Democracy's Next Step: Overcoming Rankism

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Students of natural history are often quick to point out that it is a rule of nature to pick on the weak—a course of action which minimizes the chance of retaliation—and that in this regard human beings are not unlike other species. What is less often appreciated is that it is also human nature for the weak to organize and rebel against oppression and domination. People have repeatedly shown themselves capable of imposing limits on the authority of strongmen. Examples include the English barons at Runnymede forcing King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, the birth of parliaments limiting the powers of sovereigns, colonials expelling their imperialist masters and, in the 20th century, the global spread of democracy and the defeat or collapse of dictatorships that challenged it.

We have also witnessed the rise of organized labor and of mass movements such as those for civil and women's rights in response to discrimination and exploitation by a dominant group. So while it must be acknowledged that we humans have predatory tendencies, it is also clear that we are capable of mobilizing countervailing powers that shield the weak from the strong.

Democracy has established deep roots as a system of government that protects those who are vulnerable from abuses of power in the civic realm. The challenge we face today is to confront the abuses of power that remain in our civic affairs as well as curtail those that permeate the social institutions within which we conduct large parts of our lives.

Rank—The Seat of Power

People manage their affairs, from governance to business to education, by creating ranks within organizations and institutions and assigning specific powers

to them. Our rank within any particular hierarchy signals our power within it. Thus, abuses of power can usually be viewed and treated as abuses of rank.

If we are to confront these abuses effectively, we need to have a name for them. Lacking that, we are in a position similar to that of women before the term "sexism" was coined. Writing in 1963, Betty Friedan characterized the plight of women as "The Problem That Has No Name."[i] By 1968, the problem had acquired a name—"sexism." That simple word provided a clear target and a rallying cry for protesting and overcoming abuses of power linked to gender and gave birth to the modern women's movement.

A similar dynamic has played out with other identity groups seeking redress of their grievances. Those discriminated against on the basis of their race unified against "racism." The elderly targeted "ageism." By analogy, abuse of the power inherent in rank can be called "rankism."[ii] It typically takes the form of self-aggrandizement and injurious or discriminatory behavior toward those in positions of lower rank. In some circumstances, the abuse rises to the level of exploitation or oppression. Rankism is equally the illegitimate use of rank and the use of rank illegitimately obtained or held.

Everyday examples of rankism include a boss harassing an employee, a customer demeaning a waiter, a teacher humiliating a student, a parent shaming a child. People with higher rank and more power in any particular setting can and often do maintain an environment that is hostile and demeaning to those with lower rank and less power in that setting, much as most everywhere whites used to be at liberty to mistreat blacks.

The authority of rank is so commonly misused that some jump to the conclusion that rank itself is the problem and that the solution is to do away with it. This kind of egalitarianism ignores the fact that people are inherently unequal—in skills, talent, beauty, strength, health, wealth or most any measurable trait—and that differences of rank in a particular context may correctly reflect this. Political and social models that abjure such distinctions are either naïvely utopian or demagogic. As René de Chateaubriand noted, "Equality and despotism have secret connections."

The trouble is not with rank per se but with the abuse of rank. When earned and used properly, rank is an indispensable organizational tool for fostering group cooperation and accomplishing goals. We rightfully admire and love authorities—parents, teachers, bosses, political leaders—who use the power of their rank in an exemplary way. Accepting their leadership entails no loss of dignity or opportunity by subordinates. In contrast, those who abuse their power by demeaning, exploiting or oppressing those they outrank betray a sacred trust and sow seeds of indignity that ripen into resistance and may ultimately leave their victims thirsting for vengeance.

Given the serious consequences of confusing rankism and rank, it bears repeating that many power differentials are legitimate and that inveighing against them or against the differences in rank that mirror them is misguided and futile. Proposing to do away with differences in rank makes about as much sense as the notion of doing away with differences in race or gender. Without a system of ranking, complex institutions might slip into a state of disorganization, if not anarchy.

Rankism occurs when rank-holders use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves. A malady indigenous to bureaucracies, it can be found in governments, businesses, families, workplaces, schools and universities, as well as religious, nonprofit and healthcare organizations. Recent examples in the headlines include political and corporate corruption, sexual abuse by members of the clergy, school hazing and bullying and the abuse of elders in nursing homes. Photos of the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by their American guards exposed the arrogant face of rankism to the world.

