Vocabulary for a Dignitarian Society

> Pride attaches undue importance to the superiority of one's status in the eyes of others. And shame is fear of humiliation at one's inferior status in the estimation of others. When one sets his heart on being highly esteemed, and achieves such rating, then he is automatically involved in fear of losing his status.
>
> – Lao Tzu

Dignity and Pride

The blacksmith, the baker, the minstrel, the doctor—for them and all whose service to others is understood and valued, dignity is secure. Dignity is tied to understanding our role in the group and knowing that others recognize that role. Dignity adheres to those whose manifest contribution to society gives them an acknowledged place within it.

In contrast, it is those whose contribution is invisible, or who are seen to undermine the social order, whose dignity is under assault.

> I'm nobody! Who are you?
> Are you nobody, too?
> Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
> They'd banish us, you know.
>
> – Emily Dickinson

Yet there are certain people who have faced banishment, and even execution, with dignity. William Wordsworth, in his poem *Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew Tree*, speaks of "true dignity" in a way that, at first glance, may seem to sever the tie between dignity and service:

> True dignity abides with him alone
> Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
> Can still suspect, and still revere himself
> In lowliness of heart.

For Wordsworth, "true dignity" is something we can deem ourselves

worthy of, and grant ourselves, even in the face of disapproval or rejection. When an outcast finds consolation in distinguishing between his or her self-appraisal and a hostile or punitive social consensus, it is by adopting some variant of "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." Even as the martyr, with head held high, mounts the gallows, he imagines the sentence that his contemporaries are about to carry out as overruled by an invisible higher court, by posterity, or by God. He consoles himself with the belief that although his contribution may not be understood today, it will be tomorrow. Even the loneliest sociopath is a social animal. Our dignity is linked to our service to the group, whether the group recognizes our contribution or not.

> Though for the moment K. was wretched and looked down on, yet in an almost unimaginable and distant future he would excel everybody.
>
> – Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

Despite appearances, dignity is not a function of rank. Service may take the form of leadership (president, general, chief executive officer, professor, doctor, pilot, etc.) or of a supporting role (assistant, secretary, chauffeur, janitor, valet, etc.), but so long as the role is integral to the job at hand, dignity accrues to every contributor, regardless of his or her rank and role in the hierarchy.

> Scrubbing floors and emptying bedpans has as much dignity as the presidency.
>
> – Richard M. Nixon

In contrast, pride has an element of relative importance. "Pride goeth before a fall" precisely because it is a function of *relative* rank. A Nazi SS officer, reminiscing about German military victories in the early years of World War II, remarked: "It was with unrivaled pride that we saw the world. We were somebody." But, a few years later, the "Thousand-year Reich" lay in ruins.

Over time the meanings of "dignity" and "pride" have diffused into each other. They may be partly disentangled by clarifying the distinction between the legitimate and illegitimate uses of rank.

When rank is merely a tool of organization signifying levels of authority in a hierarchy, it's not inconsistent with a culture of equal dignity for all, regardless of rank. But not uncommonly rank-holders use their status as an excuse to demean, dominate, or exploit subordinates. In such cases, rank serves as justification for self-aggrandizement and nurtures the kind of pride that is based on besting others (à la Kafka's character K above), and invites a fall.

Dignity is oblivious of relative rank, whereas pride exults in out-ranking others. Dignity entails a shared sense of worth; pride, a sense of superiority; shame, a sense of inferiority. Dignity is a creature of mutuality and reciprocity; pride, a feature of dominant-subordinate relationships.

One way to clarify this is to distinguish between "true" and "false" pride. Then "true pride" is identified as the dignity that inheres in someone whose place in society is secure, and "false pride" is understood as the compensatory self-inflation originating in the insecurity that invariably accompanies an assertion of relative superiority (which, following Lao Tsu, we fear may not be sustainable).

Dignity is to a dignitarian society what liberty is to a libertarian society and equality is to an egalitarian society—the touchstone. The basic tenet of a dignitarian—in contrast to an egalitarian—society is that it does not seek to abolish, equalize or level ranks, but rather holds that, regardless of rank, we are all equal when it comes to dignity. It follows that we must all have a fair chance to seek the dignity that comes from contributing the best we have to offer. This approach sees the unlinking of dignity from as a steppingstone to the more fair, just and decent societies that political thinkers have long envisioned.[1]

In contrast, pride is an artifact of a stratified society—one in which rank carries the right to marginalize, indignify, or exploit those of lower rank. The right to deny dignity, to non-citizens and to second-class citizens alike, is a residue of a predatory strategy, that, for millennia, has co-existed alongside a dignitarian strategy, but is now, in an epochal transformation, losing out to its dignitarian alternative. But that's another story.

