
Domination and the Arts of Resistance

Hidden Transcripts

James C. Scott

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and the
Arts of
Resistance

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James C. Scott

For Moorestown Friends' School

When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.

ETHIOPIAN PROVERB

Society is a very mysterious animal with many faces and hidden potentialities, and . . . it's extremely shortsighted to believe that the face society happens to be presenting to you at a given moment is its only true face. None of us knows all the potentialities that slumber in the spirit of the population.

VÁCLAV HAVEL, May 31, 1990

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Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Behind the Official Story	1
2. Domination, Acting, and Fantasy	17
3. The Public Transcript as a Respectable Performance	45
4. False Consciousness or Laying It on Thick?	70
5. Making Social Space for a Dissident Subculture	108
6. Voice under Domination: The Arts of Political Disguise	136
7. The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups	183
8. A Saturnalia of Power: The First Public Declaration of the Hidden Transcript	202
Bibliography	229
Index	243

Preface

THE IDEA BEHIND THIS BOOK developed as a result of my persistent and rather slow-witted efforts to make sense of class relations in a Malay village. I was hearing divergent accounts of land transactions, wage rates, social reputations, and technological change. By itself, this was not so surprising inasmuch as different villagers had conflicting interests. More troubling was the fact that the same villagers were occasionally contradicting themselves! It was some time before it dawned on me that the contradictions arose especially, but not uniquely, among the poorer and most economically dependent villagers. The dependency was as important as the poverty, since there were several fairly autonomous poor whose expressed opinions were both consistent and independent.

The contradictions, moreover, had a kind of situational logic to them. When I confined the issue to class relations alone—one of many issues—it seemed that the poor sang one tune when they were in the presence of the rich and another tune when they were among the poor. The rich too spoke one way to the poor and another among themselves. These were the grossest distinctions; many finer distinctions were discernible depending on the exact composition of the group talking and, of course, the issue in question. Soon I found myself using this social logic to seek out or create settings in which I could check one discourse against another and, so to speak, triangulate my way into unexplored territory. The method worked well enough for my limited purposes, and the results appeared in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985), especially pp. 284–89.

Once attuned more closely to how power relations affected discourse among Malays, it was not long before I noticed how I measured my own words before those who had power over me in some significant way. And I observed

that when I had to choke back responses that would not have been prudent, I often found someone to whom I could *voice* my unspoken thoughts. There seemed to be a nearly physical pressure behind this repressed speech. On those rare occasions on which my anger or indignation had overcome my discretion, I experienced a sense of elation despite the danger of retaliation. Only then did I fully appreciate why I might not be able to take the public conduct of those over whom I had power at face value.

I can claim absolutely no originality for these observations about power relations and discourse. They are part and parcel of the daily folk wisdom of millions who spend most of their waking hours in power-laden situations in which a misplaced gesture or a misspoken word can have terrible consequences. What I have tried to do here is to pursue this idea more systematically, not to say doggedly, to see what it can teach us about power, hegemony, resistance, and subordination.

My working assumption in organizing the book was that the most severe conditions of powerlessness and dependency would be diagnostic. Much of the evidence here, then, is drawn from studies of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination on the premise that the relationship of discourse to power would be most sharply etched where the divergence between what I call the public transcript and the hidden transcripts was greatest. Where it seemed suggestive I have also brought in evidence from patriarchal domination, colonialism, racism, and even from total institutions such as jails and prisoner of war camps.

This is not a close, textural, contingent, and historically grounded analysis in the way that my study of a small Malay village necessarily was. In its eclectic and schematic way it violates many of the canons of postmodernist work. What it shares with postmodernism is the conviction that there is no social location or analytical position from which the truth value of a text or discourse may be judged. While I do believe that close contextual work is the lifeblood of theory, I also believe there is something useful to be said across cultures and historical epochs when our focus is narrowed by structural similarities.

The analytical strategy pursued here thus begins with the premise that structurally similar forms of domination will bear a family resemblance to one another. These similarities in the cases of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination are fairly straightforward. Each represents an institutionalized arrangement for appropriating labor, goods, and services from a subordinate population. As a formal matter, subordinate groups in these forms of domination have no political or civil rights, and their status is fixed by birth. Social mobility, in principle if not in practice, is precluded. The ideologies justifying domination of this kind include formal assumptions about inferiority and

superiority which, in turn, find expression in certain rituals or etiquette regulating public contact between strata. Despite a degree of institutionalization, relations between the master and slave, the landlord and the serf, the high-caste Hindu and untouchable are forms of personal rule providing great latitude for arbitrary and capricious behavior by the superior. An element of personal terror invariably infuses these relations—a terror that may take the form of arbitrary beatings, sexual brutality, insults, and public humiliations. A particular slave, for example, may be lucky enough to escape such treatment but the sure knowledge that it *could* happen to her pervades the entire relationship. Finally, subordinates in such large-scale structures of domination nevertheless have a fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant. It is in such sequestered settings where, in principle, a shared critique of domination may develop.

