
Domination
and the
Arts of
Resistance

Hidden Transcripts

James C. Scott

For Moorestown Friends' School

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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.

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be damaging to the interests of dominant elites.³ Since any theory that purports to demonstrate a misrepresentation of social reality must, by definition, claim some superior knowledge of what that social reality is, it must be, in this sense, a theory of false consciousness. Simplifying things greatly, I believe we can discern a thick and a thin version of false consciousness. The thick version claims that a dominant ideology works its magic by persuading subordinate groups to believe actively in the values that explain and justify their own subordination. Evidence against this thick theory of mystification is pervasive enough to convince me that it is generally untenable⁴—particularly so for systems of domination such as serfdom, slavery, and untouchability, in which consent and civil rights hardly figure even at the rhetorical level. The thin theory of false consciousness, on the other hand, maintains only that the dominant ideology achieves compliance by convincing subordinate groups that the social order in which they live is natural and inevitable. The thick theory claims consent; the thin theory settles for resignation. In its most subtle form, the thin theory is eminently plausible and, some would claim, true by definition. I believe, nevertheless, that it is fundamentally wrong and hope to show why in some detail after putting it in as persuasive a form as possible, so that it is no straw man I am criticizing.

Within the community power literature, the debate is essentially between pluralists and antipluralists. For the pluralists, the absence of significant protest or radical opposition in relatively open political systems must be taken as a sign of satisfaction or, at least, insufficient dissatisfaction to warrant the time and trouble of political mobilization. Antipluralists reply that the political arena is less completely open than pluralists believe and that the vulnerability of subordinate groups allows elites to control the political agenda and create effective obstacles to participation. The difficulty with the antipluralist position, as their opponents lost no time pointing out, is that it creates a kind of political Heisenberg principle. That is, if the antipluralists cannot uncover hidden grievances—grievances that the elite is presumed to have effectively banished—then how are we to know whether apparent acquiescence is genuine or repressive? An elite that did its “anti-pluralist work” effectively would thereby have eliminated any trace of the issues they had suppressed.

3. The sort of misrepresentation referred to might, for a liberal democracy, include the effects of official beliefs in equality of economic opportunity, an open, accessible political system, and what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” The effect of each belief in turn might be to stigmatize the poor as entirely responsible for their poverty, to mask the inequalities in political influence underwritten by economic power, and to misrepresent low wages or unemployment to workers as an entirely impersonal, natural (i.e., not social) occurrence.

4. See Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, and Willis, *Learning to Labour*.

In an attempt to sustain the antipluralist position and to clarify how issues are, in fact, banished, John Gaventa proposes a third level of power relations.⁵ The first level is the familiar and open exercise of coercion and influence. The second is intimidation and what Gaventa calls “the rule of anticipated reactions.” This second effect typically arises from experience of subordination and defeat in that the relatively powerless elect not to challenge elites because they anticipate the sanctions that will be brought against them to ensure their failure. Here there is no change in values or grievances presumably, but rather an estimate of hopeless odds that discourage a challenge.⁶ The third level of power relations is more subtle and amounts to a theory of false consciousness that is both thick and thin. Gaventa claims that the power afforded to a dominant elite in the first two dimensions of power “may allow [them] further power to invest in the development of dominant images, legitimations, or beliefs about [their] power through control, for instance, of the media or other socialization institutions.”⁷ The result, he claims, may well be a culture of defeat and nonparticipation such as he found in the Appalachian coal valley he studied. What is not clear is how much of the “mystification” Gaventa points to is presumed to actually change values and preferences (for example, as his term “legitimations” implies) and how much is a reinforcement of the belief in the power of dominant elites to prevail in any encounter. Nor is it apparent why such ideological investments should be convincing to subordinate groups beyond the inferences they draw from their direct experience. Gaventa, at any rate, supports both a thick theory of false consciousness and a thin theory of naturalization.

When it comes to understanding why the Western working class has apparently made an accommodation with capitalism and unequal property relations despite its political rights to mobilize, one finds, again, both thick and thin accounts of ideological hegemony. The thick version emphasizes the operation of what have been called “ideological state apparatuses,” such as schools, the church, the media, and even the institutions of parliamentary democracy, which, it is claimed, exercise a near monopoly over the symbolic means of production just as factory owners might monopolize the material means of production. Their ideological work secures the active consent of subordinate groups to the social arrangements that reproduce their subordination.⁸ Put very briefly, this thick version faces two daunting criticisms.

5. *Power and Powerlessness*, chap. 1.

6. This is essentially the point of the electric fence analogy in chap. 3.

7. *Power and Powerlessness*, 22. For a “thicker” version of this argument, see Frank Parkin, *Class, Inequality and the Political Order*, 79–91.

