
Domination

and the

Arts of

Resistance

Hidden Transcripts

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and assembly of the carnival or fair to conceal their intentions. Are they playing or are they in earnest? It is in their interest to exploit this opportune ambiguity to the fullest.

And, of course, if the immediate aftermath of a successful revolt looks very much like carnival, that too is understandable because both are times of license and liberty when the hidden transcript may be disclosed, the latter with masks, the former in full view. Short of these "moments of madness" nearly all public action by subordinate groups is pervaded by disguise.¹¹⁰

110. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups

The cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do—at least in the logic of their praxis.

—PAUL WILLIS, *Learning to Labour*

[The supervision of gleaning] exasperated morale to the limit; but there is such a void between the class which was angered and the class that was threatened, that words never made it across; one only knew what happened from the results; [the peasants] worked underground the way moles do.

—BALZAC, *Les Paysans*

IN A SOCIAL SCIENCE already rife—some might say crawling—with neologisms, one hesitates to contribute another. The term *infrapolitics*, however, seems an appropriate shorthand to convey the idea that we are dealing with an unobtrusive realm of political struggle. For a social science attuned to the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible, as we have seen, is in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power. The claim made here is similar to the claim made by Leo Strauss about how the reality of persecution must affect our reading of classical political philosophy: "Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of *writing between the lines*."¹ The text we are interpreting in this case is not Plato's

1. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 24. It should be abundantly clear that my analysis is fundamentally at cross purposes with much else of what passes as "Straussianism" in contemporary philosophy and political analysis (e.g., its unwarranted claim of privileged access to the true interpretation of the classics, its disdain for the 'vulgar multitude' as well as for dim-witted tyrants). The attitude of Straussians toward nonphilosophers strikes me as comparable to Lenin's attitude toward the working class in *What is to Be Done*. What I do find instructive, however, is the premise that the political environment in which Western political philosophy was written seldom permits a transparency in meaning.

Symposium but rather the veiled cultural struggle and political expression of subordinate groups who have ample reason to fear venturing their unguarded opinion. The meaning of the text, in either case, is rarely straightforward; it is often meant to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders and authorities. If we have access to the hidden transcript (analogous to the secret notes or conversations of the philosopher) or to a more reckless expression of opinion (analogous to subsequent texts produced under freer conditions) the task of interpretation is somewhat easier. Without these comparative texts, we are obliged to search for noninnocent meanings using our cultural knowledge—much in the way an experienced censor might!

The term *infrapolitics* is, I think, appropriate in still another way. When we speak of the infrastructure for commerce we have in mind the facilities that make such commerce possible: for example, transport, banking, currency, property and contract law. In the same fashion, I mean to suggest that the *infrapolitics* we have examined provides much of the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to sustaining this claim.)

First, I return briefly to the widely held position that the offstage discourse of the powerless is either empty posturing or, worse, a substitute for real resistance. After noting some of the logical difficulties with this line of reasoning, I try to show how material and symbolic resistance are part of the same set of mutually sustaining practices. This requires reemphasizing that the relationship between dominant elites and subordinates is, whatever else it might be, very much of a material struggle in which both sides are continually probing for weaknesses and exploiting small advantages. By way of recapitulating some of the argument, I finally try to show how each realm of open resistance to domination is shadowed by an *infrapolitical* twin sister who aims at the same strategic goals but whose low profile is better adapted to resisting an opponent who could probably win any open confrontation.

The Hidden Transcript as Posing?

A skeptic might very well accept much of the argument thus far and yet minimize its significance for political life. Isn't much of what is called the hidden transcript, even when it is insinuated into the public transcript, a matter of hollow posing that is rarely acted out in earnest? This view of the safe expression of aggression against a dominant figure is that it serves as a substitute—albeit a second-best substitute—for the real thing: direct aggression. At best, it is of little or no consequence; at worst it is an evasion. The prisoners

who spend their time dreaming about life on the outside might instead be digging a tunnel; the slaves who sing of liberation and freedom might instead take to their heels. As Barrington Moore writes, "Even fantasies of liberation and revenge can help to preserve domination through dissipating collective energies in relatively harmless rhetoric and ritual."²

The case for the hydraulic interpretation of fighting words in a safe place is, as we have noted, perhaps strongest when those fighting words seem largely orchestrated or stage-managed by dominant groups. Carnival and other ritualized and, hence, ordinarily contained rites of reversal are the most obvious examples. Until recently, the dominant interpretation of ritualized aggression or reversal was that, by acting to relieve the tensions engendered by hierarchical social relations, it served to reinforce the status quo. Figures as diverse as Hegel and Trotsky saw such ceremonies as conservative forces. The influential analyses of Max Gluckman and Victor Turner argue that because they underline an essential, if brief, equality among all members of a society and because they illustrate, if only ritually, the dangers of disorder and anarchy, their function is to emphasize the necessity of institutionalized order.³ For Ranajit Guha the order-serving effects of rituals of reversal lie precisely in the fact that they are authorized and prescribed from above.⁴ Allowing subordinate groups to play at rebellion within specified rules and times helps prevent more dangerous forms of aggression.

