Somebodies And Nobodies

The Tale Of An Enticing Dichotomy

“In primate societies, including human societies, high-status individuals have a discretionary range of behavioral choices unavailable to low-status individuals. Exercise of these choices often coercively imposes costly behavior on the subordinate individuals that benefits the dominant individuals.” –Scott Atran, In Gods We Trust

Too often, the world is divided into two basic groups: Those who MATTER, and those who DON’T.(Or to be less hyperbolic: those who matter MORE and those who matter LESS.) The former are uniquely imbued with certain entitlements and privileges while the latter are dispensable, less important chattel to be dominated and exploited by the former.Generally, these two groups translate to two corresponding demographics:

- Those WITH money / connections (a.k.a. full-fledged people)
- Those WITHOUT money / connections (i.e. the subaltern population)

Though absurdly simplistic, this distinction often dictates the manner in which someone in the former category (seen as a SOMEBODY) is treated differently than someone in the latter category (seen, by default, as a NOBODY). It is, of course, is the self-interest of the former to keep things this way. The “catch” is that it is the former that has the power to dictate how things will be. The upshot is, of course, that access to power is dictated by those with access to power–an access which is used to ensure that access to power stays exclusively in the hands of those currently with access to power. Those WITH the power will tend to USE that power to MAINTAIN that power…which means keeping everyone else outside the castle walls. Ergo: A privileged microcosm of somebodies cordoned off from the nobodies.

The established order, we come to find, is designed such that the benefits of societal activity are mostly attributed to—and thereby allocated toward—the former (often at the expense of the latter).This scheme makes perfect sense if one assumes that those with status / money, by dint of that fact, automatically deserve better treatment than those who haven’t fared as well in the game of life.So we shouldn’t begrudge those within the hallowed walls of the gated community, as we peer at the ramparts from outside with dreamy eyes.

These two categories of people are salient, even if not always acknowledged openly.There are those who matter more and those who matter less.Power structures are generally set up so that the former is able to dominate and exploit the latter—all in the name of “prosperity” (i.e. the prosperity of those who matter).Indeed, it is the prosperity of the former that DEFINES “prosperity”, while the status of the latter is rendered a moot point in any assessment of what’s pejoratively called, “the economy”.Why would those in power be motivated to bring to our attention the unappealing lot in life of the disenfranchised…especially when the privileged have a vested interest in maintaining the conditions on which the incumbent order depends?After all, they’re benefiting from it; why would they tamper with it?

If one benefits handily from the incumbent order, and would just as well see the subaltern be resigned to his lot in life, doesn’t it make sense to promote a perception of merit based on the current allotment of enfranchisement?In this scheme, the well-being of the enfranchised “counts”, while the well-being of the subaltern population does not count.More specifically: the suffering of the former is deemed a tragedy (patently unacceptable) while any suffering endured by the latter is—ipso facto—perfectly acceptable (dismissed as an “externality” or as unavoidable “collateral damage” in the pursuit of the noble end).

All calculations concerning how things shall be done proceed according to these metrics.So they’re justification is self-fulfilling: they succeed splendidly in doing precisely what they’re designed to do.(The problem with Neoliberal economic policies isn’t that they don’t work; it’s that they work magnificently well for precisely those who they’re designed to serve.)

Thus, we have a world of those who “matter” and those who don’t—with, perhaps, areas of grey in between.We promote this without ever really putting it exactly that way.(After all, putting it like that would be intolerably impolite.)The quintessential embodiment of this mindset is tribalism (which, incidentally, helps make any inconvenient grey areas more black and white).

In the case where the nobodies are dehumanized (and even demonized), the somebodies overtly oppress the nobodies for the purpose of self-aggrandizement.This unholy order begets chauvinism (and an obnoxious sense of entitlement) on the part of the dominators…while begetting shame and resentment

on the part of the dominated.Here, the privileged are characterized by bigotry and a general lack of compassion for those they exploit—while radicalizing those who feel slighted.Needless to say, this is a recipe for bad things.

