

TOPIC 13

Politics and the Economy

THE TWO REMAINING INSTITUTIONS TO DISCUSS IN “PART 4: Social Institutions” are politics and the economy. The sociological view of these two institutions is that they are closely connected, and any of us can recognize the reciprocal impact of the economy and politics. How does politics respond to the demands of big business, the wealthy, political action committees, or lobbies like the National Rifle Association? How is the economy affected by political action in the form of tax refunds, changing interest rates, prosecution of business and investment companies, or tax breaks to corporations (corporate welfare)? Politics creates and oversees the rule of law in society, and as some have said, is really about “who gets what.” The economy affects each family and person in society. Having a job, or not, puts people in dramatically different circumstances. In American society where capitalism reigns, the economy regularly moves through “boom and bust” cycles. Full employment and a growing economy make for good times personally and politically. High unemployment and a weak economy have the opposite effect. Many of us have felt the impact of such a changeable economy.

Politics, more than any other institution, is about power and authority. These two ideas illuminate the difference between getting your way through force and coercion (power), and legitimately exercising power such that the decisions made are supported by those who are affected (authority). Inside of politics there is a broad range of views, from the most reactionary to the most radical. Reactionaries wish that there was a way to return to the “good old days” where government did influence everyday

life and people could settle their problems the old-fashioned way. Reactionaries, like militia groups, might resort to violence to make their views known. Radicals, who want to change society and social institutions in dramatic ways, may also have violence as part of their political approach. In either case, most Americans reject such extremes and see themselves as “conservative” or “liberal.” These are the more moderate positions on the political continuum, and rarely do we experience decades like the sixties when radicals pushed social unrest, or the eighties when reactionaries were making their views felt with violence. Having a political consciousness, an understanding of the micro and macro influences of governmental decisions, is very much a part of the sociological imagination.

The economic institution in society is often the most mysterious. While many of us have our lives and livelihood driven by the economy, we may be least able to see it and understand its impact. Somehow this lumbering giant of activity, from the most personal pay raise or promotion to the nation’s gross national product, escapes our notice. Different societies have different economies; capitalism and socialism are two examples. Along with the economics of socialism, where prices and wages are monitored so that economic change is more controlled, there comes less possibility for rapid expansion and longer periods of a “languishing” economy. In capitalism, where a free market economy and competition drive the dynamics, there is the possibility of making great sums of money (profit), with the likelihood that soon there will be a “bust” in the cycle and many people out of work. In the margins between such economic systems, issues like healthcare make interesting political issues like who should bear the cost of health services for the poor or the elderly. Many of us will have careers of more than forty years and understanding the dynamics of this enormous event in our lives will certainly make it more pleasant.

The first article is by C. Wright Mills and we are given a theoretical examination of “the power elite” in American politics. Here business, government, and the military are seen in their collective impact on both politics and the economy. In the second article, the loss of jobs, “corporate downsizing,” is qualitatively researched by Charles Koeber. What is the process by which persons who have been the victims of economic downturns make sense of and cope with their experiences? Finally, Robert W. Fuller brings a new concept of “rankism” to bear on one of the oldest sociological issues: abuse of power. Using power to harm, dominate, manipulate, and humiliate others is the most common of daily occurrences. Has Fuller identified a new form of domination based on abuse of power? Is this like racism, classism, and sexism?

C. WRIGHT MILLS**The Power Elite**

Except for the unsuccessful Civil War, changes in the power system of the United States have not involved important challenges to its basic legitimations. Even when they have been decisive enough to be called 'revolutions,' they have not involved the 'resort to the guns of a cruiser, the dispersal of an elected assembly by bayonets, or the mechanisms of a police state.'¹ Nor have they involved, in any decisive way, any ideological struggle to control masses. Changes in the American structure of power have generally come about by institutional shifts in the relative positions of the political, the economic, and the military orders. From this point of view, and broadly speaking, the American power elite has gone through four epochs, and is now well into a fifth. . . .

. . . We study history, it has been said, to rid ourselves of it, and the history of the power elite is a clear case for which this maxim is correct. Like the tempo of American life in general, the long-term trends of the power structure have been greatly speeded up since World War II, and certain newer trends within and between the dominant institutions have also set the shape of the power elite. . . .

I. In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the political order, that clue is the decline of politics as genuine and public debate of alternative decisions—with nationally responsible and policy-coherent parties and with autonomous organizations connecting the lower and middle levels of power with the top levels of decision. America is now in considerable part more a formal political democracy than a democratic social structure, and even the formal political mechanics are weak.