8. Not, however, without real concessions as the price of hegemony on the Gramscian view.

springs from its low technological level. Printing presses and copying machines may be seized, radio transmitters may be located, even typewriters and tape recorders may be taken, but short of killing its bearer, the human voice is irrepressible.

The most protected format of spoken communication is a conversation between two persons; the level of security diminishes as the number of people reached in a single encounter (for example, a public rally) increases. Oral communication, then, is safe only when it is a petty retail operation. Two important factors circumvent this apparent disadvantage. First, this account fails to allow for the geometrical progression of serial tellings, which may reach thousands in a short time, as we have seen in the case of rumors. The second factor is that each oral performance can be nuanced, disguised, evasive, and shaded in accordance with the degree of surveillance from authorities to which it is exposed. A possibly seditious folk song can, in this sense, be performed in hundreds of ways: from the apparently innocuous before hostile audiences to the openly seditious before a friendly and secure audience. Those who have earlier been privy to the more seditious interpretations will appreciate the hidden meaning of the innocuous version. Thus it is the particularity and elasticity of oral culture that allows it to carry fugitive meanings in comparative safety.

Folktales, the Trickster

Nothing illustrates the veiled cultural resistance of subordinate groups better than what have been termed trickster tales. It would be difficult, I think, to find a peasant, slave, or serf society without a legendary trickster figure, whether in animal or human form. Typically the trickster makes his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies out to defeat him—or eat him—not by his strength but by his wit and cunning. The trickster is unable, in principle, to win any direct confrontation as he is smaller and weaker than his antagonists. Only by knowing the habits of his enemies, by deceiving them, by taking advantage of their greed, size, gullibility, or haste does he manage to escape their clutches and win victories. Occasionally the fool and trickster figures are combined, and the guile of the underdog may consist in playing dumb or in being so clever in the use of words that his enemy is misled.⁵⁸

It doesn't require a great deal of subtle analysis to notice that the structural

58. For an account of the Central Sulawesi trickster *Pantenggel*, who is admired for his ability to clothe even the simplest statements in elaborate, elusive imagery, see Jane Mannig Atkinson, "Wrapped Words: Poetry and Politics among the Wana of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia," in *Dangerous Words*, ed. Brenneis and Myers.

position of the trickster hero and the stratagems he deploys bear a marked resemblance to the existential dilemma of subordinate groups. The motto of the trickster hero is, in fact, captured by a common slave saying from South Carolina: "De bukrah [whites] hab scheme, en de nigger hab trick, en ebry time de bukrah scheme once, de nigger trick twice."⁵⁹ As a genre of tales (for example, the mouse-deer Sang Kanchil stories in the Malay world, the Siang Miang tales from northeast Thailand, the spider stories from West Africa, the Till Eulenspiegel tales in Western Europe) trickster stories also contain a great deal of violence and aggression. There is some evidence linking fantasy aggression of this kind with severely punitive situations and, in particular, aggressive folktales with societies that repress open aggression.⁶⁰ Without insisting on psychological theories of projection and displacement, it is sufficient to recognize that the underdog who outwits his normally dominant antagonist in such tales is likely to exploit his advantage to exact physical revenge.

The Brer Rabbit tales of North American slaves are among the best-known examples of an oral tradition of trickster tales, many variants of which have been collected. Any collected version, naturally, represents a single performance—without the nuances of pacing and emphasis—and it is quite possible that those variants transcribed by slaveholding whites or outside folklorists represent the most sanitized or prudent tellings. The origins of the tales are, as we might expect, uncertain, although similar stories in West African oral traditions as well as in the Indian *jataka* tales of Buddha as a young man suggest a possible lineage. Brer Rabbit is generally pitted against Brer Fox or Brer Wolf, whom he defeats by relying on his endless store of dissimulation, guile, and agility. Often his exploits mimicked the survival strategies of the slaves who elaborated these tales. "Significantly, one of the trickster's greatest pleasures was eating food he had stolen from his powerful enemies."⁶¹

Rabbit's road to victory is not entirely smooth, but his setbacks are usually attributable to rashness (for example, in the tarbaby stories) or trust in the sincerity of the strong. When victory comes, it is often savored in some detail. Rabbit not only kills Wolf but "mounts him, humiliates him, reduces him to servility, steals his woman and, in effect, takes his place."⁶²

The disguises that the Brer Rabbit tales afforded were multiple. Any

59. Cited in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 81.

60. G. O. Wright, "Projection and Displacement: A Cross-cultural Study of Folk-tale Aggression," cited in Berkowitz, *Aggression*, 121–23.

61. Alex Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft with which they have been Branded: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," 418.

62. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 111–16.