In terms of class, this barometer is based on the (absurd) contention that wealth is proportionate to virtue (the Money Measures Merit Syndrome).In terms of social status, the barometer is based on the (equally absurd) contention that social status is a prima facie indicator of merit (commonly known as “birthright”).In terms of race, the barometer is based on the perverse claim that ethnic lineage dictates a person’s worth.In other words, no matter what the ultimate criterion is in this dubious scheme, it is categorically irrelevant to actual merit…and utterly indifferent to universal human enfranchisement.In this world, we all get what we deserve.It’s all part of god’s plan.

The MMM Syndrome is especially disturbing if only because it still currently garners a tragic amount of support here in the U.S.It seems that many are taken with the odd impression that the guy with the thickest wallet typically has the best answers. (Many embrace this impression even after the economic calamity of 2008 caused by the very moneyed interests to whom we unwittingly supplicate ourselves).Here, the (implicit) contention is that a man’s reservoir of wisdom is proportionate to the size of his bank account.This is an extremely dangerous impression to have if there ever was one—as its corollary is that PROBITY is proportionate to economic power.Such a vulgar notion is the blueprint for plutocracy.

Plutocrats depend on this impression being widespread.They’ve been quite successful in inculcating the rabble with this view.That’s why so many listen to everything that, say, Mitt Romney or Donald Trump or Oprah Winfrey has to say.“They have tons of money, so they simply MUST know what the heck they’re talking about, right?”

It comes as little surprise, then, that the U.S. Senate is essentially a millionaires club —a “good ol’ boys” cabal of plutocrats completely disconnected from (and unconcerned with) the predicaments and plights of the rank and file. Prior to Jack Abramoff’s demise, why did cronies commiserate at the snazzy restaurant, Signatures?Picture a brothel with corporate lobbyists instead of prostitutes.(Replace the sex in back rooms with deal-making over a juicy steak.)For many years, such figures canoodled with one another at Signatures for the same reason that those

seated around the table in the Chamber of Commerce's executive suite are NOT commiserating with poor, black folk in Harlem.The reason is quite plain: Certain people are part of the equation, certain other people are not.Period.

Is it any wonder, then, that such men insist that the State should be run like a business—and that everything under the sun should be privatized?Such a contention only seems to have any credence if people have succumbed to the MMM Syndrome: "He's rich, he MUST be worth heeding.People without grand fortunes can't be leaders—lest they'd have grand fortunes."

Alas, anyone who can find their way out of a paper bag notes a counterfactual trend: Many (most?) of the wealthiest people are some of the least intelligent and least virtuous people in society…while many of humanity's best and brightest can be found in the lower wealth brackets.The crème often doesn't rise to the top, while much of the garbage does.Those who haven't been living in a cave for the past few decades can see this quite plainly—yet few opt to draw sound conclusions from the facts before their eyes.

The reality of the current American zeitgeist is quite clear.Recognizing it, one is inclined to assert the following: If a business tycoon endorses it, we should see the red flag.We should always suspect dubious motives."He's rich, he must know what he's talking about!" seems to be a proposition that only the most credulous would swallow; yet this sentiment seems to be widely embraced.One must wonder: How could such an ill-advised sentiment be maintained en masse?The facts are difficult to not notice, yet few care to notice them.

The explanation for this trend is clear: Here in the U.S., many of us worship affluence.We fetishize opulence, we are seduced by the lures of decadence, and we therefore lionize corporate titans—as if the savvy businessman embodied the epitome of humanity.This queer worldview holds water only insofar as one manages to ignore a mountain of facts while jettisoning common sense.By seeing the society in this way, one attributes virtue to those who've somehow managed to accumulate stupendous wealth for themselves BECAUSE they've managed to (somehow) accumulate a stupendous amount of wealth.