In his description of holiday festivities among slaves in the antebellum U.S. South, Frederick Douglass, himself a slave, resorts to the same metaphor. His reasoning, however, is slightly different:

Before the holidays, there are pleasures in prospect; after the holidays, they become pleasures of memory, and they serve to keep out thoughts and wishes of a more dangerous character . . . these holidays are conductors or safety-valves to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind, when reduced to the condition of slavery. But for those, the rigors and bondage would become too severe for endurance, and the slave would be forced to dangerous desperation.⁵

Douglass's claim here is not that some ersatz rebellion takes the place of the real thing but simply that the respite and indulgence of a holiday provide just

2. *Injustice*, 459n.

3. Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa*, and Turner, *The Ritual Process*, esp. chap. 2.

4. *Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 18–76. "It is precisely in order to prevent such inversions from occurring in real life that the dominant culture in all traditional societies allows these to be simulated at regular calendric intervals," 30, emphasis added.

5. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, edited and with an introduction by William L. Andrews, 156.

enough pleasure to blunt the edge of incipient rebellion. It is as if the masters have calculated the degree of pressure that will engender desperate acts and have carefully adjusted their repression to stop just short of the flashpoint.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the safety-valve theories in their many guises is the most easily overlooked. They all begin with the common assumption that systematic subordination generates pressure of some kind from below. They assume further that, if nothing is done to relieve this pressure, it builds up and eventually produces an explosion of some kind. Precisely how this pressure is generated and what it consists of is rarely specified. For those who live such subordination, whether Frederick Douglass or the fictional Mrs. Poyser, the pressure is a taken-for-granted consequence of the frustration and anger of being unable to strike back (physically or verbally) against a powerful oppressor. That pressure generated by a perceived but unrequited injustice finds expression, we have argued, in the hidden transcript—its size, its virulence, its symbolic luxuriance. In other words, the safety-valve view implicitly accepts some key elements of our larger argument about the hidden transcript: that systematic subordination elicits a reaction and that this reaction involves a desire to strike or speak back to the dominant. Where they differ is in supposing that this desire can be substantially satisfied, whether in backstage talk, in supervised rituals of reversal, or in festivities that occasionally cool the fires of resentment.)

The logic of the safety-valve perspective depends on the social psychological proposition that the safe expression of aggression in joint fantasy, rituals, or folktales yields as much, or nearly as much, satisfaction (hence, a reduction in pressure) as direct aggression against the object of frustration. Evidence on this point from social psychology is not altogether conclusive but the preponderance of findings does not support this logic. Instead, such findings suggest that experimental subjects who are thwarted unjustly experience little or no reduction in the level of their frustration and anger unless they are able to directly injure the frustrating agent.⁶ Such findings are hardly astonishing. One would expect retaliation that actually affected the agent of injustice to provide far more in the way of catharsis than forms of aggression that left the source of anger untouched. And, of course, there is much experimental evidence that aggressive play and fantasy increase rather than decrease the

6. Berkowitz, *Aggression*, 204–27. In one experiment, for example, two groups of subjects were insulted by a powerful figure in identical ways. Some of the “victims” were then allowed to give an electric shock to their victimizer, while others were not. Those who struck back then felt less hostile toward their victimizer and also experienced a decline in blood pressure. Those who were not permitted to strike back, even though they could fully voice their aggressive fantasies indirectly in interpreting a thematic apperception test, experienced no decline in blood pressure. Indirect aggression, then, seems a poor substitute for direct retaliation.

likelihood of actual aggression. Mrs. Poyser felt greatly relieved when she vented her spleen directly to the squire but presumably was not relieved—or not sufficiently—by her rehearsed speeches and the oaths sworn behind his back. There is, then, as much, if not more, reason to consider Mrs. Poyser’s offstage anger as a preparation for her eventual outburst than to see it as a satisfactory alternative.

If the social-psychological evidence provides little or no support for catharsis through displacement, the historical case for such an argument has yet to be made. Would it be possible to show that, other things equal, dominant elites who provided or allowed more outlets for comparatively harmless aggression against themselves were thereby less liable to violence and rebellion from a subordinate group? If such a comparison were undertaken, its first task would be to distinguish between the effect of displaced aggression per se and the rather more material concessions of food, drink, charity, and relief from work and discipline embedded in such festivities. In other words, the “bread and circuses” that, on good evidence, are often political concessions *won* by subordinate classes may have an ameliorating effect on oppression quite apart from ritualized aggression.⁷ An argument along these lines would also have to explain an important anomaly. If, in fact, ritualized aggression displaces real aggression from its obvious target, why then have so many revolts by slaves, peasants, and serfs begun precisely during such seasonal rituals (for example, the carnival in Romans described by Le Roy Ladurie) designed to prevent their occurrence?⁸