The long-time tendency of business and government to become more intricately and deeply involved with each other has, in the fifth epoch, reached a new point of explicitness. The two cannot now be seen clearly as two distinct worlds. It is in terms of the executive agencies of the state that the rapprochement has proceeded most decisively. The growth of the executive branch of the government, with its agencies that patrol the complex economy, does not mean merely the 'enlargement of government' as some sort of autonomous bureaucracy: it has meant the ascendancy of the corporation's man as a political eminence. . . .

II. In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the enlarged and military state, that clue becomes evident in the military ascendancy. The warlords have gained decisive political relevance, and the military structure of America is now in considerable part a political structure. The seemingly permanent military threat places a premium on the military and upon their control of men, materiel, money, and power; virtually all political and economic actions are now judged in terms of military definitions of reality: the higher warlords have ascended to a firm position within the power elite of the fifth epoch. . . .

III. In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the economic order, that clue is the fact that the economy is at once a permanent-war economy and a private-corporation economy. American capitalism is now in considerable part a military capitalism, and the most important relation of the big corporation to the state rests on the coincidence of interests between military and corporate needs, as defined by warlords and corporate rich. Within the elite as a whole, this coincidence of interest between the high military and the corporate chieftains strengthens both of them and further subordinates the role of the merely political men. Not politicians, but corporate executives, sit with the military and plan the organization of war effort. . . .

The power elite is composed of political, economic, and military men, but this instituted elite is frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of 'crisis.' In the long peace of the nineteenth century, the military were not in the high councils of state, not of the political directorate, and neither were the economic men—they made raids upon the state but they did not join its directorate. During the 'thirties, the political man was ascendant. Now the military and the corporate men are in top positions.

Of the three types of circle that compose the power elite today, it is the military that has benefited the most in its enhanced power,

although the corporate circles have also become more explicitly entrenched in the more public decision-making circles. It is the professional politician that has lost the most, so much that in examining the events and decisions, one is tempted to speak of a political vacuum in which the corporate rich and the high warlord, in their coinciding interests, rule.

It should not be said that the three 'take turns' in carrying the initiative, for the mechanics of the power elite are not often as deliberate as that would imply. At times, of course, it is—as when political men, thinking they can borrow the prestige of generals, find that they must pay for it, or, as when during big slumps, economic men feel the need of a politician at once safe and possessing vote appeal. Today all three are involved in virtually all widely ramifying decisions. Which of the three types seems to lead depends upon 'the tasks of the period' as they, the elite, define them. Just now, these tasks center upon 'defense' and international affairs. Accordingly, as we have seen, the military are ascendant in two senses: as personnel and as justifying ideology. That is why, just now, we can most easily specify the unity and the shape of the power elite in terms of the military ascendancy.

But we must always be historically specific and open to complexities. The simple Marxian view makes the big economic man the *real* holder of power; the simple liberal view makes the big political man the chief of the power system; and there are some who would view the warlords as virtual dictators. Each of these is an oversimplified view. It is to avoid them that we use the term 'power elite' rather than, for example, 'ruling class.'

In so far as the power elite has come to wide public attention, it has done so in terms of the 'military clique.' The power elite does, in fact, take its current shape from the decisive entrance into it of the military. Their presence and their ideology are its major legitimations, whenever the power elite feels the need to provide any. But what is called the 'Washington military clique' is not composed merely of military men, and it does not prevail merely in Washington. Its members exist all over the country, and it is a coalition of generals in the roles of corporation executives, of politicians masquerading as admirals, of corporation executives acting like politicians, of civil servants who become majors, of vice-admirals who are also the assistants to a cabinet officer, who is himself, by the way, really a member of the managerial elite.

Neither the idea of a 'ruling class' nor of a simple monolithic rise of 'bureaucratic politicians' nor of a 'military clique' is adequate. The

power elite today involves the often uneasy coincidence of economic, military, and political power. . . .

Despite their social similarity and psychological affinities, the members of the power elite do not constitute a club having a permanent membership with fixed and formal boundaries. It is of the nature of the power elite that within it there is a good deal of shifting about, and that it thus does not consist of one small set of the same men in the same positions in the same hierarchies. Because men know each other personally does not mean that among them there is a unity of policy; and because they do not know each other personally does not mean that among them there is a disunity. The conception of the power elite does not rest, as I have repeatedly said, primarily upon personal friendship.

