

A Dignitarian Society

[as published in *The New Zealand Herald*, March 8, 2005]

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The basic tenet of a *dignitarian*—in contrast to an *egalitarian*—society is that although we are unequal in rank, we are equal in dignity. The goal of a dignitarian society is to structure our personal relations and our social institutions so that rank is not abused and human dignity is universally protected.

In the last four decades, human beings have learned to look at themselves through the lens of color. What we saw was the injustice of racism. Similarly, when we looked through the lens of gender, we saw the inequities of sexism. Looking at ourselves through the lens of rank is no less illuminating and transformative.

Whether your title reads president or citizen, boss or employee, doctor or patient, teacher or pupil, rank defines your authority. When it's a badge of excellence, rank is not a problem. On the contrary, we admire and emulate those who've earned their rank and exercise the power it signifies to serve their employees, students, patients, or fellow citizens.

But when those with higher rank use their power to exploit those of lower rank, we're speaking not of rank, but of its *abuse*.

We don't have a ready name for rank-based abuse, but it needs one. When abuse and discrimination are race-based, we call it racism; when they're gender-based, we call it sexism. By analogy, abuse of the power inherent in rank is "rankism."

Like other forms of discrimination, rankism occurs at both interpersonal and institutional levels. For example, when a boss harasses an employee or a teacher humiliates a student, that's interpersonal rankism. "Somebodies" with higher rank and more power in a particular setting can maintain an environment that is hostile and demeaning to "nobodies" with lower rank and less power in

that setting, much as most everywhere whites used to be at liberty to mistreat blacks.

Examples of institutional rankism include corporate corruption, sexual abuse by clergy, elder abuse, and the undue political influence of special-interest groups. At the societal level, rank-based discrimination afflicts none more inescapably than those lacking the protections of social rank—the working poor.

A dignitarian society is for equal dignity and against rankism. Rankism is invariably experienced as an abridgement of dignity.

Rankism is the illegitimate use of rank, and, equally, the use of rank illegitimately acquired or held. When the high-ranking aggrandize themselves at the expense of subordinates, that's rankism. It's the opposite of service. Good leaders eschew rankism; bad ones indulge in it. When leaders are perceived by subordinates as condoning rankism, it spreads like a virus through the ranks. Photos of the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by their guards exposed the arrogant face of rankism to the world.

In the workplace, rankism destroys morale, stifles initiative, and taxes productivity. In the schools, defending against the indignities of rankism takes precedence over learning. Everywhere, rankism takes a terrible toll, as do racism and sexism where they're not disallowed. In international relations, the rankism that is perceived by weaker nations as unilateralism, exceptionalism, and bullying fuels a passion for revenge.

A dignitarian society that provides health care to some but not to others is inconceivable. Likewise, wealth would not be a precondition for getting a quality education. In a dignitarian society respect for the environment would be a corollary of respect for human dignity. Building a dignitarian society to overcome rankism is democracy's next step.

[560 words]

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