Rankism distorts personal relationships, taxes productivity, undermines public trust, stokes ethnic hatred and incites revenge. It has both short and long-term costs: the immediate toll on the targeted individual or group and the cumulative corrosive effects on organizations that tolerate it. At the societal level, rankism afflicts none more so than those lacking the protections of social rank—the working poor.[iii]

People acquiesce in rankism, even collude in self-abnegation, because they fear the consequences of resisting: demerit, demotion, ridicule and ostracism. The muffled complaints, occasional whistle-blowing, and sporadic outbursts we do hear echo those of blacks and women who resisted in solitary protest before popular movements made it impossible to ignore their demands.

As the taboo on discussing rank and its prerogatives is broken and the costs of rankism are revealed, we can anticipate that acceptance of rankism, either tacit or overt, will gradually diminish. Like the members of the familiar identity groups, rankism's casualties will slowly find their voice and make themselves heard. An auspicious example is the recently founded Roman Catholic lay organization Voice of the Faithful, whose goal is to hold clerics accountable in their exercise of authority.

Rankism—The Root of All Isms

At first glance, it might seem that rankism is one more in the string of familiar "isms"—racism, sexism, ageism, etc.—against which various identity groups have rebelled. But there are important differences.

Unlike race and gender—native traits that are generally fixed—rank is mutable and in fact is constantly changing. We can hold high rank in one setting (e.g., at home) and simultaneously be low on the totem pole in another (at work). Likewise, we can feel powerful at one time and powerless at another, as when we move from childhood to young adults and then from our "prime" into old age, or when we experience the loss of a job, a partner or our health. As a result, most of us have been not only victims but also perpetrators of rankism, depending on the context. Indeed, this is part of what has kept rankism in the shadows for so long. People are often reluctant to attack it for fear of losing the privileges they themselves might already enjoy or hope to in the future.

Secondly, rankism covers a much broader terrain than any of the familiar identity-based forms of discrimination. In fact, it is the root of them all. Distinguishing traits such as color, gender or sexual orientation signify weakness only if there is a social consensus in place that handicaps those bearing them.

Anti-Semitism, racial segregation, the feminine mystique and homophobia are all examples of complex social agreements that have functioned to make whole groups of people vulnerable. But all these kinds of prejudice depend for their existence on differences in social rank that in turn signify differences in power, so they are all at the deepest level varieties of rankism.

Several phenomena point to the limitations of purely identity-based analyses. In the four decades since the 1960s, racism, sexism and numerous other trait-based forms of discrimination have been significantly curtailed. Yet there has been virtually no impact on abuses that occur *within* these groups. Blacks insult and exploit other blacks, whites do the same to whites, and women to women, all with confidence that it will pass for business as usual. Most often these abuses are not trait-based; they are instances of rankism.

Of additional significance are the diminishing returns that identity-based movements have begun to experience. This trend will not be reversed until we understand that it is not race or gender per se that is keeping these forms of discrimination alive but rather social rank and the power we still attach to it. At this point, the best way to help any particular identity group fight indignity and ongoing prejudice is to overcome the broad-based rankism that infects our social institutions at large and so affects us all, no matter what specific traits we may or may not possess.

The situation is analogous to the era in medicine when malignancies peculiar to different organs were seen as disparate maladies. In time they were all recognized to be various forms of one disease—cancer. Attacking the familiar isms one at a time is like developing a different chemotherapy for each kind of cancer instead of seeking to preempt the entire class of malignancies by strengthening the body's immune system or modifying the genome.

A Dignitarian Society

Regardless of whether it occurs between groups or individuals, rankism is experienced first and foremost as an insult to dignity. Human beings everywhere have an innate sense that dignity is their birthright and are quick to detect

affronts to it. In the words of Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Foundation, “Dignity is not negotiable.”

Insults to dignity set in motion a psychological dynamic that commands people’s attention and drains their energy. When we must defend our dignity in the workplace, productivity suffers. In schools, learning may be sacrificed. Recent studies linking social class to mortality and morbidity suggest that the chronic rankism experienced by the poor is as harmful to health as smoking 3 1/2 packs of cigarettes a day.[iv]

How can we minimize rankism in our personal interactions and social institutions? What would a “dignitarian” society—one that disallowed rankism—look like?