As the requirements of the top places in each of the major hierarchies become similar, the types of men occupying these roles at the top—by selection and by training in the jobs—become similar. This is no mere deduction from structure to personnel. That it is a fact is revealed by the heavy traffic that has been going on between the three structures, often in very intricate patterns. The chief executives, the warlords, and selected politicians came into contact with one another in an intimate, working way during World War II; after that war ended, they continued their associations, out of common beliefs, social congeniality, and coinciding interests. Noticeable proportions of top men from the military, the economic, and the political worlds have during the last fifteen years occupied positions in one or both of the other worlds: between these higher circles there is an interchangeability of position, based formally upon the supposed transferability of 'executive ability,' based in substance upon the co-optation by cliques of insiders. As members of a power elite, many of those busy in this traffic have come to look upon 'the government' as an umbrella under whose authority they do their work.

As the business between the big three increases in volume and importance, so does the traffic in personnel. The very criteria for selecting men who will rise come to embody this fact. The corporate commissar, dealing with the state and its military, is wiser to choose a young man who has experienced the state and its military than one who has not. The political director, often dependent for his own political success upon corporate decisions and corporations, is also wiser to choose a man with corporate experience. Thus, by virtue of the very criterion of success, the interchange of personnel and the unity of the power elite is increased.

Given the formal similarity of the three hierarchies in which the several members of the elite spend their working lives, given the ramifications of the decisions made in each upon the others, given the coincidence of interest that prevails among them at many points, and given the administrative vacuum of the American civilian state along with its enlargement of tasks—given these trends of structure, and adding to them the psychological affinities we have noted—we should indeed be surprised were we to find that men said to be skilled in administrative contacts and full of organizing ability would fail to do more than get in touch with one another. They have, of course, done much more than that: increasingly, they assume positions in one another's domains.

The unity revealed by the interchangeability of top roles rests upon the parallel development of the top jobs in each of the big three domains. The interchange occurs most frequently at the points of their coinciding interest, as between regulatory agency and the regulated industry; contracting agency and contractor. And, as we shall see, it leads to co-ordinations that are more explicit, and even formal.

The inner core of the power elite consists, first, of those who interchange commanding roles at the top of one dominant institutional order with those in another: the admiral who is also a banker and a lawyer and who heads up an important federal commission; the corporation executive whose company was one of the two or three leading war materiel producers who is now the Secretary of Defense; the wartime general who dons civilian clothes to sit on the political directorate and then becomes a member of the board of directors of a leading economic corporation.

Although the executive who becomes a general, the general who becomes a statesman, the statesman who becomes a banker, see much more than ordinary men in their ordinary environments, still the perspectives of even such men often remain tied to their dominant locales. In their very career, however, they interchange roles within the big three and thus readily transcend the particularity of interest in any one of these institutional milieux. By their very careers and activities, they lace the three types of milieux together. They are, accordingly, the core members of the power elite.

These men are not necessarily familiar with every major arena of power. We refer to one man who moves in and between perhaps two circles—say the industrial and the military—and to another man who moves in the military and the political, and to a third who moves in the

political as well as among opinion-makers. These in-between types most closely display our image of the power elite's structure and operation, even of behind-the-scenes operations. To the extent that there is any 'invisible elite,' these advisory and liaison types are its core. Even if—as I believe to be very likely—many of them are, at least in the first part of their careers, 'agents' of the various elites rather than themselves elite, it is they who are most active in organizing the several top milieux into a structure of power and maintaining it. . . .

The outermost fringes of the power elite—which change more than its core—consist of 'those who count' even though they may not be 'in' on given decisions of consequence nor in their career move between the hierarchies. Each member of the power elite need not be a man who personally decides every decision that is to be ascribed to the power elite. Each member, in the decisions that he does make, takes the others seriously into account. They not only make decisions in the several major areas of war and peace; they are the men who, in decisions in which they take no direct part, are taken into decisive account by those who are directly in charge.

On the fringes and below them, somewhat to the side of the lower echelons, the power elite fades off into the middle levels of power, into the rank and file of the Congress, the pressure groups that are not vested in the power elite itself, as well as a multiplicity of regional and state and local interests. If all the men on the middle levels are not among those who count, they sometimes must be taken into account, handled, cajoled, broken or raised to higher circles. . . .

The conception of the power elite and of its unity rests upon the corresponding developments and the coincidence of interests among economic, political, and military organizations. It also rests upon the similarity of origin and outlook, and the social and personal intermingling of the top circles from each of these dominant hierarchies. This conjunction of institutional and psychological forces, in turn, is revealed by the heavy personnel traffic within and between the big three institutional orders, as well as by the rise of go-betweens as in the high-level lobbying. The conception of the power elite, accordingly, does *not* rest upon the assumption that American history since the origins of World War II must be understood as a secret plot, or as a great and co-ordinated conspiracy of the members of this elite. The conception rests upon quite impersonal grounds.

