says, “Sorry, sir. About how long do you expect to be?”

The executive hollers over his shoulder, “You’ll know when you see me, won’t you?” The valet winces, but holds his tongue. Postscript: he goes home and bullies his kid brother.

Further examples leap to mind: a boss harassing an employee, a cook or a customer demeaning a server, a coach bullying a player, a doctor disparaging a nurse, a school principal insulting a teacher, a professor exploiting a teaching assistant, a teacher humiliating a student, students ostracizing other students, a parent belittling a child, an officer abusing a suspect, a caretaker mistreating an invalid.

Again, it’s not that rank itself is illegitimate. When rank has been earned and signifies excellence, then it’s generally accepted, and rightfully so. But the power of rank can be and often is abused, as in the examples above. Power begets power, authority becomes entrenched, and rank-holders become self-aggrandizing, capricious, and overbearing. Most of us have tasted rankism; for many, it’s a dietary staple.

Rankism insults the dignity of subordinates by treating them as invisible, as nobodies. Nobody is another n-word and, like the original, it is used to justify denigration and inequity. Nobodies are insulted, disrespected, exploited, ignored. In contrast, somebodies are sought after, given preference, lionized.
You may be thinking that rankism is just a new name for bullying. While bullying is indeed archetypal rankism, the old word has limited range. The term rankism is more inclusive, grouping disparate actions by their common underlying cause and affording us a fresh look at behaviors we now put up with, sometimes collude in and, on occasion, indulge in ourselves.

**Rankism—Mother of “Isms”**

It might be supposed that if one overcame tendencies to racism, sexism, ageism and other narrowly defined forms of discrimination, one would be purged of rankism as well. But rankism is not just another ism. It subsumes the familiar dishonorable isms. It’s the mother of them all.

What makes it possible for one group to discriminate against another? For example, whites segregating blacks, Gentiles imposing quotas on Jews, or straights harassing gays? Color, religion, gender, and sexual orientation are simply pretexts for constructing and exploiting social stratifications; they are not the actual cause of ongoing injustice. Such discrimination is predicated on social dominance that depends on established, constructed power differences, fortified by customs and laws. As the power gap closes through the breakdown of customs and the repeal of prejudicial legislation, systemic abuse becomes harder and harder to sustain.

Like other predators, human beings select as prey those they perceive as weak. It’s a safer bet; there’s less chance of retaliation. Distinguishing traits such as color, gender, or sexual orientation only signify weakness if there is a social consensus in place that handicaps those bearing the trait. A social consensus such as Jim Crow, the feminine mystique, or homophobia functions to keep an entire group of people weak and usable by the dominant group (whites, males, or straights, in these cases).

Power matters. In fact, it’s more or less all that matters, and it is important for those who temporarily lack it to realize this so they can set about building a countervailing power. It is only as those subordinated by a particular consensus organize and gain power commensurate with that of their oppressors that the prevailing consensus unravels and the pretext for exploitation is disallowed.

Although rank-based discrimination feels the same to its targets as the more familiar kinds, there are some important differences in the way it works. Unlike race or gender, rank is mutable. You can be taken for a nobody one day and for a somebody the next. You can be a nobody at home and a somebody at work, or vice versa. The mutability of rank means that most of us have been both victims and perpetrators of rankism, in different contexts.

Rankism, like racism, is a source of social injustice as well as personal indignity. As we’ll see, a great deal of what’s labeled social pathology has its origins in rankism. But unlike racists and sexists, who are now on notice, rankists still go largely unchallenged. The indignity suffered by those who’ve been “nobodied” festers. It builds to indignation and sometimes erupts in violence. When a person or a people is nobodied, it not only does them an injustice, but also plants a time bomb in our midst.

The consequences range from school shootings to revanchism, even to genocide. The twentieth century has seen many demagogues who have promised to restore the pride and dignity of a people that felt nobodied. Hitler enjoyed the support of Germans humiliated by punitive reparations in the aftermath of World War I. The national impotence imposed on the German nation (the Fatherland) by the victors reverberated through every German family, as well. In opting for Hitler, many Germans were not only voting to restore rank to the Fatherland, but also to overcome the sense of inadequacy they’d experienced as the heads of German families. Similarly, President Milosevic of Yugoslavia traded on the wounded pride of the Serbs in the 1990s. Once war begins, people will become apologists for crimes they would otherwise condemn to get even with those they believe have nobodied them.

Globally, there are few counterparts to the democratic institutions that mitigate the most flagrant displays of rankism within nations. However, nowhere are rankism’s effects more acute than in the still largely extra-legal realm of international relations; weaker states are often compelled to do the bidding of stronger ones.

In the distinction between rank and rankism lies the difference between dignity and indignity—for persons, for peoples, for nations. A truly great power, to be worthy of the name, distinguishes itself from a “mere” superpower through its sensitivity to this difference in its dealings with weaker states.

Attacking the familiar isms, one at a time, is like lopping heads off the Hydra of discrimination and oppression; going after rankism aims to drive a stake through the Hydra’s heart.
Equal in Dignity

Dignity is not negotiable.
—Varan Gregorian, American writer, university president, and foundation executive (1934–)

Though most of us have experienced rankism, we do not routinely protest it, at least not to the perpetrators. We limit our complaints to those who share our station. Uncle Tom’s policy of “to get along, go along” recommends itself to almost everyone when it comes to confronting rankism. As a short-term solution this is understandable because the power difference upon which rankism is predicated makes resisting it dangerous. But in the long run, appeasement fails. Uncle Tom ended up being whipped to death.

Despite the fact that we may acquiesce to unequal treatment or even collude in self-abnegation, most of us sense that there is something about human beings that is universal, absolute, and, yes, equal.

Equal? We are obviously unequal in skill, talent, beauty, strength, health, or wealth—in any measurable trait for that matter.

What then? For millennia, there have been people of every faith, often in opposition to their own religious leaders, who have sensed that all human beings are of equal dignity. Though this spiritual insight is routinely violated, it is grounded in (and represents an intuitive grasp of) more pragmatic reasons for opposing rankist abuses of power, reasons that we'll explore in the chapters to follow.

Rankism is invariably an assault on dignity. If people are fundamentally equal in dignity, then discrimination on the basis of power differences—experienced as an insult to dignity—has no legitimacy and must be disallowed. The notion of rankism links ethics and politics through dignity.

All ranks, like all races, are worthy of equal dignity. Deviations from equal dignity set in motion a dynamic that draws attention away from whatever we're doing—working, learning, or healing. When energy is diverted to defending one's dignity against insults in the workplace, productivity suffers. In schools, students sacrifice their learning to defend their dignity. Today, it is not so much racial prejudice as misuse of rank that functions to keep students of all colors from committing themselves to education. It is rankism that creates the specious divide between winners and losers at an early age and extinguishes ambition in many before they reach third grade.

More than other peoples, Americans seem to believe that if you fail, it's your own fault. Yet we all know of many instances where power, position, and privilege—not merit—have predetermined an outcome. The rich, the powerful, and the famous enjoy unearned perks in all walks of life. Celebrities go to the head of the line; their transgressions are forgiven. We hope to be treated evenhandedly, but are not surprised when we're not.

Over the centuries, the democratization of our civic institutions has curtailed the most blatant kinds of governmental rankism. But rising voter apathy now signals that the issues that matter most—education, health policy, and working conditions—are perceived as lying beyond the effective reach of government. The challenge is to find a way to bring the core principle of democracy—the idea of mutual accountability and non-rankist service—to all our social institutions.

The Myth of Meritocracy

America sees itself as a meritocracy, in contrast to aristocratic Europe. But while opportunity is more equal here than it was in aristocracies, it is still far from merit-based. The last half-century has seen an assault on race, gender, sexual orientation, and age-based barriers to equal opportunity, but the surface upon which we compete for recognition is still a steep hill, not a level playing field.