Indignity and Indignation

As with liberty, dignity is most readily defined in the breach. As individuals, we know at once when we're treated with disrespect, and for good reason. An intimation or overt gesture of disregard may be a test to gauge the degree of our resistance to subordination, or to remind us of our place. An insult is often a signal of intent to ostracize someone, to cast him or her as a nobody.

To be "nobodied" carries the threat of being deprived of social and material resources critical to well-being. Such threats are tantamount to blackmail or extortion, forcing targets to toe the line or face banishment.

Whole groups may be marginalized, as well as individuals. As between tribes (or nations) an insult or indignity carries an implicit threat of possible subordination and enslavement. Status remains a determinant of whether we prosper or decline, so an attack on status is experienced as an existential threat.

While those atop the social pyramid prize liberty above all, the majority put dignity first. History is full of examples of humiliated peoples who willingly surrender their freedom to a demagogue who promises to restore their pride. One has only to think of Weimar Germany in the aftermath of the punitive Versailles treaty that concluded World War I. Almost a century before that, in a prophetic letter about German nationalism, Karl Marx had observed that "…if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring."[2] Today, a proud Russia, reeling from the disintegration of the Soviet Empire and wary of an expanding NATO, provides a contemporary example of how accumulated indignities fester into indignation. A humiliated bear is no less dangerous than a recoiling lion.

We promote justice indirectly—by removing the causes of injustice. So it must be with dignity. But before we can effectively target indignity, we must understand its origins.

The Wellspring of Indignity

Every child knows that indignities flow downhill—from "somebodies," of higher rank (indicating greater power) to "nobodies," of lower rank (and relatively less power). No sooner do we understand this, than we imagine a solution: equalize power, eliminate rank.

But power differences are a fact of life. To bemoan them is like bemoaning the fact that the sun is brighter than the moon. And rank differences merely reflect power differences, so rank differences cannot be eliminated by decree.

Fortunately, this stark reality does not doom the prospects of achieving equal dignity for all. Understanding why is the key to a new politics—the politics of dignity.

Again, in and of itself, rank is *not* a source of indignity. Unless rank is inherently illegitimate—as, for example, the specious social rankings that accord certain identity groups second-class citizenship—then the problem is not with rank per se but rather with its abuse. The distinction between rank and its abuse goes to the heart of many vexing and intractable political issues, domestic and international. In the vast majority of situations, indignity has its origins in *abuse* of the power signified by rank.

Confusing rank with its abuse occurs because rank is so commonly misused that we jump to the conclusion that the only remedy is to eliminate ranks. Conflating rank and rank-based abuse is logically unnecessary and it's a mistake with grave consequences. The socialists of nineteenth-century Europe and communists of the twentieth century often suffered from, or cynically exploited, this misconception. When egalitarian ideologies did prevail, the self-appointed leaders typically imposed even harsher tyrannies than the ones they replaced.

When legitimately earned and properly used, rank is an important—often indispensable—organizational tool for achieving group goals. We rightfully admire and love authorities—parents, teachers, bosses, even political leaders—who hold their rank and use the power it signifies in an exemplary way.

Accepting such leadership entails no loss of self-respect or opportunity by those in subordinate roles. It is when people use the power of position to aggrandize themselves or disadvantage those they outrank that seeds of indignity are sown. The consequences range from foot-dragging to genocide.

A Name for the Cause of Indignity—Rankism

> To have a name is to be.
> – Benoit Mandelbrot[3]

We don't have an inclusive name for rank-based abuse, but if we are to delegitimize it, 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*.

Rankism lies at the root of organizational dysfunction and corruption as well as the incendiary resentments that weaker nations harbor for stronger ones. International terrorism has multiple, complex causes, but one factor we can address is rankism between nations. There is no fury like that borne of chronic humiliation.

To victims, rankism feels like being taken for a nobody. For example, when a boss harasses an employee or a teacher humiliates a student, that's rankism. "Somebodies" with higher rank and more power in a particular setting can maintain an environment that is hostile and disadvantageous to "nobodies" of lower rank and less power in that setting, much as, most everywhere, whites used to be at liberty to mistreat blacks.