There is, however, little doubt that the American power elite—which contains, we are told, some of 'the greatest organizers in the

world’—has also planned and has plotted. The rise of the elite, as we have already made clear, was not and could not have been caused by a plot; and the tenability of the conception does not rest upon the existence of any secret or any publicly known organization. But, once the conjunction of structural trend and of the personal will to utilize it gave rise to the power elite, then plans and programs did occur to its members and indeed it is not possible to interpret many events and official policies of the fifth epoch without reference to the power elite. ‘There is a great difference,’ Richard Hofstadter has remarked, ‘between locating conspiracies *in* history and saying that history *is*, in effect, a conspiracy. . . .’²

The structural trends of institutions become defined as opportunities by those who occupy their command posts. Once such opportunities are recognized, men may avail themselves of them. Certain types of men from each of the dominant institutional areas, more far-sighted than others, have actively promoted the liaison before it took its truly modern shape. They have often done so for reasons not shared by their partners, although not objected to by them either; and often the outcome of their liaison has had consequences which none of them foresaw, much less shaped, and which only later in the course of development came under explicit control. Only after it was well under way did most of its members find themselves part of it and become gladdened, although sometimes also worried, by this fact. But once the co-ordination is a going concern, new men come readily into it and assume its existence without question.

So far as explicit organization—conspiratorial or not—is concerned, the power elite, by its very nature, is more likely to use existing organizations, working within and between them, than to set up explicit organizations whose membership is strictly limited to its own members. But if there is no machinery in existence to ensure, for example, that military and political factors will be balanced in decisions made, they will invent such machinery and use it, as with the National Security Council. Moreover, in a formally democratic polity, the aims and the powers of the various elements of this elite are further supported by an aspect of the permanent war economy: the assumption that the security of the nation supposedly rests upon great secrecy of plan and intent. Many higher events that would reveal the working of the power elite can be withheld from public knowledge under the guise of secrecy. With the wide secrecy covering their operations and decisions, the power elite can mask their intentions, operations, and further

consolidation. Any secrecy that is imposed upon those in positions to observe high decision-makers clearly works for and not against the operations of the power elite.

There is accordingly reason to suspect—but by the nature of the case, no proof—that the power elite is not altogether ‘surfaced.’ There is nothing hidden about it, although its activities are not publicized. As an elite, it is not organized, although its members often know one another, seem quite naturally to work together and share many organizations in common. There is nothing conspiratorial about it, although its decisions are often publicly unknown and its mode of operation manipulative rather than explicit. . . .

The idea of the power elite rests upon and enables us to make sense of (1) the decisive institutional trends that characterize the structure of our epoch, in particular, the military ascendancy in a privately incorporated economy, and more broadly, the several coincidences of objective interests between economic, military and political institutions; (2) the social similarities and the psychological affinities of the men who occupy the command posts of these structures, in particular the increased interchangeability of the top positions in each of them and the increased traffic between these orders in the careers of men of power; (3) the ramifications to the point of virtual totality, of the kind of decisions that are made at the top, and the rise to power of a set of men who, by training and bent, are professional organizers of considerable force and who are unrestrained by democratic party training.

Negatively, the formation of the power elite rests upon (1) the relegation of the professional party politician to the middle levels of power, (2) the semi-organized stalemate of the interests of sovereign localities into which the legislative function has fallen, (3) the virtually complete absence of a civil service that constitutes a politically neutral, but politically relevant, depository of brainpower and executive skill, and (4) the increased official secrecy behind which great decisions are made without benefit of public or even Congressional debate.

As a result, the political directorate, the corporate rich, and the ascendant military have come together as the power elite, and the expanded and centralized hierarchies which they head have encroached upon the old balances and have now relegated them to the middle levels of power. Now the balancing society is a conception that pertains accurately to the middle levels, and on that level the balance has become

more often an affair of entrenched provincial and nationally irresponsible forces and demands than a center of power and national decision.

NOTES

1. Cf. Elmer Davis, *But We Were Born Free* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 187.
2. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1955), pp. 71–2.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What parts of society make up the “power elite” discussed by Mills? What practices allow this concentration of power?
2. Is the “power elite” an accident or a conspiracy? Defend your answer with information from the article.

CHARLES KOEBER

Corporate Restructuring, Downsizing, and the Middle Class

The Process and Meaning of Worker Displacement in the “New” Economy

Introduction

The term “downsizing” refers to the large-scale and systematic displacement of workers by typically corporate employers. Although the term is arguably a euphemism, its recent and common usage indicates the pervasiveness of the corporate job-cutting trend. This trend has not only resulted in mass job loss, but has contributed to the transformation of the post-World War II model of employment (Rubin 1996), altered the prevailing structure of labor markets (Osterman 1999), and significantly affected the American class structure (Perrucci and Wysong 1999).