The structural kinship just described is analytically central to the kind of argument I hope to make. I most certainly do not want to claim that slaves, serfs, untouchables, the colonized, and subjugated races share immutable characteristics. Essentialist claims of that kind are untenable. What I do wish to assert, however, is that to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are also broadly comparable. Thus, slaves and serfs ordinarily dare not contest the terms of their subordination openly. Behind the scenes, though, they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced. The specific forms (for example, linguistic disguises, ritual codes, taverns, fairs, the “hush-arbors” of slave religion) this social space takes or the specific content of its dissent (for example, hopes of a returning prophet, ritual aggression via witchcraft, celebration of bandit heroes and resistance martyrs) are as unique as the particular culture and history of the actors in question require. In the interest of delineating some broad patterns I deliberately overlook the great particularity of each and every form of subordination—the differences, say, between Caribbean and North American slavery, between French serfdom in the seventeenth century and in the mid-eighteenth century, between Russian serfdom and French serfdom, between regions and so on. The ultimate value of the broad patterns I sketch here could be established only by embedding them firmly in settings that are historically grounded and culturally specific.

Given the choice of structures explored here, it is apparent that I privilege the issues of dignity and autonomy, which have typically been seen as secondary to material exploitation. Slavery, serfdom, the caste system, colonialism, and racism routinely generate the practices and rituals of denigration, insult,

and assaults on the body that seem to occupy such a large part of the hidden transcripts of their victims. Such forms of oppression, as we shall see, deny subordinates the ordinary luxury of negative reciprocity: trading a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult. Even in the case of the contemporary working class it appears that slights to one's dignity and close control of one's work figure as prominently in accounts of exploitation as do narrower concerns of work and compensation.

My broad purpose is to suggest how we might more successfully read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups. How do we study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery? If we take all of this at face value we risk mistaking what may be a tactic for the whole story. Instead, I try to make out a case for a different study of power that uncovers contradictions, tensions, and immanent possibilities. Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of *both* hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination.

After a rather literary beginning drawing on George Eliot and George Orwell, I try to show how the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power. At the same time, I explore the hegemonic purpose behind displays of domination and consent, asking who the audience is for such performances. This investigation leads in turn to an appreciation of why it is that even close readings of historical and archival evidence tend to favor a hegemonic account of power relations. Short of actual rebellion, powerless groups have, I argue, a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances.

The meaning of these appearances can be known only by comparing it with subordinate discourse outside of power-laden situations. Since ideological resistance can grow best when it is shielded from direct surveillance, we are led to examine the social sites where this resistance can germinate.

If the decoding of power relations depended on full access to the more or less clandestine discourse of subordinate groups, students of power—both historical and contemporary—would face an impasse. We are saved from throwing up our hands in frustration by the fact that the hidden transcript is

typically expressed openly—albeit in disguised form. I suggest, along these lines, how we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct. These patterns of disguising *ideological* insubordination are somewhat analogous to the patterns by which, in my experience, peasants and slaves have disguised their efforts to thwart material appropriation of their labor, their production, and their property: for example, poaching, foot-dragging, pilfering, dissimulation, flight. Together, these forms of insubordination might suitably be called the *infrapolitics* of the powerless.

Finally, I believe that the notion of a hidden transcript helps us understand those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.

Acknowledgments

TOO MANY PEOPLE helped me in too many ways with this manuscript. The result was an aggregation of individual acts of exemplary generosity and large-spiritedness that produced, on my part, an intellectual gridlock that lasted for some time. I began to think of this as a kind of perverse mirror-image of Adam Smith's invisible hand. Unsnarling the traffic meant shooting several drivers, burying their vehicles, and resurfacing the road as if they had never existed. Executions and burials were held with all the necessary decorum, and the victims might take comfort in the fact that three of my own children (chapters 2, 3, and 5) were blindfolded, led to the wall, and shot without much ceremony but with much gnashing of teeth. The result, I think, is a reinvigorated intellectual traffic that moves along fairly briskly. Its briskness, I understand, comes at the considerable cost of eliminating intersections that would have permitted travel in different directions to new destinations. The costs can be weighed only against a judgment about whether we have, in the end, gotten to a place worth going to, and it is for the reader to decide that.

Among the tempting destinations left off the itinerary were those that would have integrated my enterprise here more closely with contemporary theoretical work on power, hegemony, and resistance. There is an implicit dialogue between this work and, for example, the work of Jürgen Habermas (particularly his theory of communicative competence), that of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault where it touches the normalization or naturalization of power, that of Steven Lukes and John Gaventa on the various "faces of power," that of Fredric Jameson on "the political unconscious," and, most recently, that of Susan Stanford Friedman on the "repressed in women's narrative." My argument is carried out in the knowledge of these works. But to have stopped and carried out a full-fledged exchange with any of them would

have, I thought, interrupted the logic of my presentation and, more seriously, made the result more forbidding to a less theoretically oriented audience.

I owe the origin of this book to Zakariah Abdullah, a teacher of rare patience and a friend of rare generosity, who taught me most of what I understand about Malay village life.

The members of an informal lunch seminar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Science, Technology, and Society Program, where I was an Exxon Fellow in 1984, should be thanked for responding to the first crude version of the idea behind this book. In its various guises the idea was inspected, used, criticized, elaborated, and ridiculed by the undergraduates who have been in my seminar "Powerlessness and Dependency." Their perspectives and papers about slavery, serfdom, concentration camps, prisons, homelessness, old-age homes, and women were more of an education than I had bargained on. I learned to discount their praise and amplify their criticism, since I was giving them grades.