Despite noteworthy advances in designing models of governance that impose limits on those holding positions of power, many in both civic and social institutions continue to abuse their subordinates when they think they can get away with it. The cynicism previously reserved for politicians has spread to envelop the corporate world as well. News of another financial scandal is often met with shrugs, as if to say, “What did you expect?” And in both business and government, we act as if finding the right leadership would solve the problem. This is like hoping the heir to the throne will be more benevolent than the absolute monarch now sitting on it. Sometimes that does happen, but making those entrusted with power accountable is a far more dependable solution to the recurring problem of tyrannical or corrupt leadership.

In order to effect the overthrow of superstition and dogma, it was not enough for a few leading figures to inveigh against ignorance. A critical number of ordinary people also had to substitute knowledge, evidence and reason for unsubstantiated beliefs. Only then was a societal tipping point reached that we call the Enlightenment.

So it will be with the Dignitarian Era that will mark the removal of rankism’s social sanction. The dismantling of rankism and the adoption of dignitarian governance models for our civic and social institutions—models that make their leaders accountable to those they serve—begins with each one of us in our

personal relationships with relatives, friends, co-workers, teachers and physicians. The larger transgressions we complain about—corporate and governmental corruption; bullying in the workplace, the marketplace, and among nations—differ in scale but not kind from the “little” abuses of power most of us permit ourselves. That is where we must start. Only when we have cleansed our individual relationships of rankism will there be the understanding and the will to challenge the broader forms of it that afflict us all.

Interpersonal Rankism

Interpersonal rankism runs the gamut from disregard to discrimination to exploitation. Its common denominator is indignity. Spouses ridicule their partners, older siblings dominate younger ones, coaches humiliate players, clerics exploit parishioners. Examples abound in countless areas and the dynamic is always the same: the high-ranking and powerful take advantage of the low-ranking and vulnerable.

In a dignitarian society, self-aggrandizement and servility would both be rare. Rank would be defined narrowly as signifying a degree of expertise or achievement in some specific area at a given time. Gains and losses of rank would be both commonplace and expected, and arrogance and shame would attach to neither. Shifting from higher to lower rank and back again, in different arenas and under varying circumstances, would be viewed as a natural process and we would make such transitions without fear of exposing ourselves to the “sting”[v] of rankism. People with high rank would keep their promises to those on lower rungs of the ladder.

In a post-rankist world, labels like “somebody” and “nobody,” referring to people with higher or lower rank, would lose their judgmental connotations. Somebodies would be seen as those who were serving society as leaders, teachers or other public figures at the present time. Nobodies would simply be those who were not playing high-profile roles at the moment. Everyone’s unique contribution would be recognized and appreciated, no matter what their status or situation. People with high rank would not expect to have a permanent hold on it

because that would put others at an unfair disadvantage in future competitions for rank.[vi]

Because dignity-preserving relationships might seem at first glance like an unattainable ideal, it is important to notice how rapidly we're moving toward them in certain areas. One of the clearest examples lies in the remarkable evolution of child-rearing practices.

Well into the 20th century, "because I say so" was reason enough for forcing a child to do anything. But over the last several generations, we have moved from children being "seen but not heard" to a previously unimaginable degree of parity between the young and their elders—not parity in knowledge or wisdom, of course, but parity in their status as individuals. "Kids are people, too," is the slogan guiding this transformation. Listening to the young and considering their views is not the same as indulging them or abdicating parental responsibility for their well-being.

One consequence of the new attitude towards children is that public authorities have begun to intervene in family life if they perceive a child to be in danger. Abuse of all sorts that used to be shielded from scrutiny with a defiant "mind your own business" is now being exposed. In the service of protecting children, parental rank has been circumscribed.

It's not hard to imagine that the next step will be to find a way to give weight to the interests of the young in electoral politics. No group lacking political representation has ever enjoyed the benefits of equal citizenship.

Democracy's mantra of "one person, one vote" is overdue for reinterpretation when it comes to the very young. Many of the arguments for denying children a voice in political matters—which obviously affect them profoundly—sound much like the old paternalistic rationalizations for denying women and ethnic minorities equal citizenship. Respecting children's dignity, in political as well as personal terms, is part of teaching them to respect the dignity of others when they become adults. As populations age, giving proportional electoral weight to the interests of the young is also a requirement of national rejuvenation.