During the 1970s and 1980s, plant closings and displacement of manufacturing workers were largely *reactive* measures that occurred as a response to economic recessions, drops in product demand, and the failure of U.S. companies to compete globally (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). However, during the 1990s, the downsizing of not only manufacturing workers, but also service, managerial, and professional workers became a *proactive* measure, a management strategy that companies in a variety of industries used in attempts to be more competitive and

profitable or to increase their stock market value (Downs 1995). Downsizing thus became a defining feature of the new capitalism under which *all* types and classes of workers were at risk of losing their jobs (Smith 2001; Budros 1998; Sennett 1998).¹

Paradoxically, the job cuts of the mid and late 1990s were not accompanied by or did not result in high levels of national unemployment. Unlike previous waves of layoffs in the twentieth century during periods of economic contraction, these layoffs occurred during an economic recovery and expansion in which many new jobs were created and unemployment rates hovered at or near record lows. Thus, two seemingly contradictory realities characterized part of the U.S. economic environment at the end of the twentieth century: high numbers of job cuts and low unemployment.

The dual reality of high numbers of job cuts alongside low rates of unemployment suggests that studies of worker displacement should focus not merely on aggregate job losses or job loss as an event. Rather, it appears that for many Americans, work has increasingly become a *transitional and transformational process* of “serial employment.” Due in part to corporate restructuring and downsizing that occur in the context of a rapidly changing global economy, many workers lose their jobs (Baldoz et al. 2001). When employment levels are sufficiently high, most displaced workers find new jobs and experience an accompanying change in the conditions and relations of their work. This perspective suggests that research concerning downsizing and worker displacement should focus on the complex relationship between the changing work experiences and mobility of displaced workers and changes in the structure of the economy, organizations, and labor markets (Kraft 1999).

Research Methods

The project employed qualitative case study methods as the basis for collecting and analyzing information. The methods of this study yield at least three main advantages. First, the case study approach helps to break down the larger research population of displaced workers into manageable units (White 1992, p. 83), enabling an account of the complex experiences of a specific group of displaced workers. Second, case study techniques provide the subjects with the opportunity to have a “voice” and to tell their “story” (Ragin and Becker 1992, p. 43). The third and most important advantage is that case study procedures encourage

and facilitate the development of “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). In this study I develop grounded theoretical concepts related to work and employment change of displaced workers.

The study draws upon thirty interviews with workers. It is difficult to sample displaced workers, as firms do not publicize the names of workers they displace and often provide limited information about workforce reductions to the public. Since it was not possible to develop a complete sampling frame of displaced workers, I relied on a variation of “snowball” sampling. This sampling procedure is appropriate when studying hard-to-access populations (Babbie 2001). Initial contacts occurred through personal acquaintances I sought out as a resident of the Binghamton area. These contacts provided me with telephone numbers of additional respondents who in turn provided me with further references. . . .

The occupational composition of the sample fell into mostly white-collar and professional positions and included eight engineers, seven administrative workers, four managers, three programmers, three designers, two technicians, one salesperson, one materials handler and one training instructor. All but one of the respondents were employed full time in the jobs that they lost. In terms of demographic characteristics, all respondents were white. Twenty-one were males and nine, females. The mean age of respondents was 46, but the males in the sample were older than the females. The mean job tenure of respondents in the lost job was 20 years. . . .

I used retrospective interviews to order events and occurrences. According to Schutt, retrospective interviewing is appropriate when longitudinal data are not available and the researcher believes respondents can provide reliable information about their histories (1996, p. 131). The interviews allowed for analysis of work histories and comparison of objective characteristics of respondents’ work and employment—such as wages, hours, types of tasks, and types of work relations—before and after job loss. The interviews also explored displaced workers’ subjective experiences with downsizing, displacement, and employment change.

Although most of the data for the study came from interviews with displaced workers, I used data from the Department of Labor to examine work and employment conditions in the Binghamton metropolitan statistical area (MSA). This information was useful in approximating the quantity of workforce reductions at IBM and Link and for describing the structural context of the job search and labor market encounters of

respondents. The combination of multiple methods and sources of information (or triangulation) in this study is consistent with suggestions in the literature concerning use of multiple research techniques to enhance social science findings (Chen 1998).