During the summer of 1987, with the intellectual stimulation (not to mention room and board) of the Pacific and Southeast Asian History Department of the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Australian National University, I began pursuing the ideas here in earnest. Tony Reid not only arranged the visit but organized a seminar on which my still preliminary argument was subjected to such an array of well-aimed and high explosive projectiles that I had virtually to begin again. Although I would not have said so at the time, the experience was intellectually bracing, and I want to thank particularly Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha, Tony Milner, Clive Kessler, Jamie Mackie, Brian Fegan, Lea Jelinek, Ken Young, and Norman Owen. This was my first encounter with the intellectual energy of the *Subaltern Studies* group that had transformed South Asian historiography in fundamental ways. At the center of this group stands Ranajit Guha, whose original and sweeping work is of fundamental importance. If I had been able to revise my manuscript in more of the ways his discerning eye suggested, it would have been a better book and would have better repaid the friendship he and Mechthild extended. Other friends in Canberra who contributed in one way or another to this book were Tony Johns, Helen Reid, Harjot S. Oberoi, Susan B. C. Devalle, Claire Milner, and Kenny Bradley, who did his best to teach me to shear sheep like a real Aussie.

A year at the Institute for Advanced Study, funded in part also by the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities, represented the oasis that made possible the broad reading and tranquility necessary to begin writing. The minimal routines of the Institute's School of Social Sciences together with the smart neighbors it provides were a

nearly ideal combination. Some of those neighbors should be singled out for making my stay rewarding: Clifford Geertz, Albert Hirschman, Joan Scott, Michael Walzer, Valentine Daniel, Elliot Shore, Harry Wolff, Peg Clark, Lucille Allsen, Barbara Hernstein-Smith, Sandy Levinson, and Paul Freedman. Nor can I resist giving public thanks to the "unknown nonbureaucrat" who interceded with the apparatchiks to allow my April Fools' hens to remain in the well-groomed Institute courtyard for a few days.

Bits and pieces of my first draft were imposed on various academic audiences with results that were, at least to me, beneficial if occasionally sobering. Thanks, then, to those who listened and occasionally spilled blood at the University of Washington, Seattle, Vanderbilt University, Johns Hopkins, the University of Minnesota's Center for Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society, the Davis Center at Princeton University, Boston University, University of the South-Sewanee, Washington University, St. Louis, Trenton State University, Trinity College-Connecticut, Cornell University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, St. Lawrence University, University of California-Irvine, Northern Illinois University, University of California-Los Angeles, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Oslo, and Göteborg University.

A few intellectual debts embedded in this book merit special recognition. Barrington Moore's work is a looming presence here even when he is not cited, and much of my argument could be read as a conversation with the more provocative sections of his book *Injustice*. The same could be said for Murray Edelman's work, with which I've been grappling, I've only recently fully realized, for a long time. Even if our answers diverge, Moore and Edelman have asked most of the questions I've set myself to. I also owe a debt to Grant Evans's arresting description of the ceremony in Vientiane appropriated in chapter 3. Daniel Field's *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* contains the basis of the argument about naive monarchism at the end of chapter 4.

As I wrote earlier, so many people had so many divergent things to say about my argument in its oral or written form that, while they almost certainly improved it, they can hardly have been said to have sped me on my way. Some of them thought I was barking up the wrong tree; others thought I had the right tree but was not going about it right; others wondered why I was barking at all; and still others, thank God, associated themselves with the hunt and worked on improving my bite so it might come up to the level of my bark. I can think of nothing else to do but to list them all more or less indiscriminately so any of them can disavow any affinity with the position I've staked out. They are (deep breath): Edward and Susan Friedman, Jan Gross, Grant Evans, Tony Reid, Don Emmerson, Leonard Doob, Joseph Errington, Joseph LaPalombara, Helen Siu, Susanne Wofford, Deborah Davis, Jean Agnew, Steven

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A far smaller number of colleagues went through the entire manuscript with a fine-toothed comb and sent me suggestions I could act on as well as searching critiques that occasionally left me at a loss. Their help and criticism have certainly improved the book, and I believe have made me a bit smarter. It may well not have brought the final version up to their expectations. I'll take the rap for that, as if I had any choice. These good colleagues are Murray Edelman, Clifford Geertz, Crawford Young, Jennifer Hochschild, Ramachandra Guha, Michael Adas, Fran Piven, Arlie Russell Hochschild, Lila Abu-Lughod, Aristide Zolberg, and Claire Jean Kim. I assure them that I will never make the mistake of seeking so much advice again—at least as much for my sake as for theirs.

A somewhat different version of chapter 3 has been published under the title "Prestige as the Public Discourse of Domination," in a special issue of *Cultural Critique* on the "Economy of Prestige," edited by Richard Leppert and Bruce Lincoln, no. 12 (Spring, 1989), 145–66.

Kay Mansfield, manager of the Council on Southeast Asian Studies at Yale, did as much as anyone to see this manuscript through to completion. I thank her for her friendship, efficiency, editorial skills, and her efforts. Ruth Muessig, Mary Whitney, and Susan Olmsted were helpful in the final and hectic revisions.