Dignity in the Workplace

A quiet anti-authoritarian revolution is spreading in the workplace as it becomes clear that management that does not respect the dignity of workers is counterproductive. A dignitarian workplace would be one in which the dysfunctionality of rankism is understood by all. In such an environment, rank would be designated ongoingly on a task-by-task basis. Faced with changing missions and circumstances, companies and organizations would reassign ranks to facilitate cooperation on each new undertaking. There would be no favoritism toward those currently serving in positions of high rank and care would be taken not to abridge the rights and privileges of those with lower rank. Businesses would pride themselves as being places where everyone experienced equal dignity, had equal opportunity and was compensated fairly.

A non-rankist work environment is good for the bottom line because as rank abuse is reduced, the energy that individuals bring to their jobs increases. Overcoming discrimination and injustice pays dividends in the form of greater loyalty, increased productivity and fewer days of sick leave. Companies that give their workers a voice in management and a stake in earnings reap significant benefits.

Without rankism, employee co-ownership would be the rule, not the exception and the income and equity gaps that separate the highest and lowest paid would narrow. Negative motivations such as fear of demotion or dismissal would be dwarfed by the positive motivation that comes from being recognized as part of a poised, flexible and responsible team. Eliminating “malrecognition”—the hunger for deserved but denied recognition—from the workplace will be as good for profitability as eliminating malnutrition was for the productivity of day laborers.

A system of management in which power is abused is vulnerable to competition from firms unburdened by the inefficiencies generated by rankism. In time the latter demonstrate their superiority by out-producing the former. Young upstart companies that have put older inflexible ones out of business are now

legion. Invariably, the explanation lies in calcification of rank. Whether of a state or a firm, rank abuse is self-limiting and ultimately self-defeating. A former director of the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration attributes the two space shuttle disasters to the culture of rankism that pervades NASA's bureaucracy.[vii]

Organizations in which rank is used in ways that protect everyone's dignity incubate a superior power. Accordingly, there is no more important task of leadership than the detection and eradication of rankism. Good leaders know this instinctively and seek to instill non-rankist behavior by exemplifying it in their own relationships with subordinates. As Jim Collins[viii] has shown, the founder-leaders of great companies neither indulge in abuses of power themselves nor tolerate it among the ranks. They create an atmosphere of unimpeachable dignity from top to bottom throughout their organization.[ix]

Dignitarian Schools

There's a reason that educational reforms, whether progressive or conservative, almost always disappoint, leaving so many of the young withholding their hearts and minds from study. What's sapping their will to learn is the unacknowledged rankism that pervades educational institutions from kindergarten through graduate school and beyond. In a rankist environment, trying to acquire and hold on to a position of dignity takes priority over all else. Such efforts deplete attention and energy that could otherwise go towards acquiring knowledge and skills. For many of our youth, the game is lost by the age of six.

Students in rankist schools are like ethnic minorities in racist schools: they will sacrifice learning if they feel they must do so in order to defend their pride. They forfeit their chance for an education with long-term benefits in the pursuit of fleeting respect. Disallowing racism in the schools has helped relieve ethnic minorities of the burden of trying to protect their dignity vis-à-vis the majority. But left in place are a whole host of humiliating practices that demean all students, regardless of race or ethnicity.

If we understand martyrdom as the choice to sacrifice one's own development or even life in defense of dignity, then the high failure rate of our schools can be understood as a kind of martyrdom. As William James presciently put it a century ago, "With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure, no humiliation." Tragically, but understandably, avoiding degradation trumps personal growth, no matter what our age. By eliminating the potential for indignity we can spare people from ever having to make this fateful choice.

Ridding schools of rankism is complicated by the fact that determinations of rank are a legitimate tool for guiding students toward a vocation suited to their interests and abilities. But that tool is misused when tests, instead of serving a constructive, diagnostic function, are used to stigmatize those who get low grades and exalt those who score high. When that happens, rankings become self-fulfilling prophecies and soon a debilitating gap is created between students destined for success and those marked for failure.

For the most part, schools mirror society's values. Until we create a non-rankist society, educational reforms will make little headway as they are pitted against the fundamental desire for human dignity. The best educational policy of the day was of little benefit to American blacks and women when it was implemented in a racist or sexist context. Likewise, other potentially salutary remedies will be doomed to fail so long as they are introduced into a system beset with rankism. Surely if we can establish the right to die with dignity, we can establish the right to learn with dignity.