The Process of Displacement

The subjects of this study underwent a process by which they experienced work and employment change and by which they became separated and detached from prior conditions, relations, and meanings of work. As noted earlier, I conceptualize this pattern of experiences as the “displacement process.” Interviews with workers suggest this process occurred in three main stages, which are summarized in Table 1. The first *stage* of the displacement process began before job loss and occurred in two distinct *phases*. In phase 1A workers experienced a transformation of work relations as the firms began reorganizing and reducing their workforces. During phase 1B, participants lost their jobs. The second stage occurred following job loss, when respondents faced difficulty in the labor market; it was comprised of three phases. Phase 2A consisted of making work-related decisions about the future. Phase 2B involved re-education and/or retraining for most of the subjects. Phase 2C entailed a job search. Stage three of the displacement process covers the re-employment experience. This stage consisted of two phases. Phase 3A involved a period of transitional employment and/or “job hopping” during which time respondents worked in jobs mainly as a means to support themselves while looking or waiting for more favorable work. Phase 3B involved employment resettlement. . . .

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TABLE 1 Stages and Phases of the Displacement Process

Stage 1 Employment and job loss		Stage 2 Unemployment			Stage 3 Re-employment	
Phase 1A	Phase 1B	Phase 2A	Phase 2B	Phase 2C	Phase 3A	Phase 3B
Working in a downsizing firm	Losing or leaving one's job	Decision making	Additional education or training	Job searching	Job hopping in transitional employment	Resettling into new employment

Description of Stage One: Employment and Job Loss

Restructuring and downsizing had several related, overlapping and often contradictory effects on the work environments at IBM and Link. Workers' experiences and comments suggested these effects could be divided into four related outcomes: 1) fear of job loss; 2) decline of work effort and enthusiasm; 3) workplace conflict; and 4) diminished work expectations. . . .

Not surprisingly, many workers reacted emotionally to their job loss. They expressed feelings of shock, anger, fear, and unpleasant surprise. These emotions were expressed not only as a reaction to job loss per se, but as a reaction to the abandonment of longstanding familial relations and the job security that had previously characterized the two companies. The following IBM worker articulates a common sentiment found among the sample:

[It was] very discouraging and depressing. You felt a sense of betrayal. It was almost like your wife divorcing you, because you had a strong sense of family. In fact, that was one of IBM's big things, a big happy family. And they did at least try to propagate that feeling through their employees. . . . So I felt betrayed, basically. I trusted the organization and it betrayed me. I was doing the best that I knew how to do what I was supposed to be doing. Then they slap you around saying you're worthless and then they show you the door, or you show yourself the door before they do (26).

More surprisingly, some workers did express favorable reactions to their displacement, describing feelings of happiness and relief. While job loss was an unfortunate occurrence, as the following two respondents indicated, it also represented an exit from unsatisfactory conditions and relations of work or a sense of closure to the open-ended possibility of job loss:

I had a real problem—this is like when I sat down with my second-level manager and we started talking about (early) retirement—I had a real hard time keeping a grin off my face and shaking his hand and saying, "Thank you!" Because the pressure was off; I didn't have to worry any longer what was gonna happen (18).

As I was walking down, a guy says, "What happened to you? You look like you are happier than hell." [I said], "I'm laid off!" A couple guys said, "I'll trade you." That was the atmosphere: people were looking to get out of there (16).

Description of Stage Two: Unemployment

As noted by the model, stage two of the displacement process involved a period of unemployment consisting of three phases. The first, phase 2A, entailed making difficult decisions about one's work and employment. A major issue in this phase concerned workers' decisions regarding physical relocation options and choices related to job opportunities. Respondents in this sample chose to remain in the Binghamton area. Although some respondents indicated that they chose to remain because they did not think they would be able to sell their homes (and/or sell them at a reasonable price), the most often cited reason for staying among the sample was the preference to remain near family:

My family's here. I'm an only child. His [her husband] family's here and he is very important in his family. His father is passed away, so he's [her husband] looked upon [sic]. We weren't gonna leave (9).

Following relocation decisions, workers were confronted with the issue of whether to obtain additional education or training (phase 2B). The benefits of education and training for respondents were limited. Although respondents indicated that additional education and training helped them to secure a job, education or training did not necessarily result in higher earnings. There was little difference in the amount of earnings or earnings loss for those in the sample who received re-education/retraining versus those who did not. The mean annual gross earnings of both groups were similar before job loss (approximately \$40,000) and after job loss (approximately \$30,000) with both groups losing approximately \$10,000 per year.

Additionally, having more education in general did not immunize respondents from earnings loss. Although those who possessed education beyond high school did not experience as much earnings loss as those with only a high school diploma, the categories of those with either a high school diploma, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree all experienced in subsequent employment yearly gross earnings losses that ranged from an average of \$9,000 to \$12,000 approximately.

For most workers, the re-education/retraining experience led to a difficult job search. The difficulties were compounded if the participants were searching for employment with pay and benefit levels comparable to their former jobs. In phase 2C participants searched extensively—looking for openings in the newspaper and on the Internet, networking, sending out dozens of resumes—taking many steps in their attempts to

secure a job. For these respondents the consequences of corporate downsizing included not only the loss of their jobs, but also difficulties of finding new ones in the Binghamton area. Even professional jobs that one might expect to be in high demand were seemingly in scarce supply in Binghamton. As two respondents commented:

It was kind of a rude awakening. I honestly thought that there would be no problem, you know, getting back into industry in the engineering field. So I started filling out resumes and mailed 'em out to a few places around town, and nothing. No response. It kind of shocked me a little (13).

With IBM downsizing, Link downsizing, it didn't leave a lot of opportunity to find corporations that would be hiring finance people. The number of jobs were few and the number of people looking for jobs was many (23).

Description of Stage Three: Re-employment

For most workers in the study, re-employment occurred in two distinct phases. Workers first experienced a transition in their employment, moving from one job to another, attempting to find satisfactory work (phase 3A). After averaging twenty years of tenure in their prior jobs, at the time of the study respondents had been separated from IBM or Link for an average of four years, during which time they had an average of more than two jobs.

Sometimes transitional employment entailed nonstandard job experiences in which respondents were employed as “contingent” or “alternative/indirect” workers. Some even returned as contingent workers to the same sites from which they were displaced. For instance, as part of an arrangement in which IBM outsourced its customer service functions, an IBM contractor leased a vacant portion of the IBM facility. Several displaced IBM respondents worked part time for the contractor as telephone customer service representatives, troubleshooting problems with clients' IBM products. Other respondents at both IBM and Link were called back to perform the same jobs from which they were displaced, albeit on a temporary basis. And, in a few cases, some returned to their old workplaces as temporary employees to perform jobs they occupied earlier in their careers. One respondent tersely summed up the main source of discontent that he experienced under this arrangement: “I'm doing the same job I did five years ago for probably a quarter—not even a quarter—of the pay!” (15).

Job hopping also occurred for respondents outside of the Link and IBM organizational context. Some worked for temporary help agencies, bouncing from job to job. Others experimented with various types of sales jobs, working for commission. In the absence of full-time employment opportunities, some respondents worked part-time in service and retail jobs, in restaurants and department stores, as waitresses and clerks.

While nearly half the sample continued to encounter employment transition at the time of interview, the other half indicated that they had entered phase 3B, resettling in a job in which they planned to remain. Re-employment outcomes in this sample corresponded with differences in gender and age. Men under age 50 more often settled in comparable positions whereas women and those age 50 and over were more likely to continue to job hop or to settle in lower paying jobs. The differences between these three gender/age groups were evident in not only the comparison of annual earnings change but also in occupational change and change in the number of hours worked per week. . . .

Younger men, while experiencing formidable challenges of a competitive labor market, were not subject to the same disadvantages that confronted women and older men. Several of these men—mainly engineers and programmers—eventually secured employment at other large high-tech firms in the region. However, even for this group, the process of displacement was arduous. For some, losing a job was particularly hard on their self-esteem, given self-perceptions as breadwinners in the prime of their lives. Some lost income in transition; many worked contingent/alternative jobs before finding comparable work. One relocated and left his family for a year before returning to find work in the Binghamton area. Another commuted an hour each way to and from work. Over half of the respondents in this group reported they were less satisfied with their present employment than with their job at IBM or Link. As a former Link worker explains, the displacement process typically involved drawbacks, even for those who eventually found comparable paying jobs:

Well, obviously the decrease in salary was one of the things. I had to tighten my belt somewhat until I had gone through the training period because I was on a fixed amount of money, which was \$9,000 less than I was making before. So obviously I had to cut some corners for probably a good six to eight months. So that was an impact. Getting into the type of [job] situation where my time really wasn't my time, it was my

client's time. Obviously to be successful in this type of business you have to pay a price, you have to sacrifice something else to be successful. . . A lot of times I don't get out of here until 5:30 or 6:00 and I may have an appointment with somebody (later in the evening) so this job's the sacrifice. Now my style of managing my time is important, more so now than it was then. It was regimented there. Now I have to manage it. And because of that managing I have to try to reduce the time away from the family as much as I can. I don't have as much time. So I try to structure my day in such a way that is less impacted to the family life because that is obviously just as important or more important than your work life. So it's more of a juggling act now. That can have stress on a marriage. . . To be successful in anything you have to pay a price and in some cases that price will be your family. So going into this business I knew I'd have to give up something. It wasn't going to be all hunky-dory. If I wanted to succeed in this business I would have to pay a price, a price I didn't have to pay over there (22).