The Hidden Transcript as Practice

The greatest shortcoming of the safety-valve position is that it embodies a fundamental idealist fallacy. The argument that offstage or veiled forms of aggression offer a harmless catharsis that helps preserve the status quo assumes that we are examining a rather abstract debate in which one side is handicapped rather than a concrete, material struggle. But relations between masters and slaves, between Brahmins and untouchables are not simply a clash of ideas about dignity and the right to rule; they are a process of

7. This perspective is suggested by the monumental work of Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*. Veyne treats the bread and circuses of classical Rome as something as much *wrung* from elites as conferred by them to neutralize anger. As he claims, “The government does not provide the circus to the people to depoliticize them but, certainly, they would be politicized against the government if it refused them the circus” (94).

8. The coincidence by itself does not, of course, prove that such rituals, as rituals, were a provocation to revolt. Here one would have to distinguish between the effects of ritual symbolism on the one hand, and the mass assembly of subordinates on the other.

subordination firmly anchored in material practices. Virtually every instance of personal domination is intimately connected with a process of appropriation. Dominant elites extract material taxes in the form of labor, grain, cash, and service in addition to extracting symbolic taxes in the form of deference, demeanor, posture, verbal formulas, and acts of humility. In actual practice, of course, the two are joined inasmuch as every public act of appropriation is, figuratively, a ritual of subordination.

The bond between domination and appropriation means that it is impossible to separate the ideas and symbolism of subordination from a process of material exploitation.⁹ In exactly the same fashion, it is impossible to separate veiled symbolic resistance to the ideas of domination from the practical struggles to thwart or mitigate exploitation. Resistance, like domination, fights a war on two fronts. The hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation. In the case of slaves, for example, these stratagems have typically included theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labor, footdragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery, arson, flight, and so on. In the case of peasants, poaching, squatting, illegal gleanings, delivery of inferior rents in kind, clearing clandestine fields, and defaults on feudal dues have been common stratagems.

To take the question of slave pilfering as an illustration, how can we tell what meaning this practice had for slaves?⁹ Was the taking of grain, chickens, hogs, and so on a mere response to hunger pangs, was it done for the pleasure of adventure,¹⁰ or was it meant to chasten hated masters or overseers? It could be any of these and more. Publicly, of course, the master's definition of *theft* prevailed. We know enough, however, to surmise that, behind the scenes, theft was seen as simply taking back the product of one's labor. We also know that the semiclandestine culture of the slaves encouraged and celebrated theft from the masters and morally reproved any slave who would dare expose such a theft: "[To] steal and not be detected is a merit among [slaves]. . . . And the vice which they hold in the greatest abhorrence is that of telling upon one another."¹¹ Our point is not the obvious one that behaviors are impenetrable

9. I have benefited greatly here from Alex Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft, with which they have been Branded."

10. As Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 177, notes, the trickster in Afro-American folktales took particularly great satisfaction in taking his food from more powerful animals. Cited in *ibid.*, 418.

11. Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Institution of the Negroes in the United States*, 131, 135, cited by Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft," 422.

until given meaning by human actors. Rather, the point is that the discourse of the hidden transcript does not merely shed light on behavior or explain it; it helps constitute that behavior.

The example of forest crimes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, since the historical evidence is comparatively rich, provides a way of further demonstrating how practices of resistance and discourses of resistance were mutually sustaining. At a time when property law and state control were being imposed, direct assertion of opposition was ordinarily very dangerous. Since the difficulties of effectively policing the forests were enormous, however, low-grade forms of resistance there promised success at comparatively little risk. Following the French Revolution, Maurice Agulhon notes, the peasants of Var, taking advantage of the political vacuum, stepped up their offenses against the forest laws.¹² With greater impunity they exercised what, to judge from customary claims, they assumed to be their privileges—taking dead wood, making charcoal, pasturing animals, gathering mushrooms, and so on—though the new national laws prohibited it. Agulhon nicely captures the way in which these practices implied and, in fact, sprang from a consciousness of rights to the forest that could not safely take the form of a public claim: "From then on, [there was] an evolution already under way at the level of infra-politics, which led from the consciousness of rights to the woods to rural offenses, and from this to prosecution, which in turn led to hatred against gendarmes, bailiffs, and prefects and finally from this hatred to a desire for a new revolution more or less libertarian."¹³

A penetrating study of forest poaching in early eighteenth-century England and the draconian death penalties enacted to curb it reveals the same link between a sense of popular justice that cannot be openly claimed and a host of practices devised to exercise those rights in clandestine ways.¹⁴ In this period, the titled owners of estates and the Crown began in earnest to restrict local customary rights to forest pasturage, hunting, trapping, fishing, turf and heath cutting, fuel wood gathering, thatch cutting, lime burning, and quarrying on what they now insisted was exclusively their property. That yeomen, cottagers, and laborers considered this breach of customary law to be an injustice is abundantly clear. Thompson can thus write of yeomen with a "tenacious tradition of memories as to rights and customs . . . and a sense that they and not the rich interlopers, owned the forest."¹⁵ The term *outlaws* as applied to those who continued to exercise these now-proscribed rights has a

12. *La république au village*, 81.