Louise and our children continue to be an impediment to my scholarly productivity. They see no earthly reason why I should want to spend so much time writing books, given the cost in solitude and in opportunities foregone. This book was, like those before it, written in the teeth of their best efforts to bring me to my senses. There is little doubt that without them I could have written more and, who knows, maybe even have gotten smarter. All in all, a very small price to pay for their company.

Domination and the Arts of Resistance

CHAPTER ONE

Behind the Official Story

I tremble to speak the words of freedom before the tyrant.

—CORYPHEUS, in Euripides, *The Bacchae*

The Labourer and Artisan, notwithstanding they are Servants to their Masters, are quit by doing what they are bid. But the Tyrant sees those that are about him, begging and suing for his Favour; and they must not only do what he commands, but they must think as he would have them [think] and most often, to satisfy him, even anticipate his thoughts. It is not sufficient to obey him, they must also please him, they must harass, torment, nay kill themselves in his Service; and . . . they must leave their own Taste for his, Force their Inclination, and throw off their natural Dispositions. They must carefully observe his Words, his Voice, his Eyes, and even his Nod. They must have neither Eyes, Feet, nor Hands, but what must be ALL upon the watch, to spy out his Will, and discover his Thoughts. Is this to live happily? Does it indeed deserve the Name of Life?

—ESTIENNE DE LA BOETIE, *A Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*

And the intensest hatred is that rooted in fear, which compels to silence and drives vehemence into constructive vindictiveness, an imaginary annihilation of the detested object, something like the hidden rites of vengeance with which the persecuted have a dark vent for their rage.

—GEORGE ELIOT, *Daniel Deronda*

IF THE EXPRESSION “Speak truth to power” still has a utopian ring to it, even in modern democracies, this is surely because it is so rarely practiced. The dissembling of the weak in the face of power is hardly an occasion for surprise. It is ubiquitous. So ubiquitous, in fact, that it makes an appearance in many situations in which the sort of power being exercised stretches the ordinary meaning of *power* almost beyond recognition. Much of what passes as normal social intercourse requires that we routinely exchange pleasantries and smile at others about whom we may harbor an estimate not in keeping with our public performance. Here we may perhaps say that the power of social forms embodying etiquette and politeness requires us often to sacrifice candor for smooth relations with our acquaintances. Our circumspect behavior may also have a strategic dimension: this person to whom we misrepresent ourselves may be able to harm or help us in some way. George Eliot may not have exaggerated in claiming that “there is no action possible without a little acting.”

The acting that comes of civility will be of less interest to us in what follows than the acting that has been imposed throughout history on the vast majority of people. I mean the public performance required of those subject to elaborate and systematic forms of social subordination: the worker to the boss, the tenant or sharecropper to the landlord, the serf to the lord, the slave to the master, the untouchable to the Brahmin, a member of a subject race to one of the dominant race. With rare, but significant, exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful. I shall use the term *public transcript* as a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.¹ The public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. It is frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation. The oral history of a French tenant farmer, Old Tiennon, covering much of the nineteenth century is filled with accounts of a prudent and misleading deference: "When he [the landlord who had dismissed his father] crossed from Le Craux, going to Meillers, he would stop and speak to me and I forced myself to appear amiable, in spite of the contempt I felt for him."²

Old Tiennon prides himself on having learned, unlike his tactless and unlucky father, "the art of dissimulation so necessary in life."³ The slave narratives that have come to us from the U.S. South also refer again and again to the need to deceive:

I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. . . . First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored at the south, free and slaves, find it particularly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe.⁴

1. *Public* here refers to action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship, and *transcript* is used almost in its juridical sense (*procès verbal*) of a complete record of what was said. This complete record, however, would also include nonspeech acts such as gestures and expressions.

2. Emile Guillaumin, *The Life of a Simple Man*, ed. Eugen Weber, rev. trans. Margaret Crosland, 83. See also 38, 62, 64, 102, 140, and 153 for other instances.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina* (Boston, 1848), quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells, and Solomon Northrup*, 9.

As one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups has been impression management in power-laden situations, the performance aspect of their conduct has not escaped the more observant members of the dominant group. Noting that her slaves fell uncharacteristically silent whenever the latest news from the front in the Civil War became a topic of white conversation, Mary Chesnut took their silence as one that hid something: "They go about in their black masks, not a ripple of emotion showing; and yet on all other subjects except the war they are the most excitable of all races. Now Dick might be a very respectable Egyptian Sphynx, so inscrutably silent he is."⁵

Here I will venture a crude and global generalization I will later want to qualify severely: the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast. In other words, the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask. We might imagine, in this context, situations ranging all the way from a dialogue among friends of equal status and power on the one hand to the concentration camp on the other, in which the public transcript of the victim bears the mark of mortal fear. Between these extremes are the vast majority of the historical cases of systematic subordination that will concern us.