This is a vulgar barometer for how to afford esteem, yet it seems to be quite in fashion these days.This widespread misimpression may be attributed to the manner in which we pathologically covet the romanticized life of the “high roller” rather than, say, the unglamorous life of the low-profile humanitarian.Why eat broccoli when we’re incessantly being fed enticing dishes of candy?

Thus, we find utter imbeciles are revered simply by dint of their fame and fortune: Donald Trump, Jack Welch, etc. (We could call this the “Rudy Guiliani” Syndrome.)It seems inconceivable to some that a man could have possibly accumulated power for himself without being, somehow, wonderful in some way.Meanwhile, we’ve implicitly accepted the notion that the marginalized should be resigned to their unsavory lot in life, because if one is NOT the high-powered mogul, one must deserve to be where one is.It’s treated as if the actual indicates the normative—as if the current lot were a matter of Providence.“Chalk it all up to god’s plan, and we can resign ourselves to apparent iniquities.”

Welcome to a world in which the proclamations of a famous rich man trump the knowledge of a bona fide scholar.We’ll eagerly heed the declarations of a corporate executive before we pay any heed to a human rights activist.We want to BE the former, not the latter.While we know how we measure instrumental “success” (the achieving of one’s goal, whatever that goal may be), how do we measure a more profound conception, “Success”?

A viable definition for Success would be: The degree to which one has been able to promote the well-being of his fellow man—and thus positively impact human society as a whole—is what ultimately matters.But that seems so banal next to the visions of opulence and glamour with which we’ve become preoccupied.

But we continue to peer at the ramparts of the proverbial gated community with dreamy eyes.If we challenge the sanctity of the established order, they tell us that we are just jealous.“You’re just envious of their superiority.They are worthy, the rest of us are unworthy.That’s all there is to it.If you don’t have the American Dream yet, then just work harder.In the meantime, quit your bitchin’.”(We’re expected to ignore structural inequalities and barriers to entry.We’re expected to chalk any / all inequality up to the stuff of fair outcomes: roughly reflecting disparities in merit.So when Reagan notified us that those who are poor are poor because they deserve it, many believed this explanation.)

Only a plutocrat would declare that the rich are rich because they deserve it, and expect a penitent rabble to accept this as a truism.Yet when we call this declaration “capitalism”, it becomes heretical to challenge it.And so it goes: U.S. corporate interests are labeled “U.S. interests”, and we carry on as usual.(How dare you speak up against “U.S. interests”?)

Bringing the matter back to the thesis of the present essay: When we allocate esteem based on such dubious criteria as economic class and social status, we (inadvertently) foster a culture in which rich people MATTER while poor people DON’T.Consequently, we speak of “prosperity” and “growth” even if such wonderful things only apply to a select few people—those who are well-positioned within a system that is rigged to only benefit those who are well-positioned within the system.(Indeed, it’s the people who’ve “made it” that matter, and who warrant our reverence.We measure exclusively THEIR fortune in order to ascertain how our society is faring.)

There is a word that most people use for such a system on a micro level: “unfair”.But, alas, we’re forbidden to bring up structural inequalities or barriers to entry—or to even insinuate that outcomes in America are anything other than magnificently meritocratic.Why do more wealthy kids from Greenwich, Connecticut go on to become prosperous than poor kids from Harlem?We’re expected to believe that more white kids from the rich neighborhood have earned privilege than black kids from the destitute neighborhood.One may be inclined to call that blatantly unfair, but we’re told that it’s just capitalism in action.To mention that there are just as many youth in Harlem with the nascent capability of becoming medical doctors and international diplomats as there are in Greenwich is to elicit a scoff from the privileged class.Our nation may be far more feudalistic than we like to admit.