13. *Ibid.*, 375.

14. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*.

15. *Ibid.*, 108.

strange ring when we recall that they were certainly acting within the norms and hence with the support of most of their community.

And yet, we have no direct access to the hidden transcript of cottagers as they prepared their traps or shared a rabbit stew. And of course there were no public protests and open declarations of ancient forest rights in a political environment in which all the cards were stacked against the villagers in any sustained, open confrontation. At this level we encounter almost total silence—the plebeian voice is mute. Where it does speak, however, is in everyday forms of resistance in the increasingly massive and aggressive assertion of these rights, often at night and in disguise. Since a legal or political confrontation over property rights in the forest would avail them little and risk much, they chose instead to exercise their rights piecemeal and quietly—to take in fact the property rights they were denied in law. The contrast between public quiescence and clandestine defiance was not lost on contemporary authorities, one of whom, Bishop Trelawny, spoke of “a pestilent pernicious people . . . such as take oaths to the government, but underhand labor its subversion.”¹⁶

Popular poaching on such a vast scale could hardly be mounted without a lively backstage transcript of values, understandings, and popular outrage to sustain it. But that hidden transcript must largely be inferred from practice—a quiet practice at that. Once in a while an event indicates something of what might lie beneath the surface of public discourse, for example, a threatening anonymous letter to a gameskeeper when he continued to abridge popular custom or the fact that the prosecution couldn’t find anyone with a radius of five miles to testify against a local blacksmith accused of breaking down a dam recently built to create a fish pond. More rarely still, when there was nothing further to lose by a public declaration of rights, the normative content of the hidden transcript might spring to view. Thus two convicted “deer-stealers,” shortly to be hanged, ventured to claim that “deer were wild beasts, and that the poor, as well as the rich, might lawfully use them.”¹⁷

The point of this brief discussion of poaching is that any argument which assumes that disguised ideological dissent or aggression operates as a safety-valve to weaken “real” resistance ignores the paramount fact that such ideological dissent is virtually always expressed in practices that aim at an unobtrusive renegotiation of power relations. The yeomen and cottagers in question were not simply making an abstract, emotionally satisfying, backstage case for what they took to be their property rights; they were out in the

16. *Ibid.*, 124.

17. *Ibid.*, 162.

forests day after day exercising those rights as best they could. There is an important dialectic here between the hidden transcript and practical resistance.¹⁸ The hidden transcript of customary rights and outrage is a source of popular poaching providing that we realize, at the same time, that the practical struggle in the forests is also the source for a backstage discourse of customs, heroism, revenge, and justice. If the backstage talk is a source of satisfaction, it is so in large part owing to practical gains in the daily conflict over the forests. Any other formulation would entail an inadmissible wall between what people think and say, on the one hand, and what they do, on the other.

Far from being a relief-valve taking the place of actual resistance, the discursive practices offstage sustain resistance in the same way in which the informal peer pressure of factory workers discourages any individual worker from exceeding work norms and becoming a rate-buster. The subordinate moves back and forth, as it were, between two worlds: the world of the master and the offstage world of subordinates. Both of these worlds have sanctioning power. While subordinates normally can monitor the public transcript performance of other subordinates, the dominant can rarely monitor fully the hidden transcript. This means that any subordinate who seeks privilege by ingratiating himself to his superior will have to answer for that conduct once he returns to the world of his peers. In situations of systematic subordination such sanctions may go well beyond scolding and insult to physical coercion, as in the beating of an informer by prisoners. Social pressure among peers, however, is by itself a powerful weapon of subordinates. Industrial sociologists discovered very early that the censure of workmates often prevailed over the desire for greater income or promotion. We can, in this respect, view the social side of the hidden transcript as a political domain striving to enforce, against great odds, certain forms of conduct and resistance in relations with the dominant. *It would be more accurate, in short, to think of the hidden transcript as a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it.*

One might argue perhaps that even such practical resistance, like the discourse it reflects and that sustains it, amounts to nothing more than trivial coping mechanisms that cannot materially affect the overall situation of domination. This is no more real resistance, the argument might go, than veiled symbolic opposition is real ideological dissent. At one level this is perfectly true but irrelevant since our point is that these are the forms that political

18. A comparable dialectic, moreover, joins the practices of domination to the hidden transcript. The predations of game wardens, arrests and prosecutions, new laws and warnings, the losses of subsistence resources would continually find their way into the normative discourse of those whose earlier rights to the forest were being curtailed.

struggle takes when frontal assaults are precluded by the realities of power. At another level it is well to recall that the aggregation of thousands upon thousands of such "petty" acts of resistance have dramatic economic and political effects. In production, whether on the factory floor or on the plantation, it can result in performances that are not bad enough to provoke punishment but not good enough to allow the enterprise to succeed. Repeated on a massive scale, such conduct allowed Djilas to write that "slow, unproductive work of disinterested millions . . . is the calculable, invisible, and gigantic waste which no communist regime has been able to avoid."¹⁹ Poaching and squatting on a large scale can restructure the control of property. Peasant tax evasion on a large scale has brought about crises of appropriation that threaten the state. Massive desertion by serf or peasant conscripts has helped bring down more than one ancien regime. Under the appropriate conditions, the accumulation of petty acts can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche.²⁰

Testing the Limits

In any stratified society there is a set of limits on what . . . dominant and subordinate groups can do. . . . What takes place, however, is a kind of continual probing to find out what they can get away with and discover the limits of obedience and disobedience.

—BARRINGTON MOORE, *Injustice*

Rarely can we speak of an individual slave, untouchable, serf, peasant, or worker, let alone groups of them, as being either entirely submissive or entirely insubordinate. Under what conditions, however, do veiled ideological opposition and unobtrusive material resistance dare to venture forth and speak their name openly? Conversely, how is open resistance forced into increasingly furtive and clandestine expression?

The metaphor that promises to serve us best in understanding this process is that of guerrilla warfare. Within relations of domination, as in guerrilla warfare, there is an understanding on both sides about the relative strength and capacities of the antagonist and therefore about what the likely response to an aggressive move might be. What is most important for our purposes, though, is that the actual balance of forces is never precisely known, and estimates about what it might be are largely inferred from the outcomes of previous probes and encounters. Assuming, as we must, that both sides hope

19. *The New Class*, 120. One is also reminded of the East European adage, "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work."

20. This argument is made at much greater length in Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, chap. 7.

to prevail, there is likely to be a constant testing of the equilibrium. (One side advances a salient to see if it survives or is attacked and, if so, in what strength. It is in this no-man's-land of feints, small attacks, probings to find weaknesses, and not in the rare frontal assault, that the ordinary battlefield lies. Advances that succeed—whether against opposition or without challenge—are likely to lead to more numerous and more aggressive advances unless they meet with a decisive riposte. The limits of the possible are encountered only in an empirical process of search and probing.)²¹

The dynamic of this process, it should be clear, holds only in those situations in which it is assumed that most subordinates conform and obey *not* because they have internalized the norms of the dominant, but because a structure of surveillance, reward, and punishment makes it prudent for them to comply. It assumes, in other words, a basic antagonism of goals between dominant and subordinates that is held in check by relations of discipline and punishment. We may, I believe, routinely suppose this assumption holds in slavery, serfdom, caste domination, and in those peasant-landlord relations in which appropriation and status degradation are joined. Such assumptions may also hold in certain institutional settings between wardens and prisoners, staff and mental patients, teachers and students, bosses and workers.²²

The vicissitudes of the relationship between gameskeepers and woodwardens on the one hand and poachers on the other is a useful example of how limits are probed, tested, and occasionally breached. E. P. Thompson's account of early eighteenth-century poaching details the stepwise progression of poaching as plebeian encroachments nibbled steadily at private and Crown land.²³ Once a practice was established it could be considered a custom, and a

21. The initiation of some forms of rebellion can be understood along these lines. Imagine, for example, that a subordinate peasantry appears to have been effectively intimidated by their overlords, to judge from their deferential manner. On closer inspection one may find occasional, if rare, acts of aggression from below (e.g., a tenant who loses his temper and strikes back when the work is too onerous, the rents too high, or his pride too insulted). These acts will typically have been met quickly with severe sanctions (e.g., beatings, jailings, hut burnings) thus establishing a frontier of intimidation. Imagine now that after some years a distant political event (e.g., a government with reformist sympathizers) neutralized the rural police authorities who had applied these sanctions. In this case, the occasional acts of aggression from below might, for the first time in living memory, go unpunished. As the realization spread that, say, a tenant who slapped a landlord actually went unpunished, I suspect that other tenants would be tempted to risk acting on their own anger. Assuming these new expectations about the balance of power were confirmed, it is not hard to see how, like the process by which rumor is propagated, open acts of aggression could quickly become generalized. As the aggression from below becomes generalized it also fundamentally changes the balance of power that prevailed earlier.

22. The most obvious empirical test of this assumption is to observe what happens when surveillance or punishment is relaxed.

23. *Whigs and Hunters*, chaps. 1, 2.

custom, steadily exercised, was nearly as good as a right in law. The process was, however, nearly imperceptible under ordinary circumstances so as not to provoke an open confrontation. For example, villagers might secretly girdle the bark of trees just below ground level and then, when the tree inevitably died, openly take the dead tree, to which they were entitled. Alternatively, they might conceal green boughs in the center of a bundle of dead wood. Gradually, they might, if not checked, increase the proportion of green wood till it made up most of the load. This incremental process might accelerate precipitously whenever forest enforcement was lax, as those who had held back now rushed in to take the wood, game, pasture, and peat to which they all along thought they had a right. Thus, when a bishopric with substantial woodland "fell vacant . . . for six months the tenants . . . appear to have made a vigorous assault on the timber and deer."²⁴ The preponderance of force was, in overall terms, obviously in the hands of the Crown and large property holders, but the poachers were not entirely without resources. The terrain favored their kind of infrapolitics, and they were frequently able to intimidate justices of the peace and gameskeepers with anonymous threats, beatings, arson, and so on. As poaching became more generalized, aggressive, and open, the issue was no longer simply the de facto control of property in game and wood but the implicit provocation represented by open insubordination from below. As Thompson explained,

What made the "emergency" was the repeated public humiliation of the authorities, the simultaneous attacks upon royal and private property, the sense of a confederated movement which was enlarging its special demands . . . the symptoms of something close to class warfare with the royalist gentry in the disturbed areas objects of attack and pitifully isolated in their attempts to enforce order. . . . It was this displacement of authority and not the ancient abuse of deer-stealing, which constituted, in the eyes of the Government, an emergency.²⁵

The Black Acts, providing capital punishment for those found abroad at night with blackened faces, were one of the decisive ripostes by the state.

The impetus behind forms of infrapolitical resistance like poaching is not only influenced by the counterforce of surveillance and punishment brought to bear by the authorities. It is greatly affected as well by the level of need and indignation among the subordinate population. The theft of wood in mid

24. *Ibid.*, 123.

25. *Ibid.*, 190.

nineteenth-century Germany was, as Marx noted in some early articles in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a form of class struggle.²⁶ The overall volume of offenses varied as much with the subsistence needs of the population as with the vigor of enforcement. Forest encroachments ballooned when provisions were expensive, when wages were low, when unemployment grew, when the winter was severe, where emigration was difficult, and where dwarf-holdings prevailed. In the bad year of 1836, 150,000 out of a total of 207,000 prosecutions in Prussia were for forest crimes. In 1842 alone in the state of Baden there was one conviction for every four inhabitants.²⁷ The virtual invasion of the forest for a time overwhelmed the enforcement apparatus of the state.

While the pressure driving everyday resistance varies with the needs of subordinate groups it is rarely likely to disappear altogether. The point is that any weakness in surveillance and enforcement is likely to be quickly exploited; any ground left undefended is likely to be ground lost. Nowhere is this pattern more evident than in the case of repetitive appropriations such as rents or taxes. Le Roy Ladurie and others, for example, have charted the fortunes of tithe collections (in principle, one-tenth of the grain harvest of cultivators) over nearly four centuries.²⁸ Because it was so rarely devoted to the local religious and charitable purposes for which it was originally intended, the tithe was bitterly resented. Resistance, however, was less to be found in the open protests, petitions, riots, and revolts that did occasionally erupt but rather in a quiet but massive pattern of evasion. Peasants secretly harvested grain before the tithe collector arrived, opened unregistered fields, interplanted titheable and nontitheable crops, and took a variety of measures to ensure that the grain taken by the titheman was inferior and less than one-tenth of the crop. The pressure was constant, but at those rare moments when enforcement was lax, the peasantry would take quick advantage of the opportunity. When a war stripped a province of its local garrison, tithe collections would plummet; full advantage would be taken of a new tithe collector, unfamiliar with all the techniques of evasion. The most dramatic example of exploiting the openings available came with the redemption payments accorded the clergy just after the French Revolution in order to phase out the tithe gradually. Sensing the political opening and the inability of the revolutionary government to enforce

26. Peter Linebaugh, "Karl Marx, the Theft of Wood, and Working-class Composition: A Contribution to the Current Debate."

27. *Ibid.*, 13.

28. For a review of this literature and an argument about the importance of this form of resistance, see my "Resistance without Protest and without Organization," 417-52.

the payments, the peasantry so effectively evaded payment as to abolish the tithe forthwith.²⁹

Ideological and symbolic dissent follows much the same pattern. Metaphorically we can say, I believe, that the hidden transcript is continually pressing against the limit of what is permitted on stage, much as a body of water might press against a dam. The amount of pressure naturally varies with the degree of shared anger and indignation experienced by subordinates. Behind the pressure is the desire to give unbridled expression to the sentiments voiced in the hidden transcript directly to the dominant. Short of an outright rupture, the process by which the limit is tested involves, say, a particularly intrepid, angry, risk-taking, unguarded subordinate gesturing or saying something that slightly breaches that limit. If this act of insubordination (disrespect, cheek) is not rebuked or punished, others will exploit that breach and a new, *de facto* limit governing what may be said will have been established incorporating the new territory. A small success is likely to encourage others to venture further, and the process can escalate rapidly. Conversely, the dominant may also breach the limit and move it in the opposite direction, suppressing previously tolerated public gestures.³⁰

Ranajit Guha has argued convincingly that open acts of desacralization and disrespect are often the first sign of actual rebellion.³¹ Even seemingly small acts—for example, lower castes wearing turbans and shoes, a refusal to bow or give the appropriate salutation, a truculent look, a defiant posture—signal a public breaking of the ritual of subordination. So long as the elite treat such assaults on their dignity as tantamount to open rebellion, symbolic defiance and rebellion do amount to the same thing.