Liberté, *Dignité*, Fraternité

A rank-based strategy aimed at equalizing dignity stands in sharp contrast to the class-based Marxist strategy aimed at equalizing wealth. For the most part, communism merely created a rankist elite which arrogated wealth and power to itself. A rank-based strategy anticipates rather a redistribution of recognition and the elimination of the dignity gap created and perpetrated by rankism.

A dignitarian approach sees equal dignity as a steppingstone to the more fair, just and decent societies that political philosophers have long envisioned.[x]

Taking a page from the identity-based movements, it suggests that the way to build such a society is to organize a dignitarian movement against rankism.

The trait-based movements have empowered whole groups of second-class citizens to stop acquiescing in their own humiliation. Once blacks and women found their voices and focused attention on race and gender-based oppression, it was only a matter of time until racists and sexists found themselves on the defensive. The methods that secured a measure of justice for those groups can also work for victims of rankism.

It's virtually impossible to make common cause with other targets of abuse when you lack a name for your common injury. As the word "rankism" identifies the offense, so the accusation "rankist" will give pause to those who would perpetrate it. Of course, an allegation is not evidence of guilt, but once voiced, it does invite scrutiny. As with prior social movements, the result will be to switch the burden of proof from the weaker to the stronger party.

The basic tenet of a dignitarian society is that we are all equal in dignity—not just in theory but in practice, not just in God's eyes but in each others'. A dignitarian society would not compensate everyone equally, but everyone would be paid well enough to live a life of dignity. It's hard to imagine such a society providing healthcare or a quality education to some but not others. Likewise, it's impossible to imagine a dignitarian society in which one must command a fortune to run for political office. Tolerating rankism in civic affairs is no less corrosive of government than was the historical accommodation of racism.

The indignities generated by rankism are not just inefficient and counterproductive; they leave deep scars that pose an increasing danger to us all. In the 21st century, overcoming rankism is at once a moral goal and a practical necessity. Building a dignitarian world is democracy's next evolutionary step.

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[i] In her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique* (Norton, 1963).

[ii] The coinage “rankism” is related to the colloquialisms "pulling rank" and “ranking on” someone, both of which give recognition to the signal importance of rank in human interactions. As an aside it is worth noting that as an adjective, “rank” means foul, fetid, or smelly and the verb “to rankle” means to cause resentment or bitterness. Although there is no real etymological relationship between these usages and “rank” in the sense of position in a hierarchy, it’s perhaps not a bad thing that the word “rankism” picks up by association the malodor of its sound-alikes.

[iii] Three recent books chronicle this situation in the United States. In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich makes a compelling case that the working poor are in effect unacknowledged benefactors whose labor subsidizes the 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. In *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, David Shipler describes the economic black hole into which the poor can fall with scant hope of ever extricating themselves.

[iv] Research on the relationship between rankism and health is reported on by Dr. Jeffrey Ritterman in his article “The Beloved Community: From Civil Rights Dream to Pubic Health Imperative” in The Permanente Journal, Winter 2004, Vol. 8, No. 1 (pp.58–62). The cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* of October 12, 2003 makes the case that the chronic stress experienced by those of low socioeconomic status, which it calls “the new ghetto miasma,” is a killer haunting America’s inner cities. And Dr. Nancy Adler, director of the Center for

Health and Community at the University of California at San Francisco, is conducting a research program on this subject.

[v] Elias Canetti introduced the notion of "sting" in his classic work *Crowds and Power* to describe what those holding higher rank in a hierarchy may do to subordinates.

[vi] Job tenure is an inherently rankist privilege to which we should resort only when we can find no other way to protect the independent judgment of those in positions of service.

[vii] In a private conversation with the author (10/10/04)

[viii] Jim Collins*, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap…and Others Don't* (HarperCollins, 2003).

[ix] As we come to recognize and move beyond rankism, the very need (or perceived need) for a formalized system of ranking will diminish in many contexts, leading to the flattening of age-old hierarchies. This scenario has already begun to play out in businesses and elsewhere.

[x] See for example *The Decent Society* by Avishai Margalit, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* by Michael Walzer and *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls.