

is less sophisticated and less satisfying. That is to say, Hendrickson gives us vivid pictures of who the men in that photograph were in 1962, and of what they passed on to their descendants, but he makes almost no effort to explain how they got that way—almost forgetting, it seems, that these men themselves were descendants, inheritors of the forces that shaped their South. Despite a central chapter in which he weaves a kind of historical essay on the events surrounding the Battle of Oxford and its aftermath, I found myself searching for some analysis of the social and political dynamics of race and class that run as an inescapable current through Southern history.

How, for example, did the poor and working-class backgrounds of these men, their lack of education, and their place within the stratified society of white Mississippi, affect their racial fear? How did white supremacy, and the populist politics of racial solidarity, offer them a kind of perverse security within that world? How did the tangled history of race and class in the Jim Crow South set the social boundaries and norms of behavior in their time and place? Hendrickson hints elusively at such questions, but fails to confront them.

Interestingly, near the outset Hendrickson uses a metaphor of bigotry as a kind of genetic inheritance. "How," he asks, "did a gene of intolerance and racial fear mutate as it passed sinuously through time and family bloodstreams?" Only a metaphor, perhaps, but an unfortunate one: suggesting, even if inadvertently, that bigots are somehow born and not made. But history is more than the sum of family traits, and the seductions of the Southern family romance do not relieve us of the responsibility to ask tough questions about social and political realities that are all too much with us today. Just ask Trent Lott, the son of a sharecropper who scrambled his way into the warm embrace of white-supremacist Ole Miss, and whose own Southern legacy finally caught up with him.

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## Rank Prejudice

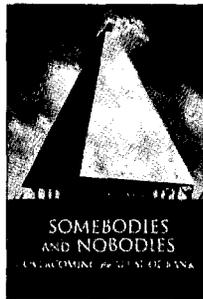
By Robert Knisely

ONCE UPON A TIME, ROBERT W. Fuller was a Somebody: physics professor at Columbia and author of a classic textbook. In 1970—the year of the Kent State massacre—Fuller, then only 33, was named president of Oberlin College. After four tumultuous years fully engaged with students protesting both the war and their role in college governance, he left to “recharge his batteries.” But after this sabbatical, he discovered, his old colleagues wouldn’t listen to his ideas, and soon wouldn’t return his calls. Without an institution backing him, he was a Nobody. He learned about what he calls the Somebody Mystique from the outside. His new book, *Somebodies and Nobodies*, grew out of that experience.

The problem, Fuller came to realize, was rankism. By his definition, rankism is the abuse of rank—the denial of the inherent dignity of every person. Rankism is everywhere, he claims, and makes almost everyone feel invisible and inconsequential at one time or another in his or her life, whether during the first days of junior high school, starting college or a new job, being unemployed, or even awaking one day to realize you’re retired.

Being a Nobody means not getting your calls returned or your résumé read—not being recognized as inherently worthy of attention. In less genteel surroundings, it means never finding work and always going hungry. Relations between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, and employer and employee are too often soured by rankism, says Fuller. Indignity in the home stunts personal growth; in the academy it sabotages learning; in the shop it taxes productivity. International rankism by the United States evokes terrorists in the developing world, where most people live in chronic indignity.

“The fact that life isn’t fair doesn’t mean we have to be unfair to each other,” Fuller argues. Now that racism and sex-



SOMEBODIES AND NOBODIES  
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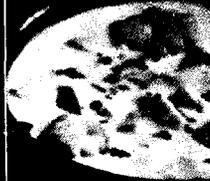
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ism are on the run, he believes, rankism—"the mother of all -isms"—should be the next to go. Fuller believes that all the other "-isms" are but subspecies of rankism, which must first be called out wherever and whenever it appears, and then negotiated out of all of our social institutions. What the world needs, he argues, is a Nobody Revolution, a Dignitarian Revolution, leading to a redistribution of rank as a first step toward global economic justice. (Who Fuller thinks should foment this revolution—graduate teaching assistants? The Roman Catholic laity?—is not entirely clear.)

Fuller admits that *Somebodies and Nobodies* is a personal book, neither

scholarly nor academic. And though "rankism" sounds hopelessly PC.—the kind of problem we didn't know we had until some well-meaning Barnard peer counselor thought it up—it's hard to disagree that abusing one's authority is a bad thing. But while Fuller acknowledges that "rank" is essential for humans working in hierarchies, and that striving for more rank brings one recognition and power—things that most people enjoy—his distinctions between rank and rankism are hard to follow. In practice, it is apparently all right for physics professors to return, unread, manuscripts from hopeful but unlettered supplicants who claim to refute Einstein, since otherwise the professors would not have

time to read each other's manuscripts. On the other hand, he says, it is never all right to bark at waitstaff for any real or imagined transgressions.

Fuller believes that rankism is ubiquitous and eternal, but that's not necessarily true. In the business world, for instance, hierarchy—which Fuller tags as the progenitor of rankism—is slowly becoming yesterday's mode of organizing human activity. Market-based and decentralized, network-based activities are becoming widely adopted as more-viable alternatives. Rankism may turn out to be yesterday's problem; as more young Americans become entrepreneurs, smaller and flatter organizations will reduce the range of rankism. (Certainly rankism is, to some degree, a peculiarly Western institution: A Zen master might well worry about a student's inner state if the student became preoccupied by rank, either high or low.)

Since the problems described in *Somebodies and Nobodies* are anecdotal—albeit universal—it's hard to evaluate Fuller's argument that the *Somebodies* will benefit by eliminating rankism when dealing with *Nobodies*. And, of course, it is the *Somebodies* who must change their behavior. Nevertheless, the case can be made. For his book *Good to Great*, James Collins sifted through the 1435 firms that have ever been in the Fortune 500. He found only 11 firms that demonstrated periods of exceptional performance; that is, generated cumulative stock returns that beat the general stock market by an average of seven times in 15 years. Notably, all 11 had CEOs who were promoted from within, intensely focused on success, and—most interestingly—humble. "Humble" is Collins's word, and by it he means a CEO who would listen to anyone, anytime, who might have something to offer to the CEO's quest for success. In other words, these CEOs eliminated every trace of rankism from their work lives—and they, and their companies, won big.

Robert Fuller's book paints a compelling portrait of an unhappy world, but fails at leading us to a better one. *Somebodies and Nobodies* boasts no fewer than 30 prepublication endorsements. Twenty-seven of the endorsers are identified by their institutional connections or the books they've published.

*Robert Knisely is a freelance writer.*

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