The logic of symbolic defiance is thus strikingly similar to the logic of everyday forms of resistance. Ordinarily they are, by prudent design, unob-

29. Revolutionary vacuums have aided more than one peasantry in this fashion. In the months after the Bolshevik seizure of power but before the new state made its presence felt in the countryside, the Russian peasantry did on a larger scale what they had always attempted on a smaller scale. They opened up new fields in what had earlier been woodland, gentry pastures, and state land and didn't report it; they inflated local population figures and deflated arable acreage in order to make the village seem as poor and untaxable as possible. A remarkable study of this period by Orlando Figes suggests that as a result of these self-help measures the 1917 census underestimated the arable land in Russia by 15 percent. *Peasant Revolution, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution*, chap. 3.

30. Primary and secondary school teachers share a lore about how important it is to establish a firm line and enforce it lest a pattern of verbal disrespect become established, leading, presumably, to more daring acts of *lèse-majesté*. Similarly, referees of basketball games may punish even trivial fouls at the outset of a game simply to establish a line that they may later relax slightly.

31. *Elementary Forms of Peasant Insurgency*, chap. 2.

trusive and veiled, disowning, as it were, any public defiance of the material or symbolic order. When, however, the pressure rises or when there are weaknesses in the "retaining wall" holding it back, poaching is likely to escalate into land invasions, tithe evasions into open refusals to pay, and rumors and jokes into public insult. Thus, the offstage contempt for the Spanish church hierarchy that was, before the Civil War, confined to veiled gossip and humor, took, at the outset of the war, the more dramatic form of the public exhumation of the remains of archbishops and prioresses from the crypts of cathedrals, which were then dumped unceremoniously on the front steps.³² *The process by which Aesopian language may give way to direct vituperation is very much like the process by which everyday forms of resistance give way to overt, collective defiance.*

The logic of the constant testing of the limits alerts us to the importance, from the dominant point of view, of making an example of someone. Just as a public breach in the limits is a provocation to others to trespass in the same fashion, so the decisive assertion of symbolic territory by public retribution discourages others from venturing public defiance. One deserter shot, one assertive slave whipped, one unruly student rebuked; these acts are meant as public events for an audience of subordinates. They are intended as a kind of preemptive strike to nip in the bud any further challenges of the existing frontier (as the French say, "pour encourager les autres") or perhaps to take new territory.

Finally, a clear view of the "micro" pushing and shoving involved in power relations, and particularly power relations in which appropriation and permanent subordination are central, makes any static view of naturalization and legitimation untenable. A dominant elite under such conditions is ceaselessly working to maintain and extend its material control and symbolic reach. A subordinate group is correspondingly devising strategies to thwart and reverse that appropriation and to take more symbolic liberties as well. The material pressure against the process of appropriation is, for slaves and serfs, nearly a physical necessity, and the desire to talk back has its own compelling logic. No victory is won for good on this terrain: hardly has the dust cleared before the probing to regain lost territory is likely to begin. The naturalization of domination is always being put to the test in small but significant ways, particularly at the point where power is applied.³³

32. Bruce Lincoln, "Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain, July 1936."

33. This, I believe, is the missing element in the theories of legitimation to be found in John Gaventa's otherwise perceptive book, *Power and Powerlessness*, esp. chap. 1. See also Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*.

Resistance below the Line

We are now in a position to summarize a portion of the argument. Until quite recently, much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political. To emphasize the enormity of what has been, by and large, disregarded, I want to distinguish between the open, declared forms of resistance, which attract most attention, and the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance that constitutes the domain of infrapolitics (see accompanying table). For contemporary liberal democracies in the West, an exclusive concern for open political