Cursory though this opening discussion of the public transcript has been, it alerts us to several issues in power relations, each of which hinges on the fact that the public transcript is not the whole story. First, the public transcript is an indifferent guide to the opinion of subordinates. Old Tiennon's tactical smile and greeting mask an attitude of anger and revenge. At the very least, an assessment of power relations read directly off the public transcript between the powerful and the weak may portray a deference and consent that are possibly only a tactic. Second, to the degree that the dominant suspect that the public transcript may be "only" a performance, they will discount its authenticity. It is but a short step from such skepticism to the view, common among many dominant groups, that those beneath them are deceitful, shamming, and lying by nature. Finally, the questionable meaning of the public transcript suggests the key roles played by disguise and surveillance in power relations. Subordinates offer a performance of deference and consent while attempting to discern, to read, the real intentions and mood of the potentially threatening powerholder. As the favorite proverb of Jamaican slaves captures it, "Play fool, to catch wise."⁶ The power figure, in turn, produces a performance of mastery

5. *A Diary from Dixie*, quoted in Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 208.

6. *Ibid.*, 338.

and command while attempting to peer behind the mask of subordinates to read their real intentions. The dialectic of disguise and surveillance that pervades relations between the weak and the strong will help us, I think, to understand the cultural patterns of domination and subordination.

The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. In the short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him. The result is that the public transcript is—barring a crisis—systematically skewed in the direction of the libretto, the discourse, represented by the dominant. In ideological terms the public transcript will typically, by its accommodationist tone, provide convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemony of dominant discourse. It is in precisely this public domain where the effects of power relations are most manifest, and any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.

A skeptic might well ask at this point how we can presume to know, on the basis of the public transcript alone, whether this performance is genuine or not. What warrant have we to call it a performance at all, thereby impugning its authenticity? The answer is, surely, that we cannot know how contrived or imposed the performance is unless we can speak, as it were, to the performer offstage, out of this particular power-laden context, or unless the performer suddenly declares openly, on stage, that the performances we have previously observed were just a pose.⁷ Without a privileged peek backstage or a rupture in the performance we have no way of calling into question the status of what might be a convincing but feigned performance.

If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript, I shall use the term *hidden transcript* to characterize discourse that takes place “offstage,” beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what

7. I bracket, for the moment, the possibility that the offstage retraction or the public rupture may itself be a ruse designed to mislead. It should be clear, however, that there is no satisfactory way to establish definitively some bedrock reality or truth behind any particular set of social acts. I also overlook the possibility that the performer may be able to insinuate an insincerity into the performance itself, thereby undercutting its authenticity for part or all of his audience.

appears in the public transcript.⁸ We do not wish to prejudge, by definition, the relation between what is said in the face of power and what is said behind its back. Power relations are not, alas, so straightforward that we can call what is said in power-laden contexts false and what is said offstage true. Nor can we simplistically describe the former as a realm of necessity and the latter as a realm of freedom. What is certainly the case, however, is that the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript. By assessing the discrepancy between the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse.

The abstract and general tone of the discussion thus far is best relieved by concrete illustrations of the possibly dramatic disparity between the public and the hidden transcripts. The first is drawn from slavery in the antebellum U.S. South. Mary Livermore, a white governess from New England, recounted the reaction of Aggy, a normally taciturn and deferential black cook, to the beating the master had given her daughter. The daughter had been accused, apparently unjustly, of some minor theft and then beaten while Aggy looked on, powerless to intervene. After the master had finally left the kitchen, Aggy turned to Mary, whom she considered her friend and said,

Thar's a day a-comin'! Thar's a day a-comin'! . . . I hear the rumblin ob de chariots! I see de flashin ob de guns! White folks blood is a runnin on the ground like a ribber, an de dead's heaped up dat high! . . . Oh Lor! Hasten de day when de blows, an de bruises, and de aches an de pains, shall come to de white folks, an de buzzards shall eat dem as dey's dead in de streets. Oh Lor! roll on de chariots, an gib the black people rest and peace. Oh Lor! Gib me de pleasure ob livin' till dat day, when I shall see white folks shot down like de wolves when dey come hungry out o'de woods.⁹

One can imagine what might have happened to Aggy if she had delivered this speech directly to the master. Apparently her trust in Mary Livermore's friendship and sympathy was such that a statement of her rage could be ventured with comparative safety. Alternatively, perhaps she could no longer choke back her anger. Aggy's hidden transcript is at complete odds with her

8. This is not to assert that subordinates have nothing more to talk about among themselves than their relationship to the dominant. Rather it is merely to confine the term to that segment of interaction among subordinates that bears on relations with the powerful.

9. *My Story of the War*, quoted in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" of the Antebellum South*, 313.

public transcript of quiet obedience. What is particularly striking is that this is anything but an inchoate scream of rage; it is a finely drawn and highly visual image of an apocalypse, a day of revenge and triumph, a world turned upside down using the cultural raw materials of the white man's religion. Can we conceive of such an elaborate vision rising spontaneously to her lips without the beliefs and practice of slave Christianity having prepared the way carefully? In this respect our glimpse of Aggy's hidden transcript, if pursued further, would lead us directly to the offstage culture of the slave quarters and slave religion. Whatever such an investigation would tell us, this glimpse itself is sufficient to make any naive interpretation of Aggy's previous and subsequent public acts of deference impossible both for us, and most decidedly for Aggy's master, should he have been eavesdropping behind the kitchen door.