Paradoxically, it is rank itself that now poses the greatest obstacle to basing rewards on merit. This is because rank acquired in one realm often confers advantages in other, unrelated ones. Why should rank shield perpetrators from the consequences of rule-breaking, misdeeds, or incompetence? Why should it be harder for those of low rank to improve their station than for those of high rank to retain theirs? If rank is based on merit, high rank today should not be a guarantor of high rank tomorrow. Nor should low rank carry the stigma of perpetual loser. Discrimination based on rank differences is as inconsistent with actual meritocracy as is discrimination based on color or gender differences.

In a true meritocracy, rank would have to be precisely defined, and rewards would reflect current rank within a large and growing number of narrowly defined niches. High rank in one specialty, as determined on one occasion, would not signify merit in general or indefinitely. Because individuals' talents, abilities, and skills vary markedly from niche to niche, composite, overall rankings that ignore variations from specialty to specialty yield spurious results. We don't simply declare the winner of the mile the best runner, because that would overlook the fact that there are sprinters and marathoners who, in their events,
can outdo the fastest miler. Merit has no significance, and therefore should carry no weight, beyond the precise realm wherein it is assessed. From this perspective, IQ measures not the broad amorphous trait “intelligence”—now recognized to assume a myriad of specialized forms—but rather the ability to do well on a particular kind of test. Similarly, ranking schools by their students’ average test scores is a measure of how a selected group of students did on a particular test, not the schools’ intrinsic educational merit.

Achievers of high rank often use their position to disadvantage those who would challenge them, or to hang on to rewards they may once have earned but have since ceased to merit. An aura of social rank—a vestige of aristocratic class—envelops winners (who are seen as somebodies), and is denied to runners-up (who are seen as nobodies). Parents pay premiums to elite universities in the belief that the prestige of these famous schools will rub off on their offspring and bring them advantages after graduation.

Although most new organizations start out with the intention of doing good and providing a service, once rankism gains a foothold, like a parasitical disease, it subverts that purpose to the narrower goal of advancing the well-being of high-ranking members. The discriminatory, morale-sapping effects of rankism can be seen in hierarchies of all kinds: schools and universities; firms, corporations, and businesses; labor unions; medical, religious and nonprofit organizations; the guardian professions and the military; bureaucracies and governments.

Meritocracy is a myth in the presence of rankism, just as it was in the presence of racism and sexism. Until there are effective procedures that curtail rank-based discrimination in all of our social institutions, American meritocracy is unworthy of the name.

Democracy’s Next Step

During the two centuries since the American and French Revolutions, and despite woeful lapses and delays, the franchise in modern democracies has gradually widened to include virtually all adults.

But although we’ve made significant inroads against racism and sexism, diminishing returns seem to be setting in. At this stage an all-inclusive approach might do more to advance the causes of minorities, women, and other identity groups than the splintering, sometimes divisive, group-based politics of recent years. A practical way to further justice at this point, including the rights of specific groups, is to attack the universal underlying cause of indignity, regardless of who is targeted. That cause is rankism.

Unequal opportunity and unfairness are incompatible with democratic ideals. The indignities of rankism, no less than those of racism and sexism, are inefficient, cruel, and self-defeating. They have no place in democracy’s future.

In the 1960s, America faced a moral crisis that threatened to tear the country apart. Once we understood that there was no way to end the crisis without dismantling racism, we took steps to do so. As we enter the twenty-first century, a moral crisis looms that could become equally grave. Our political and economic institutions, both national international, are rife with rankism.

Democracy is a work in progress. Its essence is its capacity for self-correction. Overcoming rankism—in the family, the schools, the workplace, and the boardroom, and in domestic and international politics—is now at the top of democracy’s agenda. The purpose of this book is to shine a spotlight on rank-based abuse, to learn to recognize its various faces, assess its costs, and conceive a world without it.

Like racism and sexism, rankism can’t be eradicated overnight, but its perpetrators can be put on notice. Authority can be democratized without being undermined. Democracies, which succeeded in circumscribing rank in national government, led the world in the last century. The nations that are most successful in removing rankism from business, education, and their international relations will lead in the next.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In the author’s way of thinking, what makes “rankism” the “mother of all isms”?
2. How would a world without rankism be different from today? Would you like to be part of that world?