Domination and Resistance

	<i>Material Domination</i>	<i>Status Domination</i>	<i>Ideological Domination</i>
Practices of Domination	appropriation of grain, taxes, labor, etc.	humiliation, dis-privilege, insults, assaults on dignity	justification by ruling groups for slavery, serfdom, caste, privilege
Forms of Public Declared Resistant	petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, land invasions, and open revolts	public assertion of worth by gesture, dress, speech, and/or open desecration of status symbols of the dominant	public counter-ideologies propagating equality, revolution, or negating the ruling ideology
Forms of Disguised, low profile, Undisclosed resistance, INFRA- POLITICS	everyday forms of resistance, e.g. poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging Direct Resistance by Disguised Resisters, e.g. masked appropriations, threats, anonymous threats	hidden transcript of anger, aggression, and disguised discourses of dignity e.g., rituals of aggression, tales of revenge, use of carnival symbolism, gossip, rumor, creation of autonomous social space for assertion of dignity	development of dissident sub-cultures e.g., millennial religions, slave "hush-arbors," folk religion, myths of social banditry and class heroes, world-upside-down imagery, myths of the "good" king or the time before the "Norman Yoke"

action *will* capture much that is significant in political life. The historic achievement of political liberties of speech and association has appreciably lowered the risks and difficulty of open political expression. Not so long ago in the West, however, and, even today, for many of the least privileged minorities and marginalized poor, open political action will hardly capture the bulk of political action. Nor will an exclusive attention to declared resistance help us understand the process by which new political forces and demands germinate before they burst on the scene. How, for example, could we understand the open break represented by the civil rights movement or the black power movement in the 1960s without understanding the offstage discourse among black students, clergymen, and their parishioners?

Taking a long historical view, one sees that the luxury of relatively safe, open political opposition is both rare and recent. The vast majority of people have been and continue to be not citizens, but subjects. So long as we confine our conception of *the political* to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond.

Each of the forms of disguised resistance, of infrapolitics, is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance. Thus, piecemeal squatting is the infrapolitical equivalent of an open land invasion: both are aimed at resisting the appropriation of land. The former cannot openly avow its goals and is a strategy well suited to subjects who have no political rights. Thus, rumor and folktales of revenge are the infrapolitical equivalent of open gestures of contempt and desecration: both are aimed at resisting the denial of standing or dignity to subordinate groups. The former cannot act directly and affirm its intention and is thus a symbolic strategy also well suited to subjects with no political rights. Finally, millennial imagery and the symbolic reversals of folk religion are the infrapolitical equivalents of public, radical, counterideologies: both are aimed at negating the public symbolism of ideological domination. Infrapolitics, then, is essentially the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril.

The strategic imperatives of infrapolitics make it not simply different in degree from the open politics of modern democracies; they impose a fundamentally different logic of political action. No public claims are made, no open symbolic lines are drawn. All political action takes forms that are designed to obscure their intentions or to take cover behind an apparent meaning. Vir-

tually no one acts in his own name for avowed purposes, for that would be self-defeating. Precisely because such political action is studiously designed to be anonymous or to disclaim its purpose, infrapolitics requires more than a little interpretation. Things are not exactly as they seem.

The logic of disguise followed by infrapolitics extends to its organization as well as to its substance. Again, the form of organization is as much a product of political necessity as of political choice. Because open political activity is all but precluded, resistance is confined to the informal networks of kin, neighbors, friends, and community rather than formal organization. Just as the symbolic resistance found in forms of folk culture has a possibly innocent meaning, so do the elementary organizational units of infrapolitics have an alternative, innocent existence. The informal assemblages of market, neighbors, family, and community thus provide both a structure and a cover for resistance. Since resistance is conducted in small groups, individually, and, if on a larger scale, makes use of the anonymity of folk culture or actual disguises, it is well adapted to thwart surveillance. There are no leaders to round up, no membership lists to investigate, no manifestos to denounce, no public activities to draw attention. These are, one might say, the elementary forms of political life on which more elaborate, open, institutional forms may be built and on which they are likely to depend for their vitality. Such elementary forms also help explain why infrapolitics so often escapes notice. If formal political organization is the realm of elites (for example, lawyers, politicians, revolutionaries, political bosses), of written records (for example, resolutions, declarations, news stories, petitions, lawsuits), and of public action, infrapolitics is, by contrast, the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance. The logic of infrapolitics is to leave few traces in the wake of its passage. By covering its tracks it not only minimizes the risks its practitioners run but it also eliminates much of the documentary evidence that might convince social scientists and historians that real politics was taking place.

Infrapolitics is, to be sure, real politics. In many respects it is conducted in more earnest, for higher stakes, and against greater odds than political life in liberal democracies. Real ground is lost and gained. Armies are undone and revolutions facilitated by the desertions of infrapolitics. De facto property rights are established and challenged. States confront fiscal crises or crises of appropriation when the cumulative petty stratagems of its subjects deny them labor and taxes. Resistant subcultures of dignity and vengeful dreams are created and nurtured. Counterhegemonic discourse is elaborated. Thus infrapolitics is, as emphasized earlier, always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible. Any relaxation in surveillance and punishment

and foot-dragging threatens to become a declared strike, folktales of oblique aggression threaten to become face-to-face defiant contempt, millennial dreams threaten to become revolutionary politics. From this vantage point infrapolitics may be thought of as the elementary—in the sense of foundational—form of politics. It is the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it. Under the conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live, it is political life. And when the rare civilities of open political life are curtailed or destroyed, as they so often are, the elementary forms of infrapolitics remain as a defense in depth of the powerless.