The hidden transcript Aggy revealed in the comparative safety of friendship is occasionally openly declared in the face of power. When, suddenly, subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations. Mrs. Poyser, a character in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* who finally spoke her mind, provides an illustration of the hidden transcript storming the stage. As tenants of the elderly Squire Donnithorne, Mrs. Poyser and her husband had always resented his rare visits, when he would impose some new, onerous obligation on them and treat them with disdain. He had "a mode of looking at her which, Mrs. Poyser observed, 'allays aggravated her; it was as if you was an insect, and he was going to dab his fingernail on you.' However, she said, 'your servant, sir' and curtsied with an air of perfect deference as she advanced towards him: she was not the woman to misbehave toward her betters, and fly in the face of the catechism, without severe provocation."¹⁰

This time the squire came to propose an exchange of pasture and grain land between Mr. Poyser and a new tenant that would almost certainly be to the Poyser's disadvantage. When assent was slow in coming, the squire held out the prospect of a longer term farm lease and ended with the observation—a thinly veiled threat of eviction—that the other tenant was well-off and would be happy to lease the Poyser's farm in addition to his own. Mrs. Poyser, "exasperated" at the squire's determination to ignore her earlier objections "as if she had left the room" and at the final threat, exploded. She "burst in with the desperate determination to have her say out this once, though it were to rain notices to quit, and the only shelter were the workhouse."¹¹ Beginning with a comparison between the condition of the house—frogs on the steps of

10. *Adam Bede*, 388–89.

11. *Ibid.*, 393.

the flooded basement, rats and mice coming in through the rotten floorboards to eat the cheeses and menace the children—and the struggle to pay the high rent, Mrs. Poyser let fly her personal accusations as she realized that the squire was fleeing out the door toward his pony and safety:

You may run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinning underhand ways o' doing us a mischief, for you've got old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is, but I tell you for once as we're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands, for want o' knowing how t' undo the tackle. An if I'm th' only one as speaks my mind, there's plenty o' the same way o' thinking i' this parish and the next to 't, for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose.¹²

Such were Eliot's powers of observation and insight into her rural society that many of the key issues of domination and resistance can be teased from her story of Mrs. Poyser's encounter with the squire. At the height of her peroration, for example, Mrs. Poyser insists that they will not be treated as animals despite his power over them. This, together with her remark about the squire looking on her as an insect and her declaration that he has no friends and is hated by the whole parish, focuses on the issue of self-esteem. While the confrontation may originate in the exploitation of an onerous tenancy, the discourse is one of dignity and reputation. The practices of domination and exploitation typically generate the insults and slights to human dignity that in turn foster a hidden transcript of indignation. Perhaps one vital distinction to draw between forms of domination lies in the kinds of indignities the exercise of power routinely produces.

Notice also how Mrs. Poyser presumes to speak not just for herself but for the whole parish. She represents what she says as the first public declaration of what everyone has been saying behind the squire's back. Judging from how rapidly the story traveled and the unalloyed joy with which it was received and retold, the rest of the community also felt Mrs. Poyser had spoken for them as well. "It was known throughout the two parishes," Eliot writes, "that the Squire's plan had been frustrated because the Poyser's had refused to be 'put upon,' and Mrs. Poyser's outbreak was discussed in all the farmhouses with a zest that was only heightened by frequent repetition."¹³ The vicarious pleasure of the neighbors had nothing to do with the actual sentiments expressed by Mrs. Poyser—hadn't everyone been saying the same thing about the squire

12. *Ibid.*, 394.

13. *Ibid.*, 398.

among themselves for years? The content, though Mrs. Poyser may have put it with considerable folk elegance, was stale; it was saying it openly (with witnesses) to the squire's face that was remarkable and that made Mrs. Poyser into something of a local hero. The first open statement of a hidden transcript, a declaration that breaches the etiquette of power relations, that breaks an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war. Mrs. Poyser had spoken (a social) truth to power.

Delivered in a moment of anger, Mrs. Poyser's speech was, one might say, spontaneous—but the spontaneity lay in the timing and vehemence of the delivery, not in the content. The content had, in fact, been rehearsed again and again, as we are told: "and though Mrs. Poyser had during the last twelve-month recited many imaginary speeches, meaning even more than met the ear, which she was quite determined to make to him the next time he appeared within the gates of the Hall Farm, the speeches had always remained imaginary."¹⁴ Who among us has not had a similar experience? Who, having been insulted or suffered an indignity—especially in public—at the hand of someone in power or authority over us, has not rehearsed an imaginary speech he wishes he had given or intends to give at the next opportunity?¹⁵ Such speeches may often remain a personal hidden transcript that may never find expression, even among close friends and peers. But in this case we are dealing with a shared situation of subordination. The tenants of Squire Donnithorne and, in fact, much of the nongentry in two parishes had ample personal reasons to take pleasure in his being publicly humbled and to share vicariously in Mrs. Poyser's courage. Their common class position and their social links thus provided a powerful resolving lens bringing their collective hidden transcript into focus. One might say, without much exaggeration, that they had together, in the course of their social interchange, written Mrs. Poyser's speech for her. Not word for word, of course, but in the sense that Mrs. Poyser's "say" would be her own reworking of the stories, the ridicule, and the complaints that those beneath the Squire all shared. And to "write" that speech for her, the squire's subjects had to have some secure social space, however sequestered, where they could exchange and elaborate their criticism. Her speech was her personal rendition of the hidden transcript of a subordinate group, and, as in the case of Aggy, that speech directs our attention back to the offstage culture of the class within which it originated.

¹⁴ Ibid., 388.

¹⁵ We are, I think, apt to have the same fantasy when we are bested in argument among equals or insulted by a peer. The difference is simply that asymmetrical power relations do not interfere with the declaration of the hidden transcript in this case.

An individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product. Whatever form it assumes—offstage parody, dreams of violent revenge, millennial visions of a world turned upside down—this collective hidden transcript is essential to any dynamic view of power relations.

Mrs. Poyser's explosion was potentially very costly, and it was her daring—some would have said foolhardiness—that won her such notoriety. The word *explosion* is used deliberately here because that is how Mrs. Poyser experienced it:

"Thee'st done it now," said Mr. Poyser, a little alarmed and uneasy, but not without some triumphant amusement at his wife's outbreak. "Yis, I know I've done it," said Mrs. Poyser, "but I've had my say out, and I shall be the easier for 't all my life. There's no pleasure in living, if you're to be corked up for iver, and only dribble your mind out by the sly, like a leaky barrel. I shan't repent saying what I think, if I live to be as old as the Squire."¹⁶

The hydraulic metaphor George Eliot puts in Mrs. Poyser's mouth is the most common way in which the sense of pressure behind the hidden transcript is expressed. Mrs. Poyser suggests that her habits of prudence and deception can no longer contain the anger she has rehearsed for the last year. That the anger will find a passage out is not in doubt; the choice is rather between a safer but less psychologically satisfying process of "dribbl[ing] your mind out by the sly" and the dangerous but gratifying full blast that Mrs. Poyser has ventured. George Eliot has, in effect, taken one position here on the consequences for consciousness of domination. Her claim is that the necessity of "acting a mask" in the presence of power produces, almost by the strain engendered by its inauthenticity, a countervailing pressure that cannot be contained indefinitely. As an epistemological matter, we have no warrant for elevating the truth status of Mrs. Poyser's outburst over that of her prior deference. Both are arguably part of Mrs. Poyser's self. Notice, however, that as Eliot constructs it, Mrs. Poyser feels she has finally spoken her mind. Inasmuch as she and others in comparable situations feel they have finally spoken truthfully to those in power, the concept truth may have a sociological

¹⁶ Ibid., 395. For readers unfamiliar with *Adam Bede* who would like to know how things turned out, the squire died providentially some months later, lifting the threat.

reality in the thought and practice of people whose actions interest us. It may have a phenomenological force in the real world despite its untenable epistemological status.

An alternative claim, nearly a logical mirror image of the first, is that those obliged by domination to act a mask will eventually find that their faces have grown to fit that mask. The practice of subordination in this case produces, in time, its own legitimacy, rather like Pascal's injunction to those who were without religious faith but who desired it to get down on their knees five times a day to pray, and the acting would eventually engender its own justification in faith. In the analysis that follows I hope to clarify this debate considerably, inasmuch as it bears so heavily on the issues of domination, resistance, ideology, and hegemony that are at the center of my concern.

If the weak have obvious and compelling reasons to seek refuge behind a mask when in the presence of power, the powerful have their own compelling reasons for adopting a mask in the presence of subordinates. Thus, for the powerful as well there is typically a disparity between the public transcript deployed in the open exercise of power and the hidden transcript expressed safely only offstage. The offstage transcript of elites is, like its counterpart among subordinates, derivative: it consists in those gestures and words that inflect, contradict, or confirm what appears in the public transcript.

Nowhere has the "act of power" been more successfully examined than in George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant," from his days as a subinspector of police in the 1920s in colonial Burma. Orwell had been summoned to deal with an elephant in heat that had broken its tether and was ravaging the bazaar. When Orwell, elephant gun in hand, finally locates the elephant, which has indeed killed a man, it is peacefully grazing in the paddy fields, no longer a threat to anyone. The logical thing would be to observe the elephant for a while to ensure that its heat had passed. What frustrates logic for Orwell is that there are now more than two thousand colonial subjects who have followed and are watching him:

And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces

behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives", and so in every crisis he has to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it. . . . A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.¹⁷

Orwell's use of the theatrical metaphor is pervasive: he speaks of himself as "leading actor of the piece," of hollow dummies, puppets, masks, appearances, and an audience poised to jeer if he doesn't follow the established script. As he experiences it, Orwell is no more free to be himself, to break convention, than a slave would be in the presence of a tyrannical master. If subordination requires a credible performance of humility and deference, so domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery. There are, however, two differences. If a slave transgresses the script he risks a beating, while Orwell risks only ridicule. Another important distinction is that the necessary posing of the dominant derives not from weaknesses but from the ideas behind their rule, the kinds of claims they make to legitimacy. A divine king must act like a god, a warrior king like a brave general; an elected head of a republic must appear to respect the citizenry and their opinions; a judge must seem to venerate the law. [Actions by elites that *publicly* contradict the basis of a claim to power are threatening.] The cynicism of the taped Oval Office conversations in the Nixon White House was a devastating blow to the public transcript claim to legality and high-mindedness. Similarly, the poorly concealed existence of special shops and hospitals for the party elites in the socialist bloc profoundly undercut the ruling party's public claim to rule on behalf of the working class.¹⁸

One might usefully compare forms of domination in terms of the kinds of display and public theater they seem to require. Another, perhaps even more revealing way of addressing the same question would be to ask what activities

17. *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, 95–96.

18. Similar inequalities are not nearly so symbolically charged in Western capitalist democracies, which publicly are committed to defend property rights and make no claims to be run for the particular benefit of the working class.

are most sedulously hidden from public view by different forms of domination. Each form of rule will have not only its characteristic stage setting but also its characteristic dirty linen.¹⁹

Those forms of domination based on a premise or claim to inherent superiority by ruling elites would seem to depend heavily on lavish display, sumptuary laws, regalia, and public acts of deference or tribute by subordinates. The desire to inculcate habits of obedience and hierarchy, as in military organizations, can produce similar patterns. In extreme cases display and performance dominate, as in the case of the Chinese emperor Long Qing, whose public appearances were so minutely choreographed that he became virtually a living icon deployed in rituals that risked nothing to improvisation. Offstage, in the Forbidden City, he might carouse as he wished with princes and aristocrats.²⁰ This may be something of a limiting case, but the attempt by dominant elites to sequester an offstage social site where they are no longer on display and can let their hair down is ubiquitous, as is the attempt to ritualize contact with subordinates so that the masks remain firmly in place and the risk that something untoward might happen is minimized. Milovan Djilas's early critique of Yugoslavia's new party elite contrasted a meaningful but secret backstage with the empty ritual of public bodies: "At intimate suppers, on hunts, in conversations between two or three men, matters of state of the most vital importance are decided. Meetings of party forums, conferences of the government and assemblies, serve no purpose but to make declarations and put in an appearance."²¹ Strictly speaking, of course, the public ritual Djilas denigrates does indeed serve a purpose inasmuch as the theater of unanimity, loyalty, and resolve is intended to impress an audience. Public ritual of this kind is both real and meaningful; Djilas's complaint is rather that it is also a performance designed to conceal an offstage arena of politics that would contradict it. Dominant groups often have much to conceal, and typically they also have the wherewithal to conceal what they wish. The British colonial officials with whom Orwell served in Moulmein had the inevitable club to repair to in the evenings. There, except for the invisible Burmese staff, they were among their own, as they might have put it, and no longer strutting before the audience of colonial subjects. Activities, gestures, remarks, and

19. We all recognize homely versions of this truth. It is, parents sense, unseemly to argue publicly in front of their children, especially over their discipline and conduct. To do so is to undercut the implicit claim that parents know best and are agreed about what is proper. It is also to offer their children a political opportunity to exploit the revealed difference of opinion. Generally, parents prefer to keep the bickering offstage and to present a more or less united front before the children.

20. Ray Huang, *1571: A Year of No Significance*.

21. *The New Class*, 82.

dress that were unseemly to the public role of sahib were safe in this retreat.²² The seclusion available to elites not only affords them a place to relax from the formal requirements of their role but also minimizes the chance that familiarity will breed contempt or, at least, diminish the impression their ritually managed appearances create. Balzac captures the fear of overexposure, as it now might be termed, among the Parisian magistrates of the mid-nineteenth century,

Ah what an unfortunate man your true magistrate is! You know, they ought to live outside the community, as pontiffs once did. The world should only see them when they emerged from their cells at fixed times, solemn, ancient, venerable, pronouncing judgment like the high priests of antiquity, combining in themselves the judicial and the sacerdotal powers! We should only be visible on the bench. . . . Nowadays we may be seen amusing ourselves or in difficulties like anybody else. . . . We may be seen in drawing rooms, at home, creatures of passion, and instead of being terrible we are grotesque.²³

Perhaps the danger that unregulated contact with the public may profane the sacred aura of judges helps explain why, even in secular republics, they retain more of the trappings of traditional authority than any other branch of government.

Now that the basic idea of public and hidden transcripts has been introduced, I will venture a few observations by way of orienting the subsequent discussion. For the study of power relations, this perspective alerts us to the fact that virtually all ordinarily observed relations between dominant and subordinate represent the encounter of the *public* transcript of the dominant with the *public* transcript of the subordinate. It is to observe Squire Donithorne imposing on Mr. and Mrs. Poyser on all those occasions on which, prior to the explosion, she managed to keep up the pretense of being deferential and agreeable. Social science is, in general then, focused resolutely on the official or formal relations between the powerful and weak. This is the case even for much of the study of conflict, as we shall see, when that conflict has become highly institutionalized. I do not mean to imply that the study of this

22. I suspect that it is for essentially the same reason that the subordinate staff in virtually any hierarchical organization tend to work in open view while the elite work behind closed doors, often with anterooms containing private secretaries.

23. *A Harlot High and Low* [*Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*], trans. Reynier Happenstall, 505. The twentieth-century literary figure who made the masks of domination and subordination the center of much of his work was Jean Genet. See, in particular, his plays *The Blacks* and *The Screens*.