

**'Natural Law' column number twelve, by Michael E. Price (uncorrected proof)
For *Global Custodian*, Spring 2012 issue**

What's Your Social Status? Depends Who You Ask

According to evolutionary psychology, humans are by nature highly motivated to seek social status, because status led to increased access to social, economic and reproductive resources for those who achieved it in the ancestral past. Assessing someone's status, however, can be tricky in modern environments. We live in complex societies, and it's possible to be high status in one segment of society while simultaneously being low status in another. Investment bankers, for example, have an ability to generate and acquire wealth that makes them highly respected in some circles, especially among those who expect to benefit from this wealth creation. Other members of society, however, perceive bankers as the enemy, as an exploitative outgroup whose control of wealth is due to deceptive and unfair tactics.

It is not inevitable that a society will lack agreement about the status of its members. I studied status perceptions in a small community of Amazonian Shuar hunter-horticulturalists, for instance, and when I asked them to rank 25 community members in terms of who received the most respect, they were essentially of one mind in the rankings they produced (Cronbach's alpha, a statistic used to measure agreement of this kind, was a remarkably high .97 out of 1.0). But modern industrialized societies are relatively enormous in size and complexity, and so it is not surprising that they tend to contain a relatively great diversity of status communities. This diversity can lead to political conflict (for example, anger at bankers has helped fuel the various "occupy" demonstrations of 2011-12), but could it also produce social benefits? And why do these different definitions of "high status" emerge in the first place?

The movie *Quadrophenia* throws some light on these issues. It's about a group of mods in 1960s London: rebellious working class kids who reject society's expectations, ride around on souped-up scooters, and cause a lot of mayhem. At the movie's end, protagonist Jimmy experiences a series of social humiliations, and his life as a mod seems to be falling apart. The last straw is when Jimmy happens upon his idol Ace Face—the badass king of the mods, played by Sting—and discovers that Ace's day job is as a lowly, submissive porter in a posh hotel. After screaming "bellboy!", an appalled Jimmy proceeds to steal Ace's magnificent scooter and (spoiler alert) drive it over a cliff. He's not on it when it goes over; it's a rejection of the mod social world, not a suicide.

These scenes are interesting because they document a radical recalibration in Jimmy's perceptions of status competition, and of his own status, in his social universe. In his life as a mod, he had at one time been fairly well-respected, but that all changed after he lost his home, job, girlfriend, friends, and scooter. He'd become an outcast in that world now, and for good evolutionary reasons he feels terrible about it. But then he feels saved by the realization that the hierarchy of the mods was really just an illusion anyway. The skills that make you high status in the mod community (such as the ability to fight, dance, or look cool on a scooter) aren't particularly conducive to professional success in mainstream society. When Jimmy realizes that the king of the mods gets no respect from the real world, it's like he is waking up from a nightmare; it doesn't matter anymore if Jimmy is low status among the mods, because the mods are low status to the larger society. Instead of killing himself to end the humiliation of losing so much status, he trashes the social system that took that status away from him.

The wide diversity of status communities that exists in modern societies can be either a blessing or a curse. It can be a blessing if it broadens opportunities for niche specialization, and enables people to join communities in which they can compete for status successfully—that is, the communities in which their particular talents will be most highly valued—and to reject communities in which they can't compete. If you can't make it as a tattoo artist, for instance, you can try and succeed as a lawyer, or vice versa. On the other hand, too much diversity in status communities can also lead to political disintegration, as in nineteenth century America: Southerners saw slave ownership as the royal road to social prominence, whereas Northerners saw it as barbaric and immoral, and the result was civil war. Divergent perspectives on the status of bankers, and of other professionals like politicians, lawyers, and members of the military, are examples of conflicts that create competing status communities in modern states (especially the USA), and that will hopefully get resolved before political disintegration gets too out of hand.