Perpetrators of rankism presume their own superiority and act as if their rank justifies them in demeaning or exploiting their subordinates and others whom they take to be their inferiors.

Front-page examples of rankism include corporate corruption, predatory lending, sexual abuse by clergy, elder and inmate abuse, torture, and the undue political influence of special-interest groups. The photos of Iraqi prisoners

humiliated at Abu Ghraib gave the world a look at rankism's brutish face. Hurricane Katrina made visible rankism's most common victims—the poor, the weak, the sick, the old. At the societal level, rankism afflicts none more inescapably than those lacking the advantages and protections of social rank—the working poor.

Rankism distorts personal relationships, erodes the will to learn, taxes economic productivity, and stokes international enmities. The effects on its victims are like the impact of racism and sexism on minorities and women. But, unlike these isms, which are based on all but fixed, native traits, rank is mutable—one may be a somebody in some contexts and a nobody in another. This means that unlike the isms we've confronted during the last half-century, most people are both victims and perpetrators of rankism. At first, our dual roles as victims and perpetrators might seem to present an insuperable obstacle to overcoming rankism. But in tackling the familiar isms, we've learned what we need to take it on.

The notion of rankism embraces both the illegitimate use of legitimate rank (as within an organization) and the lawful use of illegitimate rank (for example, trait-based forms of second-class citizenship within a society). The familiar isms are all examples of this latter form. They are based on the construction and maintenance of differences in social rank that violate ethical symmetry principles (such as the golden rule) and flout constitutional guarantees of equal protection under the law.[4]

The relationship between rankism and the various isms targeted by identity politics can be compared to that between cancer and its subspecies. For centuries the group of diseases that are now seen as varieties of cancer were regarded as distinct illnesses. No one realized that lung, breast, and other organ-specific malignancies all had their origins in a similar kind of cellular malfunction.

In this metaphor, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other varieties of prejudice are analogous to organ-specific cancers, and rankism is the generic malignancy analogous to cancer itself.

The last century has borne witness to the delegitimization of racism and

the transformation of many ethnically homogeneous and segregated societies into multicultural ones. Globalization calls for a change of comparable scope. That humans have modified their values and behavior when it comes to race and gender is reason to believe that we will also find a way to disallow rankism and create a world of dignity for all.

In the aftermath of the delegitimization of a given type of rankism, all sorts of transitional phenomena come into play. Some of these may look like substituting one form of rankism with its opposite. For example, in the wake of the dignitarian values that the women's movement brought to relationships between the sexes, men and women have spent decades replacing traditional patterns of dominance and submission with more reciprocal, mutual, and symmetrical behaviors. During such transitional periods, it is not uncommon to see a temporary role reversal between perpetrators and victims resulting in what has been called reverse sexism, racism, or ageism. But since these compensatory behaviors, are equally unstable, their appearance simply marks a step on the path to equal dignity for all.

That dignity was the ultimate equilibrium position was foretold by the prophets of every world religion, so it's really nothing new. What is new is that we can now trace indignities to rankism and systematically disallow them. We've known the golden rule for millennia and rare is the person who doesn't experience at least a twinge of guilt in flouting it. The threat to human civilization posed by the advent of lethal weapons of mass destruction gives us reason, if we need one, to operationalize the golden rule in the form: Accord unto others the dignity you'd have for yourself.

> Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.
> – Philo of Alexandria

> Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme.
> – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

[1] For example, see John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*), Michael Walzer (*Spheres of Justice*), and Avishai Margalit (*The Decent Society*).

[2] Thanks to Thomas Scheff for this quotation, which appears in a letter Marx wrote to Ruge in 1843.

[3] Mandelbrot is the mathematician who invented, and named, fractals.

[4] There are also situations in which an a priori hierarchy is absent, but in which individuals, gangs, or other groups may vie for rank. Athletic contests are examples of regulated competitions for rank that are not inherently rankist. But insofar as victors gain "bragging rights," pride has crept into the picture. A boxing match is an example of a contest for rank that is dignitarian as far as it goes, but a swaggering aftermath would reek of rankism. In contrast, a mugging is a damaging assertion of rank that, in our present-day context, is unambiguously rankist. So, is torture, aggressive war, and genocide.