So many remain locked in the mindset, “Rich people know best; they must, otherwise they wouldn’t be rich.”So the rabble buys their books, listens to their proclamations, and votes for them in elections.The nobodies believe the somebodies when the somebodies tell the nobodies that “I care about the you.”The rich insist that the rabble believe in “trickle down” myths—and the rabble believe it.Why? Because many harbor the abiding hope: “That too can one day be me; so I shan’t thwart their agenda.”Thus, those who benefit from the incumbent order are able to persuade those who do NOT benefit from it to agree to maintain it.

The presence of this systemic dysfunction is lost on those who fixate only on those who represent the realization of “the American dream”…neglecting the plight of those who don’t fit comfortably into that picture (i.e. most of the general populace).After all, when only certain people MATTER, our perception of what is “good” becomes skewed.Consequently, many of us only gauge the system by the status of those who’ve managed to benefit most handily from the system—not on the system’s effect on the rank and file.We often fail to pose (and accurately answer) the elementary question: “Cui bono?”

But when we caricature society in the way prescribed by the powers that be, we fail to pose such important questions.The rosy depiction we’ve adopted makes perfect sense to those of us complacent with our own myopia.We may be NOBODIES now, but someday we too could be one of the chosen few within those hallowed walls of privilege.And that skewed perception is perfectly fine for the SOMEBODIES we emulate.

The key insight we should note is quite simple: It’s not how much money a person has, it’s what he did to acquire the money and what he’s doing with the money now that he has it.Only then can we recognize that poor people are people too, that even those without social status or connections are SOMEBODIES, and that no human being should ever be treated as a NOBODY.

Most people would concur with this proposition without a moment’s hesitation…yet—peculiarly—still proceed (presumably, unwittingly) as though some people matter more than others.They pay attention to the privileged, romanticize affluence, and are thereby distracted from the plight of those who aren’t part of that seductive picture—even if they themselves are included in the latter group.2008’s infamous “Joe the Plumber” was a case in point.

Such people allocate esteem based on the very dubious criteria that, when articulated explicitly, they would promptly denounce.After all, who would openly disagree with the contention that all human beings qua human beings are of equal value?It is a maxim many profess to honor, yet to which few adhere in practice.

We can map this maxim to foreign policy.Do the U.S. conduct its foreign policy as if certain people matter and certain people don’t?The perception of innocent peoples’ deaths here in New York vis a vis over there in Iraq is illustrative of the prevailing paradigm.When innocent civilians die in foreign lands, it’s often seen as regrettable yet acceptable.Yet when AMERICANS die, we finally wake up and recognize the

horrific nature of innocent civilian casualties.The hypocrisy is astonishing to behold—yet generally passes without notice.A point in case: The perception of Americans killed on September 11, 2001 juxtaposed against the perception of Iraqi civilians killed as a consequence of the U.S. military invasion in 2003.Let's look at a couple discomfiting facts that are rarely mentioned:

- Saddam Hussein's most heinous acts against his own people occurred with full-fledged U.S. government support.
- The U.S. incursion into Iraq precipitated a number of deaths of innocent civilians (untold hundreds of thousands) roughly on par with the number of his own people Hussein killed.Moreover, the U.S. incursion caused orders of magnitude more innocent civilians to die than were killed on 9/11.

Many Americans aren't even aware of the first point, and many find the second point unproblematic.

If all human beings were seen as equally valuable, then these two facts alone would indicate that U.S. foreign policy is based on egregiously defective thinking.That defect amounts to the following proposition: There are SOMEBODIES and there are NOBODIES.Disregard for the rights of the latter in the name of promoting the interests of the former seems only to be allowed insofar as we can obfuscate the fact that much U.S. policy is based on that very taxonomy.

Walking by the "Vietnam Memorial" on the Mall in D.C., surveying the list of SOMEBODIES carved on the wall, I can't help think of all of the millions of NOBODIES in Vietnam who were pointlessly slaughtered, unworthy of our memory.For every U.S. serviceman I see on that wall, I know that there is a human being with yellow skin and funny-looking eyes who was killed in Vietnam who will never have his name on a wall.