Conclusion

Given recent developments in national and global economic and employment trends, some researchers have called for more social science research on work and employment issues in this “era of flexibility.” In a recent review essay, Smith notes: “We need a deeper understanding of personal experience, subjective interests, and of how aspirations are sustained or crushed as the opportunity structure undergoes changes that appear to be permanent and radical” (1997, p. 335). This study is an example of one approach to the issue raised by Smith and others. By addressing the ramifications of corporate downsizing in the 1990s, it provides insights into how workers, especially those of a roughly middle-class character, experience this abstract concept.

The experiences of workers before, during, and after job loss suggest that we need to expand the conventional meaning of worker displacement. They also highlight a number of work and employment problems, issues, and new questions concerning the downsizing phenomenon. To be displaced means to be separated or detached. Participants in this study became separated or detached in many ways, and not merely because they lost their jobs. The displacement model illustrates how this patterned process occurred for many workers. As we saw, the meanings of displacement were shaped by workers' prior

history of paternalistic work relations at IBM and Link as well as by subsequent restructuring and workforce reductions. Following job loss, the meaning of displacement continued to be shaped by changes at IBM and Link, as workforce reductions transformed the structure of the labor market from one characteristic of a thriving company town to one characteristic of a de-industrialized area. For half the sample, displacement led to contingent employment. This finding raises several interesting questions about the relationship between downsizing and contingent work that may be addressed by future research. For many participants, re-employment was marked by a continuation of severance from more favorable work conditions and relations as they lost careers and became downwardly mobile. Finally, we saw that outcomes of the displacement process varied by age and gender. This suggests a need for more research of the causal mechanisms of gender and age differences among displaced workers and their experiences with downsizing, displacement and employment change.

The generalizability of this case study of displaced workers in the Binghamton, New York area is limited. However, national-level data indicate that the phenomenon of corporate downsizing has been far from limited to Binghamton, New York. Thus, it is likely that hundreds of thousands or even millions of workers have experienced or will experience the displacement process in terms similar to the model presented in this study.

Politically, popular solutions to employment problems of displaced workers, such as education or retraining, imply that workers must adapt to new and inexorable economic realities. As we have seen, this adaptation may involve moving through stages and phases in an arduous process. In one scenario, the displaced worker experiences little in the way of material hardship, but nonetheless suffers a temporary disruption in her or his working life and is forced to redefine expectations and attitudes about work and working. Another less attractive but frequent outcome is that the process of displacement leads many workers through experiences of job instability, downward mobility, and the permanent loss of previously favorable conditions, relations, and meanings of work. The evidence in this study as well as in some larger studies indicates that many workers do not fare well. As we saw, this is not only the case for displaced blue-collar workers; many white-collar and middle-class workers lose their jobs and become downwardly mobile (Newman 1988; Rubin 1994). Even those who do appear to overcome job losses on favorable terms have no guarantee they will not again be displaced. No matter

how adaptable the worker, no job is secure. As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, this emerging reality confronts the American workforce and raises issues that will require attention by workers, policy makers, academics, and all interested citizens.

NOTES

1. At the end of the twentieth century, many business organizations made frequent and large numbers of job cuts. According to Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a consulting firm that tracks corporate workforce reductions, 1998 was a record-setting year for the number of job cut announcements (677,795), breaking the previous record set in 1993 (615,186) by ten percent (Laabs 1999, p. 21). Near record-high numbers of job cut announcements (675,123) were present in 1999 (*The Detroit News* 2000, p. M1). As I write in October of 2001, layoffs and layoff announcements have substantially increased following the events of September 11th and as the economy has slowed down.

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the stages in the process of adjustment to losing one's job? How would you feel if this happened to you?
2. Many of these "displaced workers" had college degrees and advanced training. Was it easier or more difficult for them to get jobs because of this?

ROBERT W. FULLER

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—withhold 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 debilitate, damage, and destroy; named, we can begin to unravel its pathology and take steps to protect ourselves. Attacking the familiar isms singly, 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 "nobodyed" festers. It builds to indignation and sometimes erupts in violence. When a person or a people is nobodyed, 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 nobodyed. 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 nobodyed 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.

—Vartan 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 and 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?

